

Sophie Whettnall

'The Brain Walk'

2024

Artist Sophie Whettnall (1973, Brussels) was invited to create a permanent, integrated artwork that would connect the ground-floor reception area with the renovated care block at the end of the central corridor.

This connecting corridor or 'care boulevard' is over 90 metres long and, as the main artery of the hospital, handles an intensive daily flow of patients, visitors and staff. People on the way to or from a consultation, procedure or visit, headed for a particular department or just seeking a place to rest. All manner of people traverse this distance at a wide range of physical and mental tempos. The artist succeeds in capturing the collective human activity in this central axis. The constant, pulsing rhythm of human traffic through the neutral no-man's-land inspires a democratic artistic design, its cadence translated into a fluctuating graph. The monumental mural stretches the entire length of the corridor. A layered, compassionate play of lines subconsciously soothes passers-by in its relatability and accessibility. At heart height is a gilded application that greatly transcends the elementary artistic gesture of autobiography. In the layered ensemble, which straddles figuration and abstraction, the meandering seam of gold extends an empathic gesture of support, almost a hand rail to lean on.

We experience a colour palette derived from eco-friendly pigments that was designed to reflect the unique character of the AZ Sint-Lucas hospital. Calming, atmospheric tones, so natural as to convey the idea of an organic zone of transition. A sketch of the patchwork of moods carried through the space by the various patients and visitors. The catharsis that arises from the interval – a key principle in Sophie Whettnall's oeuvre.

In its totality, the artwork elegantly and harmoniously transforms the monotonous connecting corridor into an enjoyable public walkway. Waiting areas and resting points are incorporated in the work as a whole, fittingly for Ghent's only inner city hospital, with its tension between public and private space. Those seeking a moment of rest or respite find themselves beckoned toward ice floe-like sculptures that seem to defy their context. Anomalous aberrations in three sizes. On closer inspection, one observes a level of craft that makes each piece unique. All embody a contradiction between sleek and industrial forms and more irregular, natural qualities. The element of diversion quickly makes way for the work's social function, facilitated by soft, comfortable seating.

Here in the care boulevard of AZ Sint-Lucas, at the crossroads of chaos and control, the artist's soothing interventions make room for rest, reassurance and a feeling of safety for those moving from A to Z.

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