McKay, Fiona, ‘Sri Conversations: Sinta Tantra’, Sri Journal, December 2020

Sri Conversations: Sinta Tantra

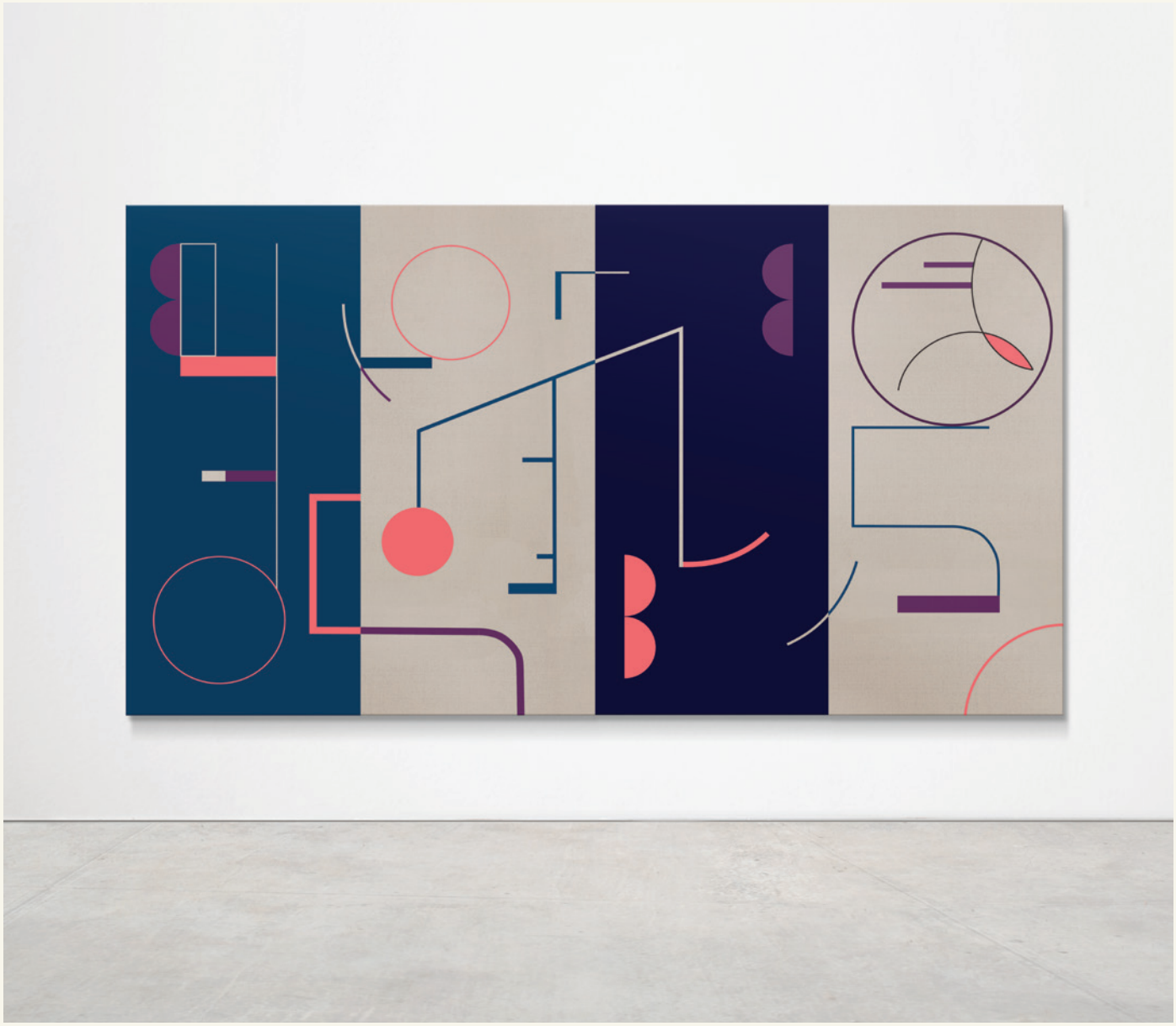
Artist Sinta Tantra, Photo by Ian Pollard.

A British artist of Balinese descent, Sinta Tantra spent her childhood in Indonesia, America and the UK where she studied at the Slade School of Fine Art and the Royal Academy Schools. Known for her colourful geometric paintings and site-specific murals, many in the public realm, Tantra’s work explores ‘painting on an architectural scale’. Living and working in between her two studios in London and Bali, Tantra’s motifs derive from Western movements such as Bauhaus, Art Deco, modernism and abstraction. Her Balinese identity within the post-colonial context is central to her work. The drawings of 20th century Balinese artist, architect and stone carver, Gusti Nyoman Lempad have informed explorations into two-dimensional lines and three-dimensional space. Her pop-tropical colour palette draws from the culture and environment of Bali.

Tantra is the first recipient of the Bridget Riley Drawing Fellowship at the British School at Rome, previous commissions include The Contemporary Art Society, Folkestone Triennial, Karachi Biennale and Canary Wharf London. Tantra’s paintings are part of the Government Art Collection, the Benetton Foundation collection and other private international collections.

Instagram: @sintatantra

https://sintatantra.com/



TABUH TABUHAN SCREEN II IN SAPPHIRE, VIOLET & PRUSSIAN (COLINE MCPHEE), 2018. Tempera on Linen, 180 x 320 cm / 4 panels at 180 x 80cm. Photo by Sinta Tantra.

Describe your journey towards becoming an artist and what were your influences growing up?

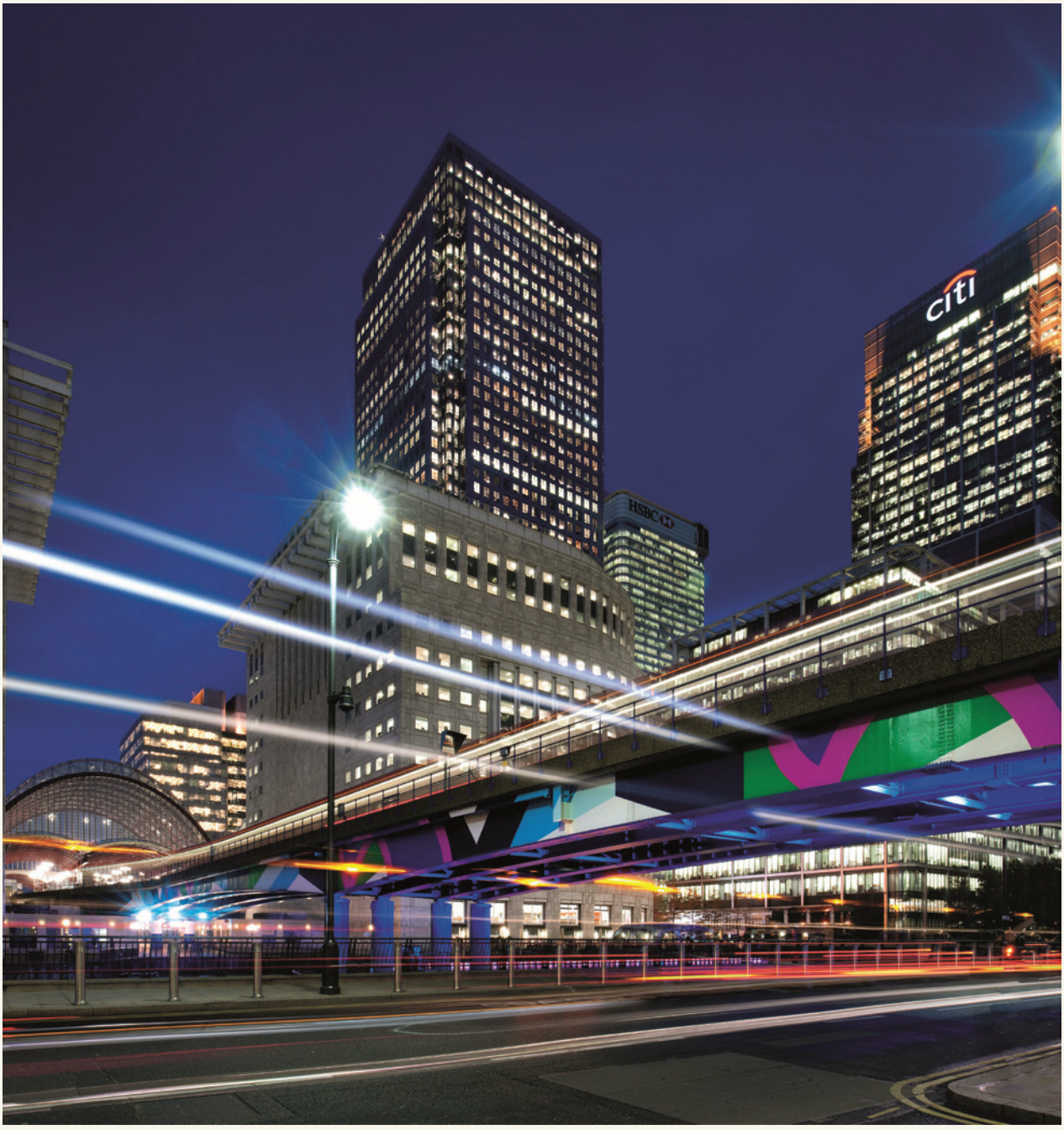
When I was younger, I was really interested in music, including playing the piano and composition. Yet I found that the subject of music in schools was taught in such a way that, as well as playing or singing other people's music, there's a certain structure to how you harmonise notes and tunes. However, within art class, I loved the idea of being faced with a blank canvas. So this was the only subject at school which enabled me to create a direct interpretation of objects in front of me, somehow translating what you see in the world onto a page. I found this quite exciting and liberating compared with any of the other subjects I studied.

I originally thought I was going to be a producer or curator, as I always enjoyed putting together events at school. And even throughout the process of being an artist, I've ended up using some of those skills, particularly within public art practice which requires putting together a vision and involves working with a team of technicians and builders. That taught me how to communicate with people from all walks of life, in different countries and cultures where English isn't the main language.

In terms of my influences and culture, although I grew up in the UK, we went back to Bali as a family every year since the age of 5. Spending three months a year in Bali helped me form quite a strong influence in terms of my upbringing. I speak Indonesian, but I don't speak Balinese since I guess my parents were of the generation where it was better to speak Indonesian to other Indonesians rather than subdividing. My mother came from a Muslim family originally, whereas my father came from a Hindu family, but being in Bali, you're very much immersed in Hindu culture. And within that culture, it's very vibrant and visually quite delicious! Compared to Europe, I found the light and colours to be really exciting as well as the natural vegetation and plantation to be very lush and green.

In terms of artistic influences, I remember going to the Necka museum with my family and falling totally in love with these drawings by Nyoman Lempad (1862–1978), who was a Balinese sculptor. The word for architecture and sculpture are very similar in Balinese, since stone masonry is really prevalent in a lot of the buildings there. My grandfather was a well respected stone mason and carver, since the district where my father's village is near Mount Agung, which obviously has lots of volcanic stone. When you look at Nyoman Lempad's drawings, it's really evident that they were drawn by a sculptor; there's a blueprint precision to how he executed them. And I love the fact that they're all black and white, which is different to how other artists would have depicted Balinese mythology. It's clear from these drawings that Lempad would have been exposed to Western artists and thinkers that came to Bali at the turn of the 20th Century.

As you can imagine, everything to do with Balinese culture is very structured around the Hindu religion. And so the making of art isn't really considered art, it's part of the ritual of making offerings, praying and is integrated within the spirituality of the Balinese people. As a child, I was really interested in the difference between, say, painting as 'high art' here and the craftsmanship inherent in Balinese people, used to creating beautiful objects using their hands.



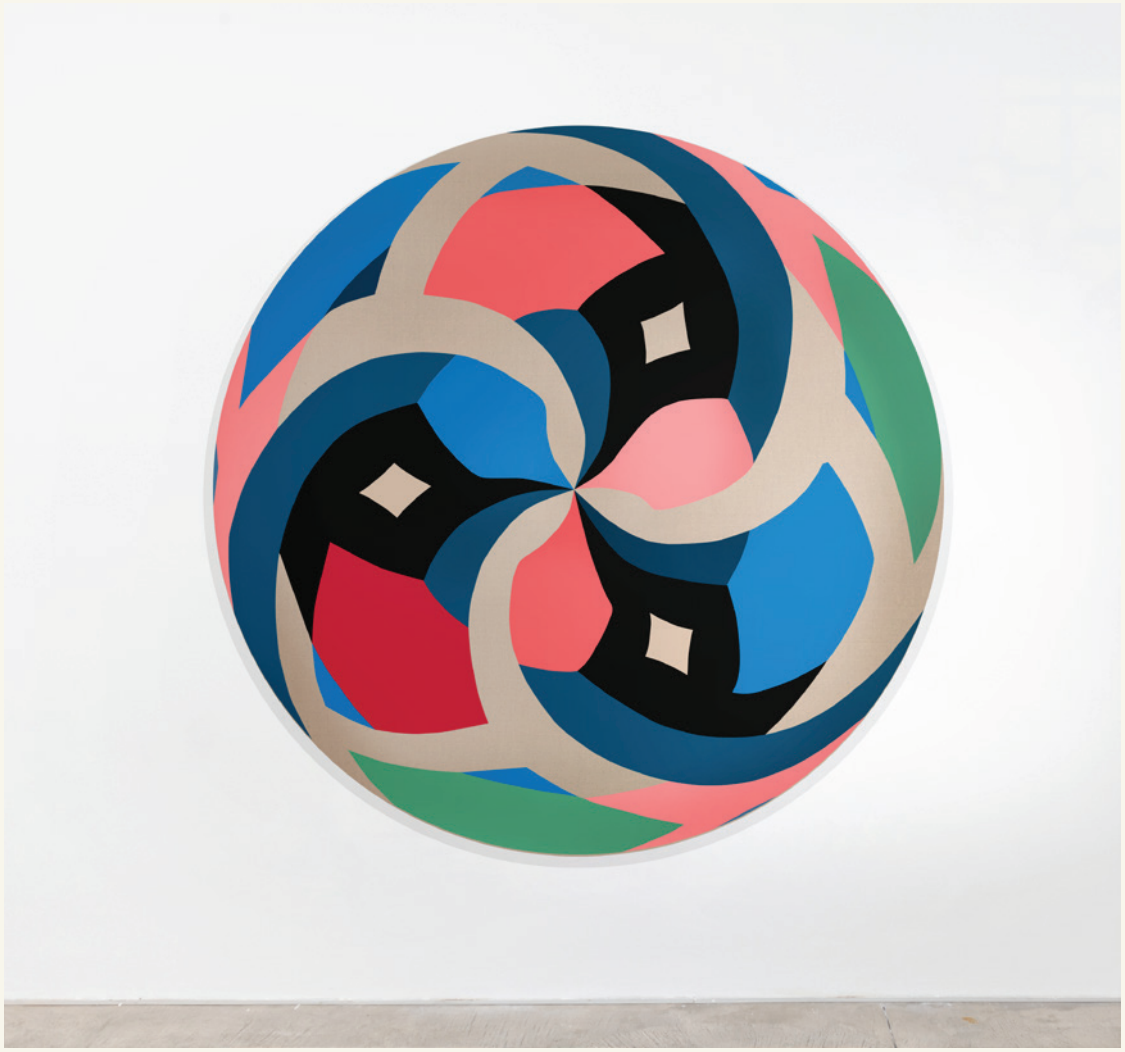
A BEAUTIFUL SUNSET MISTAKEN FOR A DAWN, 2012. DLR Bridge at Canary Wharf, London. Photo by Canary Wharf Group.

I love seeing how art from the 'everyday' becomes embedded in the immediate environment, which is how I want to create works within a public art setting. To show that you don't have to have an education in art or experience within a museum or gallery, how art can exist in the everyday in a similar way to Balinese culture, without it being considered as 'art'.

Could you expand on how your 'Balinese identity within the post-colonial context' influences your work? And perhaps more generally on the impact of tourism and development on Balinese creativity?

When I was studying, the idea of 'post-colonialism' was associated with the 1960s - 1980s and then somehow during the 1990s and 2000s, this didn't become as important. But now with the Black Lives Matter movement and authors such as Renni Eddo-Lodges being part of the mainstream discussion, it's made me think back about my personal experiences within art school and now within the art world. I wouldn't have picked up on any systemic racism back then but now it's made me pay more attention to how people view my art.

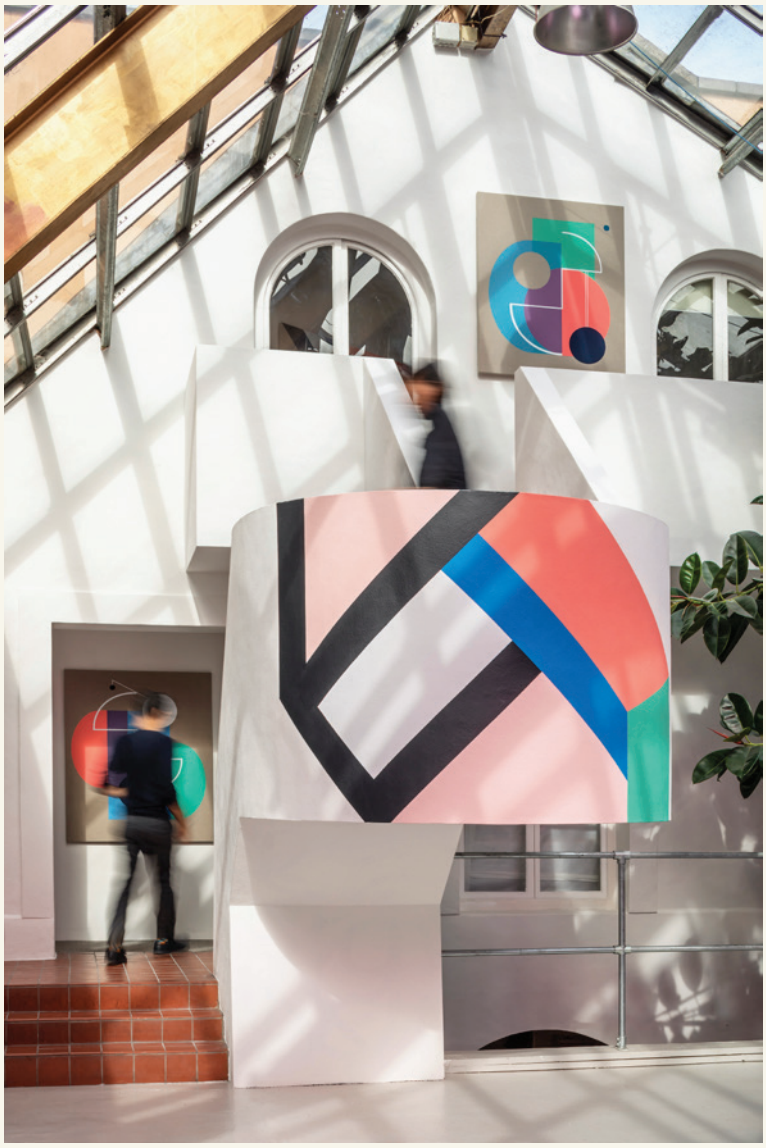
When I was a student, there was an expectation of my work to look quite decorative and feminine or even ethnic. I was told since I'm Indonesian to go look at 'batik' whereas for me at the time, it seemed a bit old fashioned to reference this. I was more interested in zooming in on motifs of femininity, decorative elements and colours within the Balinese aesthetic; playing with scale and abstraction to make it contemporary. I guess this comes with my upbringing and my experiences living in the UK and Bali, somehow finding these opportunities where I could juxtapose one thing on top of the other.



A HOUSE IN BALI EGG (SUNSET), 2017. Tempera on linen, 150 cm Photo by Sinta Tantra.

With Balinese artists, I'm not sure if they are even aware of a loss of identity, as they have been used to outside influences for such a long time. For example, in Venice, Venetians don't seem to be bothered by the tourists since they've lived with it all their lives. The Balinese definitely rely on tourism in terms of the local economy. The tourist industry and capitalism in general makes it difficult for Balinese artists to be independent. In terms of education, there is a Balinese art school but a lot of people tend to go study in Java instead. It's quite difficult to be a Balinese artist in Bali; as part of the culture, there's a lot of responsibility towards the family. So in general, the infrastructure and culture in Bali makes it quite difficult to be an independent artist, particularly to think outside the box. Since I've had that opportunity to go back and forth between Bali and the UK, I guess I'm quite an insider and outsider in both places. I suppose the concept of 'post-colonialism' can only come when you step out of that context. I think that for a lot of Balinese or Indonesian artists, even though a handful of them are very international and travel extensively, unless you've had that experience of stepping out and stepping in again, you don't really notice this.

It's clear that your strong use of colour comes from your Balinese influences but how do these connect with your other influences such as "Bauhaus, Art Deco, modernism and abstraction"?



MODERN TIMES, 2020. MuralKristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, London. Photo by Luca Piffaretti.

I guess I love pop art and generally how colours can literally 'pop' within the context of a painting. I'm also really inspired by Matisse, Fauvists and Modernists. I love using colour as a way of instinctively communicating in a direct and emotional way, and people tend to engage with this on an intuitive level. I also like combining this with the idea of the blueprint with its precise lines and the process of imagination between 2D and 3D, as well as the Western style of formalism and modernism. For example Bauhaus is a lot about composition and making things look balanced. I like to counter this with a visual language that is more emotive and intuitive; so the idea of having something quite structured but then using colour which is trying to translate my experiences or what I want it to do within the space. In summary, the industrial language of blueprints and perhaps doing things on a big scale, for instance within public art or urban design, but also having colour which is unique to me and my palettes. In addition, I enjoy being able to convey diverse narratives and stories of individuals from different countries.

How does working between the UK and Bali inform your work? Do you feel a responsibility to represent Indonesian culture/design?

When I put my art out into the world, it really depends on the market and different audiences. You just do whatever it takes to try and convey what you're trying to say to an audience, that perhaps needs something more palatable. Unless I'm in a context where I can really discuss all the intricacies, it's quite difficult to communicate the story of my work without explaining to a British audience who I am or where I'm from. Automatically, that becomes the start of my work and I guess I'm happy with that since all my life, I've had to explain what my heritage is to people within the UK.

With my work, I do get asked pretty much the same questions and you get to figure out what people want to know. If I'm giving my story to an Indonesian audience, I have to explain that I've lived all my life in London and give them a synopsis of what Bauhaus, Abstract Expressionism or Modernism is, since they've never really had those movements there.

I think each audience has a different way of wanting to place you, which I don't really mind too much. We live in a world where we say we don't want labels, but really we do. The problem with labels is that people think they know what they mean and then they contradict themselves. However, we are continually changing the way we speak and we have the freedom to evolve these labels. So as the author of your own work, you're allowed to create, construct and reconstruct whatever and whoever you want to be, which can be quite liberating.

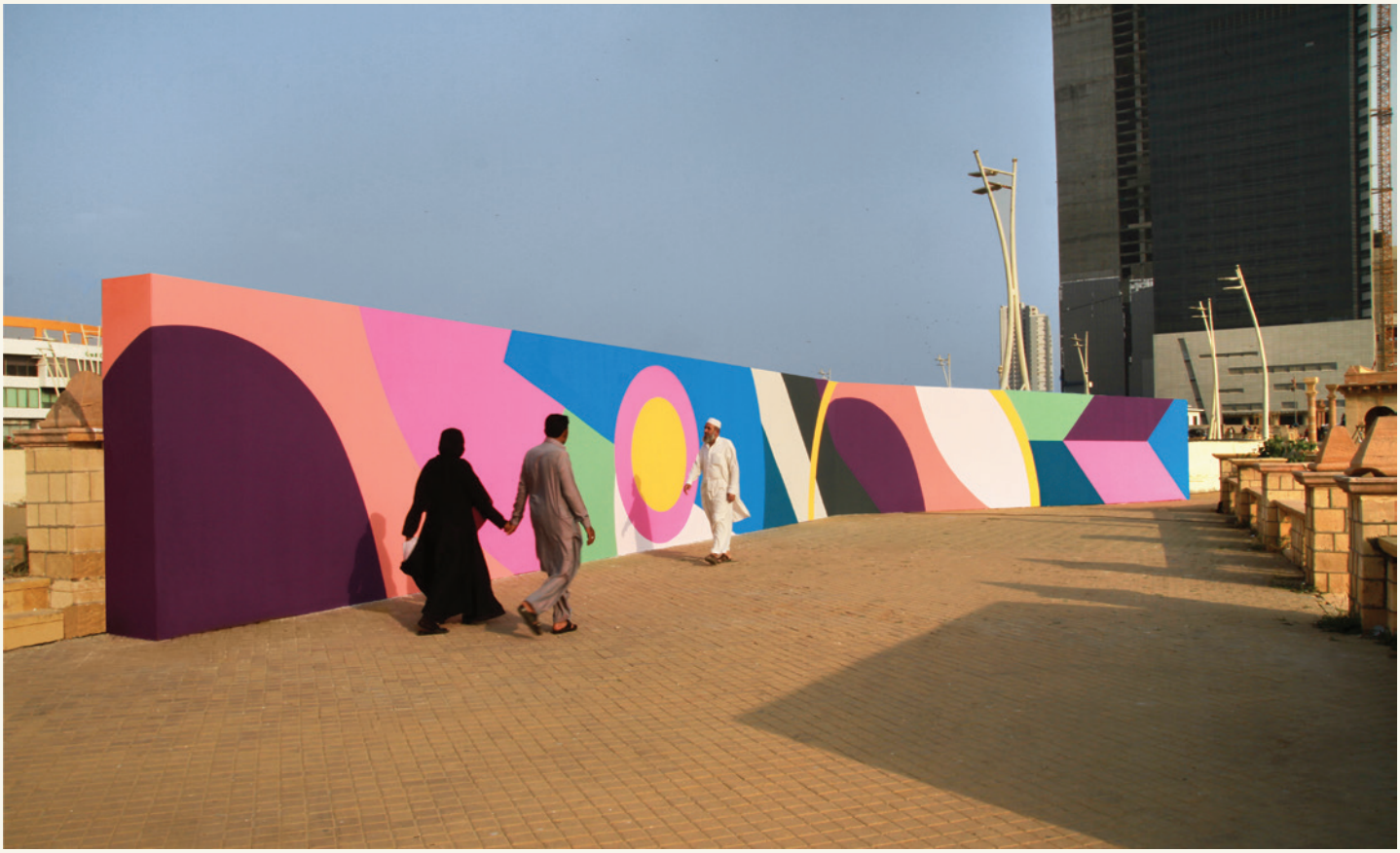
In general, I don't mind my heritage being referred to too much. I know that some artists don't talk too much about their background or how that's influenced their work. However, I find it important, especially as my work is mostly abstract so I guess I could get away with saying it's all stimulus. Overall, I guess these things have inspired me and it's truthful to my own journey and my story. Also, I didn't want my work to be white-washed and just be part of the Western canon only.

The art world and perhaps, the world at large, is still very much dependent on a capitalist system and within that you, as an artist, are selling something with which you have to use marketing language. Before you know it, everything becomes reduced to hashtags in how it's pitched. So until we get away from all of that, it's quite difficult to find a space where you can truly be yourself.

And is there a difference in the language you might use within a commercial art world setting compared to public art?

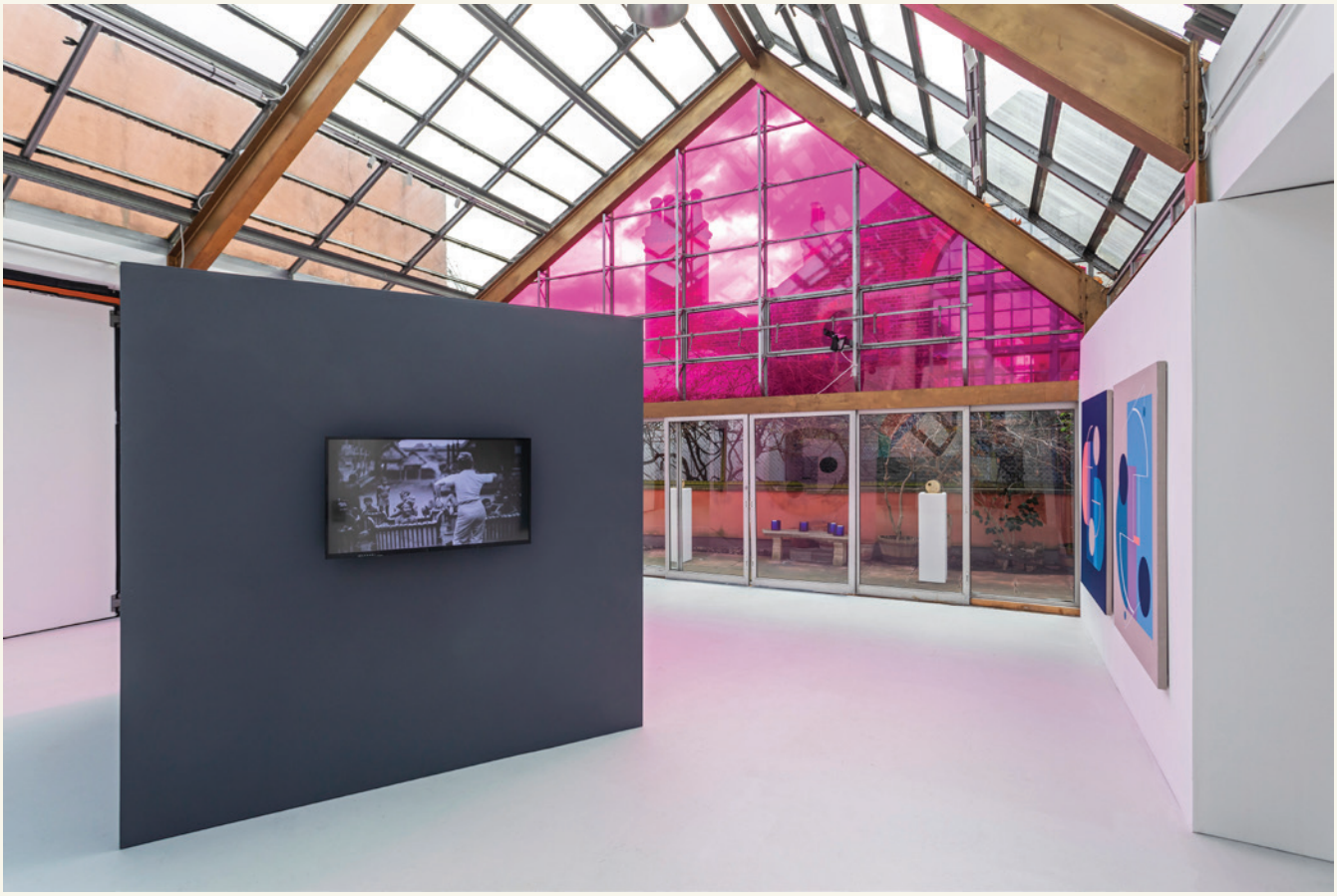
It really depends who you're speaking to. For example with collectors, they might be more instinctive and know what they like, without any reference to art history. They might just want to hear about how I interpret the work and go on that.

It's a bit of a battle though. I guess I've made my life harder because the norm for an artist is to work through a single gallery and they do most of the talking. I work with two galleries here in London and also Jakarta plus work with multiple commissioners who all have different languages. So I'm literally having to change context every single time, which is a bit like when I was growing up! For example, when I was at home with my parents, I'd speak a different type of English than say when I was at school. If you've been brought up in a multicultural environment like that, it gives you the communication skills you can use later on in life. For example, I find that I can communicate with people in places such as Pakistan, using sign language quite effortlessly!



BRIGHT DAWN, 2019, Painted Wall, 2.7 x 29 m. Karachi Biennale, Pakistan. Photo by Jamal Ashiqain.

Bali is the first representation of Indonesian culture outside of the country. With your most recent exhibition in London, 'Modern Times', you reference Charlie Chaplin's time in Bali in 1932. This seems to point towards a long history of western migration towards Bali.



MODERN TIMES (PINK), 2020, Vinyl Installation. Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, London. Photo by Luca Piffaretti.

There was a big migration of artists from the West moving to Bali in the 1920s and 1930s, who saw it as a way to escape modern life. You could say that someone like Charlie Chaplin was exoticising what Bali was then. If you speak to my father, who would have perhaps touched upon this golden age of Bali, he would say exactly the same thing which was a world that was a completely different way of life to now.

For instance, how you would fill your days would incorporate certain types of cultural activities, such as gamelan (traditional Indonesian ensemble music), cooking, festivals, having a close connection with your village. Even how the whole village was put together and how they're generally designed so beautifully with all the elements placed amongst nature. For example, in my father's village in Bali, there is a Spring Bath, where you wash yourself and then the river would be just there to wash your clothes.

This traditional way of life however doesn't seem to gel well with modern aspirations. So even in my father's generation, you already had the younger people leaving the village. My father though would have seen the last remnants of what Chaplin saw in the 1930s.

What's your thoughts on Bali today in terms of this way of life? Do you think it's now lost forever or has just evolved?

Yes I think it has been lost forever but you could say that London wasn't what it was like in the 90s when I was growing up! We often romanticise different eras of time and we live in a world that's ever changing so it's quite hard to go back. Once you're in this global and capitalist way of thinking to always move forwards, I think it's quite hard to stay in the village and just play gamelan all day! People in Indonesia don't want that anymore, they want a mobile phone or Sky TV or the latest motorbike and why not? They also want running water, they might not want to go to the stream anymore to wash their clothes!

The world is changing and for some reason, people often ask that about Bali but I think we need to ask how it can modernise but still preserve the ecology, heritage and culture. Overall, I feel optimistic because whenever I go there, you can see that the Balinese culture is still very strong, even in the city. It's perhaps when the Balinese go to live elsewhere such as Jakarta or abroad that it's difficult to keep these traditions.

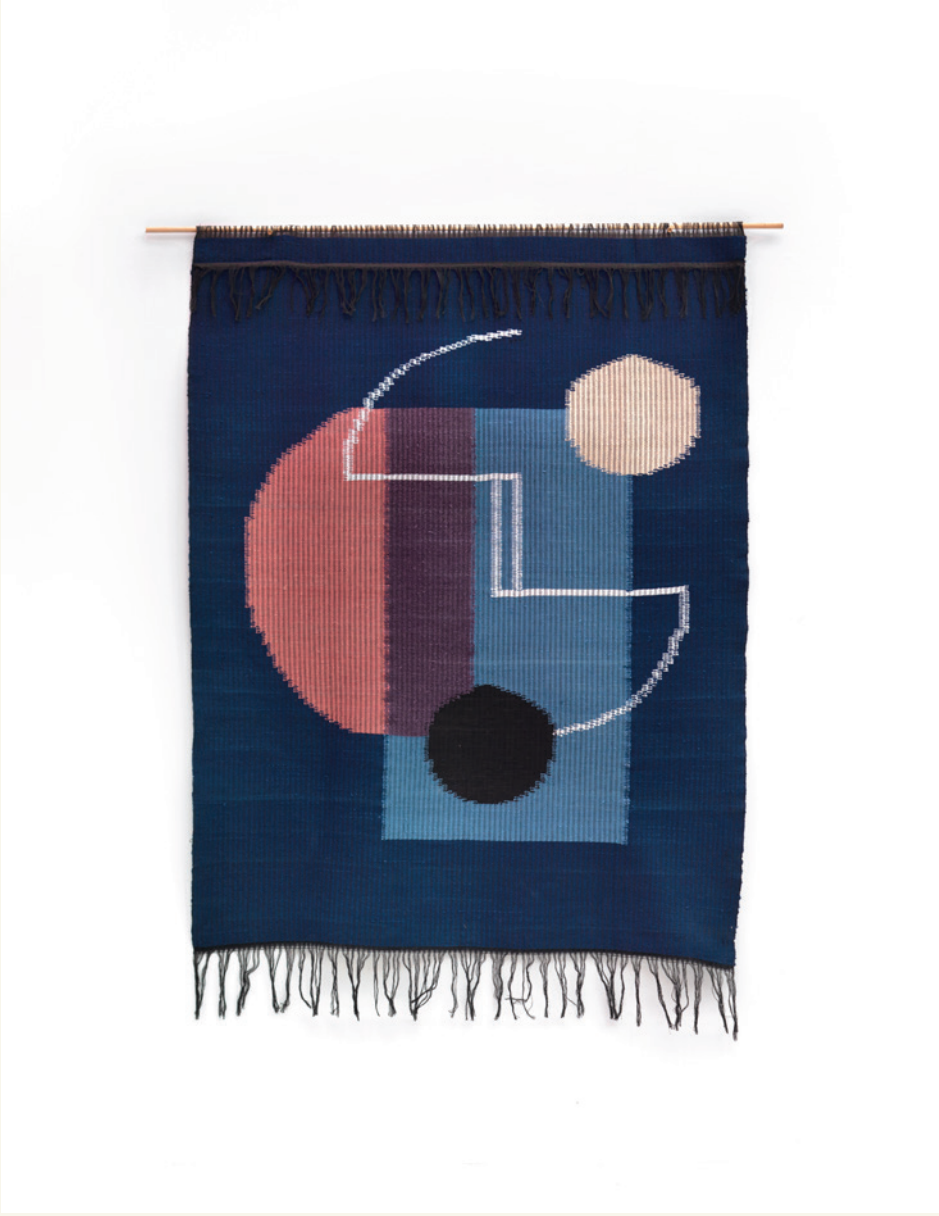
Being Balinese is not just about rituals and praying but it's a way of life. It's about believing and accepting in the good and bad within the world and that was very inherent in my upbringing. For instance with the pandemic, a typical Balinese reaction would be 'well maybe it's a reflection on how we've treated the earth', whether they'll do something about it is another matter though!

I think we have that idealised Balinese life in the village and is often placed within the wider context of Indonesia and the two notions often conflict. I think Balinese are traditionalists but at the same time interested in progress and are more open to development. In contrast, if you look at somewhere like Italy, generally speaking they aren't interested in the idea of progress and are quite happy with their existing way of life. I spent a lot of time in Sienna and they have these things called 'comperadas' which are small groups of people which it helps to be a part of if you want to be accepted into the community.

I feel like the Balinese are maybe more forward thinking and are flexible to change but I wish they were less so when it comes to preserving ecology and healthcare. This is perhaps part of a mind-set across Indonesia generally, particularly when it comes to diet and food; women's healthcare isn't paid as much attention to as it should be.

It seems now that Bali has become a hub for international designers and small scale manufacturing. Is there a tension here with exploitation and appropriation or is it a positive thing for the local economy?

I did speak to recently someone who is involved in the import/export business between South-East Asia and France. And he said that the Balinese are really great at making things with their hands but they're not keen on expanding and adapting their skills. So it's actually really difficult to get some things made there.



TARUM III, 2020, Woven Textiles, 130 x 100 cm. Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, London. Photo by Luca Piffaretti

For me, I had to do quite a few tests for my weavings and you have to spend quite a lot of time there to convey and translate how you want your design realised. You have to communicate in a different way as they don't really respond to blueprints or technical drawings; they'll respond better to a watercolour or something with scribbles and more abstract! I think we have a different entrepreneurial approach to say the Chinese or Koreans who are more open to streamlining and adapting their way of making. In a way, there's an 'old-school' quality to it which goes against their forward-thinking mentality in other areas. Although if they were, there could be a lot of opportunities for craft workshops to produce on a larger scale but there just isn't the desire to. They're quite happy with the standard of living they already have and the Balinese calendar is so packed with festivities and ceremonies, as well as having responsibilities to their village and families! Certainly if I was based solely in Bali, I wouldn't be able to work as much.

In light of the global pandemic, what have been the challenges that have arisen for you both personally and professionally? Have you felt more disconnected with the Balinese influence on your work, with not being able to go back and forth as much?

Yes of course, not being able to be there physically has automatically made me feel disconnected. I think though, the pandemic has made me question how not only I work but how the art world functions generally. It's not very eco-friendly with all this travelling and all the international art fairs, which have loads of individual artists, collectors and artworks flying in and all flying out again. And I guess they have been coping with doing things online, so on a bigger picture, it's quite interesting to see how the world is changing in terms of how we work, including the art world.

Having said that, I can't wait to go back to Indonesia and see my family. I am though also enjoying my time here in the UK as travelling is quite taxing for your body. I don't think as humans we're designed to go on 12 hour flights! So at the moment, I'm enjoying staying at home and exercising and eating healthily.

Your recent group exhibition 'On the Nature of Botanical Gardens' in Amsterdam, examined the notion of the botanical garden in relation to colonial power and the economics of nature. Can you talk us through your installation?

It was exploring how the notion of the 'garden', was originally the concept of the wild being cultivated or tamed as something controlled like a greenhouse. If you look at the notion of the 'botanical garden' from a post-colonial perspective, it would be like taming the 'savages' or colonised. When you look at the concept of tea for example, it originally comes from the earth and nature and was tamed by colonisers, with people working under horrible conditions. But then this travelled back to West as part of the sophisticated activity of 'high tea' for the gentry to partake in.

For my installation, I had an 18th Century Javanese tea caddy in carved bamboo with inlaid elements, sitting alongside postcards which were status symbols of the time and almost an equivalent to an instagram post now. In the same way, the 'botanical garden' was a symbol for cultivation and status symbol for the wealthy. In my work, I referenced the botanical gardens in Bogor, Java which was opened by Dutch colonists, was very much a place where people would visit from abroad in the 19th Century.

What's next for you?

My next project is for The Dulwich Picture Gallery, designing a new welcome space for them. I'm working with the gallery team to create a space which is open, less institutional and more uplifting. The art will be inspired by John Soane, the original architect for the building who was interested in colour and especially coloured light. I'm also going to be linking that with some paintings in the collection that portray either a sunset or sunrise, which is a theme which features a lot in my work.

I also have a commission for the Contemporary Art Society in the Bishopsgate 22 building for which I'm designing a mural across a series of arches within the restaurant space.

All images courtesy of Sinta Tantra