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## Whitstable Biennale: a new pearl among the art-world oysters

It may not have Venice quaking just yet, but this two-week festival on the Kent coast is shoring up a rich tableau of new art

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Leading light ... artist Katie Paterson's much-anticipated installation for the festival, Streetlight Storm. Photograph courtesy of the artist

Like most coastal towns in Britain, there is a faint waft of deep-fried fish that dances on your nostrils as you walk around it. You can also buy a boogie board or a beaded necklace within 15 minutes walk of the train station. But while Whitstable may previously have been most famous for its oysters, it now boasts one of the key events in the international art calendar too.

Now in its fifth year, the Whitstable Biennale has, according to [a-n magazine](#), "become one of the superior offerings of the increasingly crowded biennale calendar". For two weeks, this usually quiet town bustles with art lovers, buyers and critics from across the world. Its burgeoning reputation is in no small part down to the curatorial talent of its director, Sue Jones.



Solid art foundations ... Phil Coy's film, Façade, will be shown in a specially constructed set in the harbour. Image courtesy of the artist

Jones made her name at east London's renowned Chisenhale Gallery, where she was responsible for giving artists such as Sam Taylor-Wood, Wolfgang Tillmans, Turner prize-winner Gillian Wearing and Bob and Roberta Smith their first major shows. She sees the biennale as an opportunity to continue the process of giving emerging artists a platform. "I wanted to recreate the energy and risk-taking I employed at Chisenhale in the 90s," she says. "Looking back, just about every major artist showed there during that period. We gave many people their first big break, an opportunity to create a major work. Now I feel I'm doing the same thing – only instead of individual shows, I'm able to put on the equivalent of a two-year programme in two weeks."

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Jones believes the biennale has the potential to change the local area. "Whitstable has had a firmly established art community for a long time but now, just as Tate St Ives brought the St Ives community to the attention of the world, the Whitstable Biennale is helping to put Whitstable on the map."

The town's arrival on the art scene also means an injection of funds into its coffers. "Visit [Kent](#) calculated that the 2008 biennale brought in almost £700,000 to Whitstable over the two-week period," says Jones. "And we are anticipating an audience of 25,000 this year. Success brings confidence. The town is proud of the biennale."

Artists who show at Whitstable often go on to international success. [Film-maker Clio Barnard](#), who [created Plotlands for the 2008 biennale](#) (involving the screening of a film on the marshes for the benefit of people on passing trains) recently won best new documentary film-maker at the 2010 Tribeca Film festival in New York. [Simon Faithfull](#), who [showed Lost](#) (a run of books detailing all the things he has ever lost, ranging from keys and computers and jumpers, to his virginity) has gone on to show all over the world, including a critically acclaimed exhibition at the BFI.

So what can we look forward to this year? "Katie Paterson's [Every Night About This Time](#) is a real highlight," says Jones. "She has made 13 works that subtly thread through the biennale programme, appearing and disappearing, and stretching out from Whitstable to the whole world – and beyond this planet," says Jones. "A single black firework is set off under dark skies; a streetlight in Whitstable flickers in time with lightning storms happening across the world; an atom-size grain of sand is buried deep within the Sahara desert; a record player spins in synchronisation with the earth." Elsewhere, [Phil Coy's Façade](#), a major new filmwork from the young British artist, takes audiences through contemporary glass architecture, contrasting architectural walkthroughs of nonexistent buildings with tracking shots over the facades of existing buildings. The film will be shown in a specially constructed set in Whitstable's working harbour.

While the Whitstable Biennale continues to grow, rumours are rife that the Tate will open a space in the town. "There have been a number of rumours in the Whitstable sea air," says Jones. "I'm not at liberty to comment, except to say that the Tate are very clever at opening spaces where solid art foundations already exist. Whitstable would qualify in those terms; and it's nearer to London than Tate St Ives ..."

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