

Sophie Whettnall

Robert Storr

Shadow boxing, 2004

16 mm film on DVD

Duration: 3'

Galeria Moriarty, Madrid, Spain

At ARCO a vast, labyrinthine array of booths stretches out through two vaulting pavilions. Reconnoitering all the corridors and peering into or entering the spaces that frame them requires not only the stamina of a dedicated hiker but a basic sense of direction coupled with a Sol LeWitt-like feel for mathematical permutations of the cube.

Minimalism may no longer be the dominant style in art but it remains the preference of exhibition designers. Will that change one day, will irregular modules replace squared off architectures? Will Frank Gehry, Santiago Calatrava, Mariscal or one of their epigones introduce a new paradigm for a truly postmodern art bazaar?

Who knows! Meanwhile, disfavoured in the heavily travelled grid we currently have are the corners, especially those which do not immediately draw attention to themselves. However, in one of these marginal zones behind a black curtain I found a video space just slightly smaller than those in the composite video "motel" not far away where a curated group of presentations played to viewers who scuttled in and out like furtive visitors to a *peep show*. The entry to mine was more like that of a street corner photomat.

Yet, the image I saw in this nook were among the most memorable of the many hundreds or thousands which bombarded me from all sides during my wanderings. The artist was new to me –Sophie Whettnall –and the gallery in which she was being shown. Moriarty, had little background data on her to offer. In a way that was not so bad, because it threw me back on my direct encounter with her work rather than on reading reviews and resumes.

So far as I could gather from the scant information in her dossier this was a first, or nearly first venture into the medium. And as befits auspicious beginnings the premise was strikingly simple, almost literally so. A roughly three minute 16 millimeter film loop transferred to DVD, the video *Shadow Boxing* features a man and a woman in a decrepit green gym flanked by mirrors and a heavy red punching bag. The woman, who stands comparatively tall, is clad in a plain print dress with a low back. She is pretty but not glamorous.

Her hair is up, her arms hang at her sides, she stares straight ahead, wearing a blank expression and does not move. The man opposite her in the dark T-shirt with a shaved head hunches his shoulders, bobs and weaves and partially circles her, throwing flurries of jabs none of which land while breathing in harsh, sharply audible staccato rhythm that measures the pace and the rising and falling intensity of his exertions. While this is happening the camera fixes close-up on her bare back and notices the flutter of strands of her hair as the boxer's hands fan the air, then pulls around to show the faint shadows and movement of the hairs on her arms caused by the draft of his breathing and his motion then zeros in on the slight reflection of his actions in her unblinking eye. He is intent, she impassive. He lashes out, she never flinches. Violence is implicit but in fact no harm is ever done.

Moreover no hostility is exchanged and no anger or fear actually takes possession of those performing the ritual. Nor in fact is there any noticeable engagement at all, which is in marked distinction from real boxing matches. As it happened this point was brought home the evening after discovering Whettnall's piece as I watched a featherweight fight on television. Unlike this couple the contestants were acutely aware of and responsive to each other's levels of energy, fatigue, and frustration. They too were going through the motions, but their challenging gestures and words, their constant contact and embraces and their mutual understanding of the stylized aggression they were performing for the duration of the bout had an unmistakable intimacy, and also a theatricality about which Barthes has much to say. No such mutuality exists between the man and the woman in Whettnall's video.

Nor is there any suspense—one soon grasps the fact which the title reiterates—that the man is “fighting” a shadow and will never knock it out just as the phantom herself accepts her role of “invisibility” aware that she will not be hurt physically though she will never really be seen or acknowledged. As I said, the idea is very simple, even obvious: a passive-aggressive relationship as a low grade sporting event. However a complementary simplicity of means, involving an almost classic *mise en scène*, complemented by the visual detailing of light on skin and hair moving, the sound of heavy breathing that is not sexual but could hardly be more consuming contribute to a tape that is not used up by one run through, but rather enhanced by the sense that this pugilistic failure to connect will go on forever and that the absurdly prolonged but austere stylized confrontation grants one the time to study its every nuance and reflect on its archetypal antagonists. In a gym-crazy postmodernity, this domestic vignette is to Matthew Barney's auto-

erotic fantasmagorias what the “small” European movies are to Hollywood action orgies. Simple things are often best.