



Constellations of Being

SINTA TANTRA
Curated by Sadijah Boonstra
Aug 6 - Sep 30, 2022

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Constellations of Being

Written by Sadiah Boonstra

Sinta Tantra (b.1979) is a Balinese artist based in the UK and Indonesia. She is world-famous for her colourful abstract paintings and site-specific murals. Having spent her childhood in Indonesia, the US, and the UK, she studied at the Slade School of Fine Art and the Royal Academy in London. She now works between her studios in London and Ubud, Indonesia. Tantra's work has drawn on art movements such as Bauhaus, Art Deco, Abstract Expressionism, and Modernism for her balanced compositions. Tantra's style is inspired by Nyoman Lempad and the prolific two- and three-dimensional lines of Sol LeWitt.

Tantra's practice ranges from painted canvases to site-specific sculptural interventions to large-scale public artworks. Her interest in architecture enables Tantra to create large-scale murals, which serve to transform the meaning of the spaces she creates. She describes her work as "painting on an architectural scale." Colour is central to her practice, drawing inspiration from her Balinese heritage and the island's tropical palette. To Tantra "colours have the ability to transport one across time and space, evoking memories and places of the past."

Tantra openly speaks about the stereotypical expectations she has encountered as a female artist of colour. As a student, she felt that her work needed to look "*ethnic*" and was encouraged by her teachers to reference particular cultural markers, such as batik. Such experiences contributed to who she is as an artist today, developing a modernist visual language to escape such stereotyping.

As an insider/outsider on the interface of European, American, and Indonesian traditions, Tantra has a unique multicultural outlook which enables her to merge elements from the various worlds she lives in. It also provided the opportunity for Tantra to carve out a career as an independent woman artist. This is no small feat, especially because being an independent woman artist in Bali is challenging given the culture, social pressure and expectations of women in society, and lack of art infrastructure.

Taksu

Tantra's new series of paintings revolve around stories and family histories, or what she describes as, "constellations." Researched for over a two year period throughout the pandemic, the exhibition draws inspiration from silhouettes of tropical foliage floating against a backdrop of abstract geometric forms and linen. Here we see influences from European painters such as Henri Matisse and Jean Arp layered together with the figurative forms of Balinese artist, Nyoman Lempad.

Fuelled by the desire to understand her artistic roots and place within her own family's "constellation," Tantra interviewed her Balinese mother and father, asking them to share their childhood memories.

"I found that my great-grandfather was incredibly talented – a stone carver or *undagi* in Balinese, which is the same word as 'architect.' He would travel around Bali with his cousin, trying to get commissions. Both men worked on the elaborate stone carving of the majestic Ujung Water Palace, built by the King of Karangasem."

The project was of such prestige that they were paid not in cash, but with a Balinese orange tree that was planted in the centre of their family compound. The oranges that grew from the tree were the literal fruits of the stone mason's labour, a continued legacy of creativity, determination, and work ethic to which Tantra feels deeply connected.

This story is depicted in the small triptych *Two cousins (Batu Bata)* (2022), *Taksu (A Reincarnation)* (2022) and *Taman Ujung (A Water Palace)* (2022). Although abstract in composition, the two circles in the middle could be interpreted as the two cousins, an illustration of their friendship and brotherhood. 'Batu Bata' refers to a type of Balinese stone or brick, represented here by rectangular forms.

The large triptych painting *Taksu (A Reincarnation)* 2022 forms the central nucleus of the exhibition. According to the Balinese, *taksu* is an innate creative power one is simply born with - something that cannot be taught. This painting reflects the *taksu* of her forefathers and perhaps a reincarnated spirit within her. Fluidly flowing from one panel to the next, gold circles merge, symbolising the cycle of life, rebirth and the essence of DNA itself.

Triptych panels are a returning compositional format in Tantra's work; it talks of the power of three, past-present-future as well as family connections, or "constellations" between mother-father-daughter, grandfather-cousin-granddaughter. Against Tantra's backdrop, we could all be seen as constellations of stars, held together by a central force which keeps us floating.

Inspired by Sol LeWitt's different interpretations of the same elements, *Constellations of Being I-III* (2022) gave the show its title. A dark blue background shifts from raw linen to blues. This series depicts cosmology and the gradual effect of change, as seen in the lunar phases, or when night turns into day, and the masculine-feminine. The golden halo-like circles give the paintings a religious yet also playful tone.

Family histories and memories

Abstract compositions in rich blues, pinks and 24-carat gold leaf punctuate across the canvas, acting as cyphers that for Tantra symbolise a personal journey and exploration. Inspired by her recently discovered family history, where she interviewed her mother and father, these paintings, explore the sense of being and belonging, the fluidity of migration, identity, the shift from human to the global, merging colonial past with the present to form new dialogues and ways of relooking and reconnecting. The series explores Tantra's past within past constellations of family to create new constellations of history, emotions, experiences, as well as shapes, colours, and materials.

"I want to connect with people on a level that transcends words and cultures. I have a vocabulary of shapes and colours that I can arrange and de-arrange and a self-constructed set of rules that I can adhere to or, at times, break," Tantra says. "I'm interested in creating a kind of tension for the viewer in the compositions and combinations, a place where they can find their own narrative, where I can find my own narrative."

Taman Ujung (A Water Palace) (2022) sees the continuation of the story of the two cousins - Tantra's grandfather and his cousin who built the water palace in Karangasem who were rewarded with a *pohon jeruk* or an orange tree for their hard labour. A leave-like form sprawls across the canvas, its opulence resembling an orange tree leaf but could also be interpreted as a splash of water, while the colours of the work evoke a rainbow.

Another series of three are odes to family members. *Indah Ripon (Black Magic)* (2022) takes its title from Tantra's paternal grandmother rumoured to have been the most beautiful woman in the village. Cast under a black magic spell, she was forcibly married to Tantra's grandfather. The story made Tantra reflects on the historical position of women and the complex nature of female beauty and patriarchal systems. Here, feminine beauty and innocence are represented in the decorative, harmonised pinks with gold, a cut-out coral motif revealing the bare canvas.

Harsiam (Broken Eggs) (2022) is an ode to Tantra's maternal grandmother. As a single parent family, her grandmother Harsiam and her mother Partini, were very close. Sharing the same bed every night, Harsiam told bedtime stories to her daughter. These were mostly tales of morality, *karma*, the laws of cause and effect, and Indonesian folk stories of *kancil* the mouse deer. One day Partini was sent to the market to buy eggs but accidentally broke them on the way home. Afraid to go home with the broken eggs, the charcoal seller gifted her the charcoal. She then used the spare money to buy new eggs. Partini did not tell her mother but her guilt made her confess that night. The round shapes in this painting refer to the broken eggs and the bond between mother and daughter. The circle could be interpreted as the cyclical nature of storytelling from one generation to the next, while the floating angelic figure seems to be a lonely yet strong figure, much like Harsiam herself.

In *Remben (Purusa)* (2022) Tantra dedicated the painting to her paternal grandfather, who was the only boy in his family of four children. According to the Balinese law of *purusa*, Remben eventually inherited everything while his sisters received nothing. The family were neither rich nor poor but were comfortably off until Remben started to gamble and continued to gamble until after one dramatic night, lost everything. The intense monochromatic dark blue of this painting references the dark side of Tantra's grandfather, while the gold expresses a mysterious and alluring side, the promise of something good. The contrast between the dark and gold reflects the paradoxical character of Tantra's grandfather.

Dong Luh (She Stopped Telling Me, And I Stopped Crying) (2022) refers to one of the aunts on Tantra's father's side. Tantra's father, Wayan, would visit his aunt at night where she would tell him stories, much like Tantra's grandmother Harsiam. One evening, a story made him so sad he cried. "She stopped telling me and I stopped crying" is quoted from Tantra's father. Against the blue background of the painting, the white silhouette provides calmness and silence, much like a mother soothing her crying baby. The figure symbolises a moon goddess, which within Balinese culture, is seen as the protector of children and whose cycle is celebrated each month during *purnama* or the full moon, which means perfect.

The painting *Mukri (Combing My Hair by the River)* (2022) is dedicated to Tantra's maternal grandfather, who died at such a young age during the *revolusi* period that Tantra's mother does not even remember his face. Her reflection of him: "I remember him taking me to take me to bath in the river, in the waterfalls. My hair would be soaking wet after and he would lay me down in a trench where there was a stream of water. He lay me down there and brushed my hair with his fingers so it looked like it was nicely brushed. That's all [I remember]." The compositional arrangements between the blue and white illustrate the scene between father and daughter by the river, whilst the pink organic form reveals the tender and intimate act of combing one's fingers through someone's hair. Although the memories of Tantra's mother are not entirely blank, the raw linen background represents how we often project absent memories onto our own internal canvas, making sense of the world.

It is evident how the paintings in *Constellations of Being* have been deeply influenced by Tantra's various family members, casting a light on the women, the mothers, the grandmothers, and aunts; each of them are female characters who are strongly present. Overshadowed by the male characters of history books, *Constellations of Being*, in this sense, is an ode to the underrepresented women of Indonesia whose roles and positions were and continue to be confined to conservative values and family framework. In this sense, the triptych, Tantra as the tertiary generation of women in her family is starting to challenge traditional gender roles in Balinese society.

These different stories and relations culminate in the immersive three-dimensional installation of Balinese cut rocks, sand, mirror, glass pieces, coral, incense sticks, flowers, fruit and photographic archival material. *Constellations of Being (installation)* (2022) physically invites the viewer to sit, reflect, smell and listen. Like Balinese offerings or Canangs, each object is carefully positioned, like a cluster of stars, individually symbolising

part of a significant story or feeling from the narratives described by her mother and father in the shown video. The installation is set against an abstract soundscape created in collaboration with sound artist Thibaut Vandamme, evoking the journey of self-exploration and our relationships to the past, present, and future.

Materiality & Affect

Introducing figurative forms in her paintings has allowed Tantra to layer narrative stories with formal abstract composition.

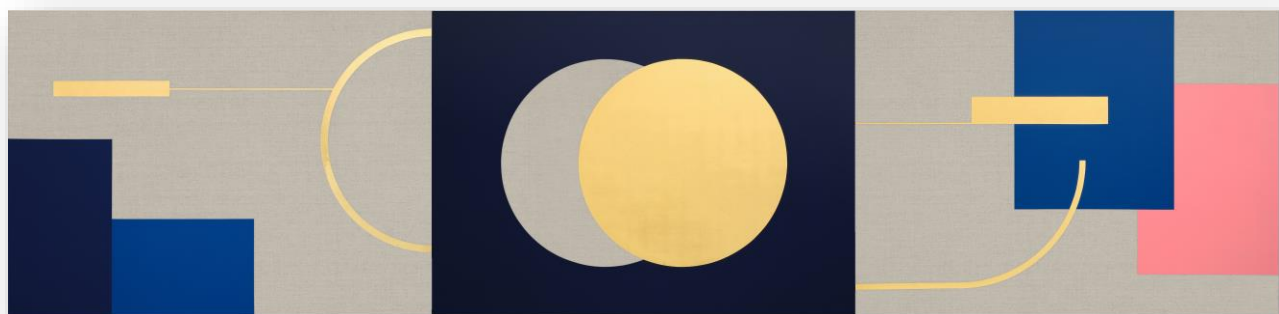
Tantra creates her paintings with tempera paint on portrait linen, working with organic materials and minerals which she describes as 'living and breathing. Multiple layers of tempera paint are sanded between coats resulting in an immaculate, colour rich, powdery finish. This painted surface contrasts against the areas of unpainted linen, finely woven and unveiling the very structure of painting itself.

The emphasis on materiality is articulated in Tantra's artistic process itself. While the visual compositions are created digitally, the paintings are executed by hand in the studio through meticulous preparation. The very act of painting itself happens quickly, performed on a stretched canvas, laid horizontally across table trestles.

Tantra reflects on her artistic process: "I don't actually see the painting until the very end when all the masking tape is taken off. Due to the fragility of the tempera paint, corrections are difficult, the process is unforgiving, and there is no space for errors. It is like calligraphy where you have just one shot at making it work."

In the last two years, Tantra has experimented with gold. Drawn to its universal appeal throughout the ages, Tantra applies gold leaf to her paintings. And whilst paint absorbs light, gold reflects and shines, continuously shifting as the light fades from day to night, from viewer to viewer as they move or walk around, allowing for shifting meanings and experiences.

Artist	Sinta Tantra
Curator	Sadiah Boonstra
Sound Artist	Thibaut Vandamme
Studio Assistant	Puti Azalia Ichsan



Taksu (A Reincarnation), 2022
540 x 130 cm (Tryptic)
130 x 180 cm (each)
Tempera and 24 ct gold leaf on linen



Two Cousins (Batu Bata), 2022
300 x 120 cm (Tryptic)
120 x 100 cm (each)
Tempera and 24 ct gold leaf on linen



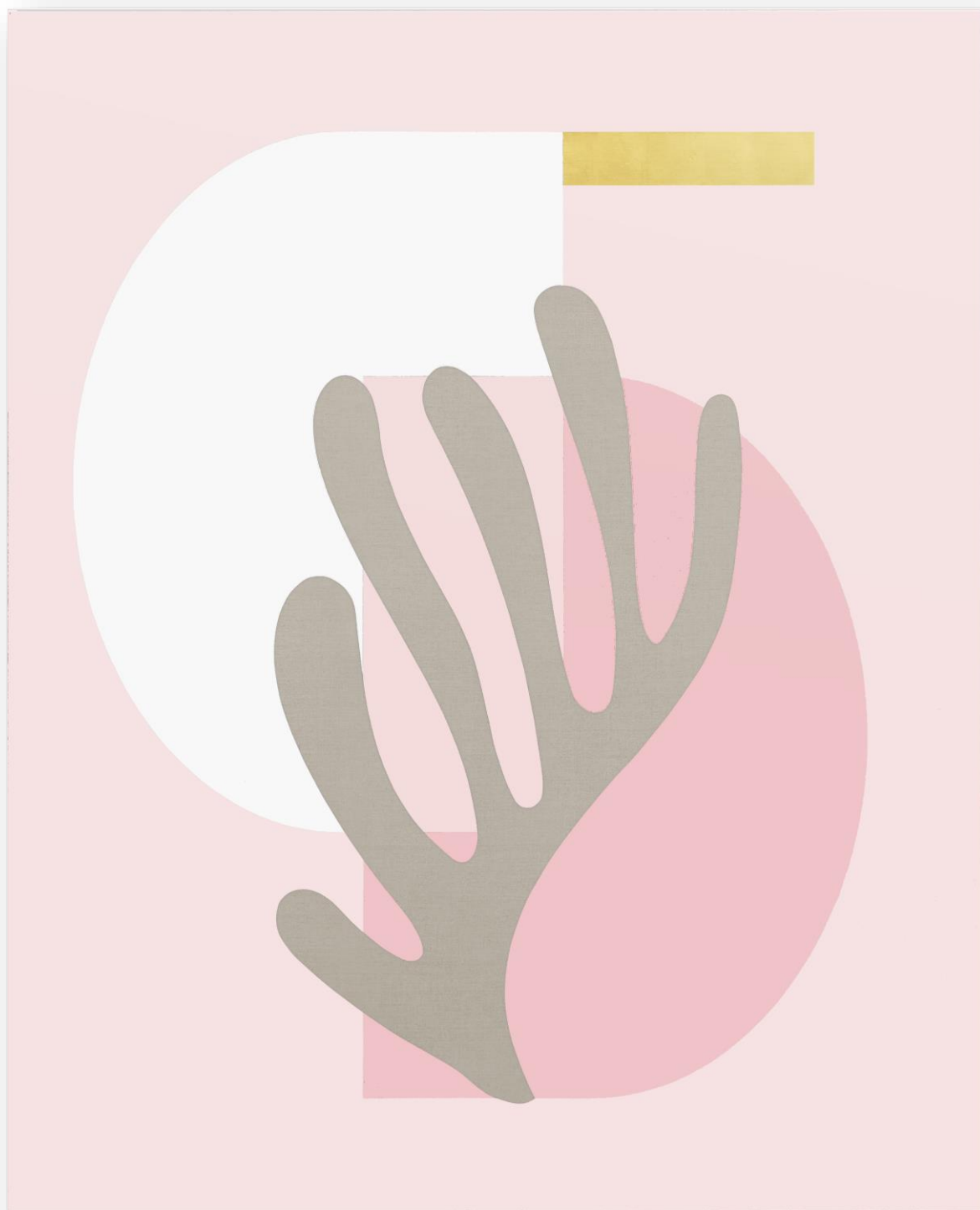
Constellations of Being I, 2022
160 x 130 cm
Tempera and 24 ct gold leaf on linen



Constellations of Being II, 2022
160 x 130 cm
Tempera and 24 ct gold leaf on linen



Constellations of Being III, 2022
160 x 130 cm
Tempera on linen



Indah Ripon (Black Magic), 2022
160 x 130 cm
Tempera and 24 ct gold leaf on linen



Harsiam (Broken Eggs), 2022
160 x 130 cm
Tempera on linen



Taman Ujung (A Water Palace), 2022
160 x 130 cm
Tempera and 24 ct gold leaf on linen



Remben (Purusa), 2022
100 x 120 cm
Tempera and 24 ct gold leaf on linen



Dong Luh (She Stopped Telling Me, And I
Stopped Crying), 2022
100 x 120 cm
Tempera and 24 ct gold leaf on linen



Mukri (Combing My Hair By the River), 2022
100 x 120 cm
Tempera and 24 ct gold leaf on linen

Sinta Tantra



(b1979, New York) the British artist of Balinese descent, Sinta Tantra studied at the Slade School of Fine Art, University College London in 1999–2003 and at the Royal Academy Schools London in 2004–06.

Highly regarded for her site-specific murals and installations in the public realm, most of her work envisions the concept of drawing and colour. Her commissions include; Lee Tung Avenue, Hong Kong (2018); Facebook London (2018); Folkestone Triennial (2017) Newnham College, Cambridge University (2016); Songdo South Korea (2015); Royal British Society of Sculptors (2013); Liverpool Biennial (2012); Southbank Centre (2007). Tantra's most notable public work includes a 300-metre long painted bridge commissioned for the 2012 Olympics, Canary Wharf, London.

Known for her fascination with colour and composition, Sinta Tantra's work is an experiment in scale and dimension, a hybridity of pop and formalism, an exploration of identity and aesthetics. Her decade of work in the public realm produced distinct colour abstractions which wrapped around the built environment, enlivening and transforming them in the process. Her work now ranges from small painted canvases to huge architectural installations, from bold, tropical colour to a calder-like minimalism. It occupies a space at the intersection between painting and architecture, striking a fine balance between the two-dimensional and three-dimensional, decorative and functional, public and private. Themes within Tantra's practice include the slippage between pictorial and physical space, of turning something 'inside out', and how we, as bodies become submerged in surface and structure.

"I describe the work as 'painting on an architectural scale'. She creates works that celebrate the spectacle, questioning the decorative, functional and social role of art. The compositional arrangements are rooted in formalism. She becomes intrigued when this formalism becomes 'relational' - when private becomes public and when the viewer becomes active. Her work is an 'overlay' which inserts its identity within the pre existing - heightening sense of fantasy within the functional.

Education

2003 – 2006 Postgraduate Diploma in Fine Art, Royal Academy of Arts, London
2000 – 2003 BA in Fine Art Slade School of Fine Art, University College London, London
1999 – 2003 BTEC Foundation Diploma in Art & Design, Middlesex University, London

Solo Exhibition

2022 On Being Blue, Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, Nevlunghavn
2021 Birds of Paradise, Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, Berlin
2020 Modern Times, Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, London.
2018 *Your Private Sky*, Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, London
2017 *A House in Bali*, ISA Gallery, Jakarta
2016 *A Romance of Many Dimensions*, Pearl Lam Gallery, Hong Kong
2015 *Fantastic / Chromatic*, Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, London
Essence of a Thing, House of St. Barnabas, London
Nick Hornby & Sinta Tantra, Choi and Lager Gallery, Cologne
2011 *Dynamic, Maximum, Tension*, Liverpool Biennial, Liverpool
2010 *Politics of Seduction*, Stanley Picker Gallery, Kingston University, London
Arsenic Fantasy, Gaya Fusion Gallery, Bali
2009 *Real Phoney*, Monika Bobinska Gallery, London

Selected Group Exhibition

2022 Reverberation, ISA Art Gallery, Jakarta
Art Moment Jakarta Online, ISA Art Gallery, Jakarta
2021 Facing the Sun, Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, Schloss Görne, Berlin
2019 Strangers in Town, Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, Berlin
Art Jakarta, ISA Art Gallery
2018 *Sinta Tantra & Haffendi Anuar*, Richard Koh Gallery, Kuala Lumpur
Hornby Tantra, Collaborative Works III, Broadgate, London
Tetap Terang / Always Bright, ISA, Jakarta
Voyage to Indonesia, The World Bank, Washington DC
2017 *Empirical Atlas*, Pearl Lam Gallery, Singapore
Acts of Transgression, Pearl Lam Gallery, Singapore
High Noon, Accademia Belle Arti di Roma, Rome
Summer Mostra, The British School at Rome, Rome
Identify Your Limitations, Acknowledge your Periphery, Vitrine Gallery, Basel
Changing Perspective, Jogja National Museum, Yogyakarta
Quotidian, Pearl Lam Gallery, Shanghai
I Lost my Heart to a Spaceship Trooper, Griffin Gallery, London
Spring Mostra, The British School at Rome, Rome
2016 *Lost and Found: Place, Space and Identity*, World Trade Centre, Jakarta
Painting Now, Riccardo Crespi Gallery, Milan

Public Art Commissions

2021	Pink Moon Rising, Seolhaewon, Gangwon-Do Temple of Flora, Ocean Flower Island, Hainan Illuminated, 22 Bishopsgate, London commissioned by Contemporary Art Society
2020	The Grand Tour, Dulwich Picture Gallery, London Crossing Mount Daemo, The H Honor Hills, Seoul commissioned by Hyundai Poins Square, Jakarta
2019	Horizon to Horizon, Sharjah Islamic Arts Festival, Sharjah Bright Dawn, Karachi Biennale, Karachi Compose Motions, Honer Hills, commissioned by Hyundai, Seoul Tasted Flight, Honer Hills, commissioned by Hyundai, Seoul
2018	Sunset in Tanah Lot, Facebook, London In the Mood for Love, Lee Tung Avenue, Hong Kong Paintworks, commissioned by Crest Nicholson, Bristol
2017	1947, commissioned by Folkestone Triennial, Folkestone Pailo Drappallone, commissioned by Commune di Siena, Siena Diamond Minutes, commissioned by Hana Bank, Incheon, Korea The Sound of Colour, commissioned by St. Paul's Way Medical Centre, London
2016	A Means of Liberation, commissioned by Newnham College, Cambridge
2015	Songdo, commissioned by the South Korean Government, Songdo Sensory Garden, commissioned by Bristol Royal Infirmary Hospital, Bristol The Eccentricity of Zero, commissioned by Royal British Society Sculptors, London
2013	Greater Reality of Elsewhere, commissioned by Locwus International, Swansea The Eccentricity of Zero, commissioned by Royal British Sculptor Society, Holland Park, London
2012	Together Yet Forever Apart, commissioned by Liverpool Biennial, Liverpool
2012	A Beautiful Sunset Mistaken For a Dawn, commissioned by Canary Wharf, London

Awards and Residencies

2018	Stoneleaf Residency, New York
2017	Bridget Riley Fellowship in Drawing, British School at Rome
2015	Shortlisted for the Jerwood Contemporary Painting Prize
2014	International Development Fund, Art Council UK and British Council
2012	First Prize, Painting and Decorating Industry Award The Royal British Society of Sculptors AHRBS
2010	Shortlisted for the Jerwood Contemporary Painting Prize
2009	British Council Grant Courvoisier 'The Future 500' in partnership with The Observer Newspaper
2007	Arts Council England Westminster Civic Award, Public Arts
2006	The Deutsche Bank Award in Fine Art The Gordon Luton Award, The Worshipful Company Painters Stainers Trust
2005	Michael Moser Award
2003	6 Paul Smith Scholarship at The Royal Academy of Arts
2002	Henry Moore Sculpture Fund



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