

design anthology

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View from the outside

At home in a gallery setting or taking her work to the street, artist Sinta Tantra knows her identity

Words / Harry McKinley





As with many artists, Sinta Tantra felt the impact of lockdown. Her most recent London exhibition, at the Kristin Hjellegjerde gallery, opened just three days before public spaces were shuttered across the UK. It shifted to a digital format, but nonetheless closed before doors reopened. An Amsterdam group show was extended, but wrapped in August while tourism to the city was still at an atypical low. As for the future, she's currently working on two large-scale public works in Jakarta and a project with the Benetton Foundation – a love seat for an Italian square, where the users are suspended one metre from each other, “physically apart, but also together,” as she says. Whether it will go ahead remains uncertain.

Both inspired by, and named after, Charlie Chaplin's 1936 film *Modern Times*, the recent London show saw some of Tantra's usually colourful canvases muted to a more subdued palette, retaining her signature flat, geometric style, like blueprint drawings for unknown machines. She covered one of the gallery's glass

walls in pink film, bathing everything in a rosy glow, and piped in birdsong, a nod to when Chaplin's character in the film awakens in a prison cell to a beautiful chirping outside, a reminder of the freedom just beyond his grasp.

Tantra's viewpoint is timely for beyond the pandemic, a wave of social activism is sweeping the country. Race, identity and equality are the talking points, and she has something to say. Born in New York to Balinese parents, she considers herself Balinese but was mostly raised in London, training at both the Slade School of Fine Art and the Royal Academy. “I've always straddled multiple cultures, but the higher up in the art world I get, the whiter and more male dominated it is,” she says. As the Black Lives Matter movement – and wider conversations around representation – come to the fore, she feels now could be the time to challenge the art world's foundations.

“I always knew growing up that to be successful I'd never go through the front door and that I'd

Previous page
Tantra's recent
show at the Kristin
Hjellegjerde
gallery in London

Above
Balinese artist
Sinta Tantra, who
studied in London

Facing page
Polarised Sky,
Rotating Screens
(*Buckminster Fuller*), a three-
dimensional
triptych from 2018

“There’s now a reconfiguring of ideas of race, gender and sexuality and yet that diversity isn’t reflected in terms of who holds the power”



Rick Roxburgh, Luca Piffaretti

have to find my own way in,” she says. It was the YBAs that proved an inspiration. They had a show at the RA around the time she was completing her A Levels and, in the era of New Labour and Cool Britannia, the likes of Tracey Emin and Damien Hirst showed a private education wasn’t a prerequisite to a creative career. “There was something a bit rock and roll about it. I saw the possibility for the first time that I could be an artist,” she says.

When she progressed to art school, she felt grateful to benefit from an education at some of the world’s top institutions. But as time has passed and her perspective has matured, she’s begun to recognise some of the quiet, insidious ways that stereotyping impacted on her development and in the evolution of her work. “I’ve always been a bit apologetic,” she says, with a laugh. “But now I feel more empowered to talk about my journey.” For which she credits Reni Eddo-Lodge’s bestselling book, *Why I’m No Longer Talking to White People About Race*.

“I used to feel like there was no racism, because I was there. But I remember little details, like a tutor saying my work would look good in a Thai restaurant, or saying my style was me screaming out for attention because it was more camp than people expected of it, of me. It was quite elitist and there was an assumption that I would produce work that reflected my ‘Asian female’ identity.”

Of course any lack of positive reinforcement didn’t suppress her buoyant, colourful approach and she’s become renowned for her behemoth public works that have graced buildings, bridges and pavements in the likes of Hong Kong, Sharjah and her home city, London. “Some people compare my work to graffiti,” she says. “And underneath they both have that same sense of wanting to be heard, to be seen and of blurring the boundaries of what constitutes art. It’s about stepping out of the canvas and creating work outside of the white cube. Doing something on a city wall makes me feel like I exist in the world.”

Even her work on canvas, which has become more prolific over the years, carries many of the

same themes – of using universal visual language, colour and line, to express complex ideas, or challenge the observer to fill the space with their own. She uses pink, for example, as a thought exercise on gender; the colour was once considered masculine in the UK, then feminine, while in other countries it’s genderless. Her work is informed by the baked-in notions each of us carry with us, both meaningful and, as social constructs, meaningless. The same often applies to how we judge and label people, especially minorities.

Her pieces now regularly hang in prestigious galleries around the globe but, even so, she riles against what she considers, at times, a constraining, selective art world that feels inaccessible – and, indeed, is inaccessible – for many. In the current cultural climate, there’s an opportunity to address it.

“Galleries are intimidating and institutions are about exclusivity. They’re helmed primarily by white, middle-class people who have become the gatekeepers of the industry. There’s now a reconfiguring of ideas of race, gender and sexuality and yet that diversity isn’t reflected in terms of who holds the power within these establishments. You can take a statue in Bristol and throw it in the river in a couple of hours, but to topple institutions, or evolve them, can take generations. A lot of that is due to the economy of the art world and what it takes to make a living as an artist. We’re stuck on this capitalist rollercoaster and we can’t get off.”

Of course there are no easy answers and, for Tantra, much of what needs to change boils down to a widening of the stories and the ways in which they’re told. “It’s like when you have an argument with someone,” she explains. “Right now it’s all coming out and I think, once the heat has died down, it will be time to have conversations. There’s a place for art to be part of that activism beyond the gallery: changing public spaces in order to change ourselves. Maybe instead of looking up to these institutions asking them to make space for diverse voices, we look at how to remake the system altogether and how to create new platforms. Maybe it starts with us.”

Facing page
Clockwise from
top left: *Your
Private Sky*
(Buckminster
Fuller), 2018;
Bali Birdsong
(Evening),
2020; *Bright
Dawn* (2019), a
30-metre-long
mural in a
Karachi park



Luca Piffaretti, Jamal Ashiqain