

Pollman, Lisa, 'Turning passion into reality: gallerist Kristin Hjellegjerde- interview', Art Radar, 6 May 2016



Art Radar

Contemporary art trends and news from Asia and beyond

Turning passion into reality: gallerist Kristin Hjellegjerde – interview

Posted on **06/05/2016**

Gallerist explodes onto international art scene with powerful, diverse stable of artists.

Art Radar catches up with London-based gallerist Kristin Hjellegjerde to find out more about her recent entry in the contemporary art scene, her newest projects and musings on art fairs.



Kristin Hjellegjerde with Soheila Sokhanvari's sculpture "Love Me Do (Self Portrait Bust)". Photo: MLR Photo. Image courtesy Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery.

When did you first become interested in art and how did it lead to where you are today, recognised as one of Blouin's 500 Best Galleries Worldwide (2016 and 2015) and The Londonist's Independent Gallery of the Year (2014)?

As I grew up in quite rural small towns in Norway without much exposure to art, I was first an avid reader. Later through places like [Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art](#) in Oslo, I discovered another world I could engulf myself in. I especially remember my first encounter with Anselm Kiefer's *The High Priestess* – it was like in it all my passions just clicked; literature, history and art... But for many years I thought I could not possibly be "allowed" to work with something that I enjoyed so much. It took me nearly 40 years to say "Hey, why should I not give my life to something I am this passionate about?" So the years of travelling and looking at art turned into living with the arts in 2012, when I established the gallery.

You've been very busy the past several years, including a recent sold-out show at Volta New York. What do you feel the role is of International Art Fairs regarding Gallerists? Artists? Collectors?

Some fairs can really make a difference. I really enjoy the [VOLTA Art Fair](#). The people behind it treat all of the exhibitors and artists in a similar way to how I like to think I work, with integrity and a family touch. We all felt very welcomed and comfortable. It is actually a lot of fun to take part, and I am always up for a laugh. Collectors also feel very comfortable in this kind of atmosphere, therefore creating a platform for a great dialogue. When the conversation flows easily, we as the gallery can communicate about the art, its narrative and technique without it seeming in any way pushy. Art fairs are great at initiating the development of new friendships that will hopefully last for a long time. In New York, we exhibited the Ethiopian artist [Dawit Abebe](#), and now we are looking forward to exhibiting [Martine Poppe](#) and [Richard Stone](#) at VOLTA 12 in Basel.



Works by Dawit Abebe at the Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery booth, VOLTA NY 2016. Image courtesy Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery.

Do you think it's important to see art in an intimate setting, say versus an Art Fair? Why?

Absolutely. Having a gallery space is very important to me – this is where we and the artist really get to know each other. It's a space for the artist to experiment and show new ideas, and also develop what they already are working on. When I feel this is mastered, I give them the chance to do the same in an art fair setting. I find it much more exciting to curate a stand for a fair where the work is made especially for that city and its particular atmosphere.

Please tell us about Kristin Hjellegjerde Projects and how it is different from your main gallery space?

The Project Space will be an ongoing platform where I will mostly introduce new artists to the gallery. It will move from place to place, until we find out where we might start a second gallery. After a great spring with a second space in Old York Road where we worked with artists like [Florine Demosthene](#) from Haiti, we have some other ideas about moving some exhibits abroad in the future.



Ephrem Solomon, Untitled, 2015, woodcut, archival newsprint and acrylic, 160 x 160 cm. Image courtesy the Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery.

You recently met with artist Engdaget Legesse and have shown work from Ethiopian artists Dawit Abebe and Ephrem Solomon. It seems like there is a lot of interest worldwide in African artists. Why do you think that is?

Yes, it has been a fantastic experience to work with both Dawit and **Ephrem**. They are super professional so they make life easy for me. I am also always excited about seeing what they create next! I even had a chance to visit Dawit in Addis Ababa and it was of such great inspiration. I have to go back soon.

Africa has such huge potential – I can already feel there are more and more collectors coming from there, and the younger generation is eager to support their own artists and to help build an art scene in their own countries. Ephrem is currently exhibiting with me and I have sold his work to collectors from around the world from the United States to England to Kenya. I am really pleased at how well both the artists are doing. They are growing at a steady rate to really be there for the future.

In June I am thrilled to introduce another African artist to the gallery and to our supporters. **Amadou Sanogo** is a Malian painter who creates large-scale works with a very powerful cultural identity.



Amadou Sanogo, 'Smile A Bit', 2015-16, acrylic and oil on canvas, 130 x 110 cm. Image courtesy the Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery.

Please tell us about your relationships with Soheila Sokhanvari, Sinta Tantra and Muhammad Zeeshan. What is different/unusual about these artists that made you want to work with them?

First of all, they all have wonderful personalities and I would dare say are “born with” tremendous talent. All three are hard working and have their own strong distinctive identity. I discovered **Soheila** at her graduation show at **Goldsmiths University of London** – she blew me away with her daring sculptures and ability to jump to making detailed, intricate paintings. She is so multi-talented. We have been close ever since. She was actually the first one I called when I was planning to open the gallery.

Sinta I basically begged to exhibit with me. I basically kind of courted her for a year and a half to be part of an exhibit, to do more paintings as she was/still is doing a lot of public commissions. I think we can laugh about this now. She has also an incredibly strong artistic identity and can work on huge public commissions as well as a tiny painting. Her strengths in using vibrant colours is both inspiring and uplifting.

Zeeshan actually came to me. He just said bluntly and in his charming way “I would like to work with you”. I felt quite honoured as his work is absolutely stunning. He not only creates his own paper with organic colours and materials, but he has also invented a way to etch his figures into the paper using a laser, without burning the paper. This technique will be patented in the future with his name. He also adds traditional miniature painting techniques to his work. Daringly he mixes the religions by which he is surrounded, and in this he shows that we all are connected.

All of my artists bring some of their history with them in their work, in a way that is personal, unique and identifiable. It is my hope that when you see these artists’ works in various settings, you will immediately say “Hey that’s a piece by...”



Muhammad Zeeshan, 'Sher III', 2015, laser scoring and gouche on wasli, 150 x 94 cm. Image courtesy the Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery.

I believe you attended Art Dubai this year. Were there any specific artists whose work you saw that was particularly memorable? Why/what made it memorable or unique?

I really enjoyed **Art Dubai**. Everyone seemed to have a lot of fun and it was easy to get to know new people even though I only came to visit. I was surprised at how international and free the atmosphere seemed. I am especially intrigued by **Diana Al-Hadid**'s such stunning work, probably my favourite from the fair. I am also a huge fan of **Wael Shawky**. His videos at **documenta** made such an impression on me – intelligent and beautiful, as well as slightly shocking. I so wish I could have one of his glass puppets.

I also enjoyed the **Sharjah Art Foundation**. Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi is a woman to admire. She does a lot for the region. I also had a chance to visit **Maraya Art Centre** and the **Barjeel Art Foundation** where, I am proud to say, Dawit Abebe is part of the collection.

How about the event (The Wedding Project, I believe) put on by the Delfina Foundation during Art Dubai? What aspects of this event did you enjoy or find interesting?

What a fabulous, fun event! More of this please and life is a joy to live! **Aaron Cezar** is doing a great job as Director. Who knew he is also an entertainer and yes, a singer!! I am guiltily seriously excited about food, so what can be better than a collaborative event between art and a dinner inspired by the different moods of love? I think I made friends for lifetime around that table. So many restaurants these days are so focused about the food which is great but they should also remember the aesthetics. Food tastes better in exciting surroundings. To meet around a table with good food opens the heart. The best way to do business as well, in my opinion!



Roberto Cortázar, 'Head of a Front Male Figure No. 6', 2015, oil and silverpoint on panel, 205 x 155 cm.
Image courtesy the Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery.

Please tell us about your upcoming exchange with Mexican artists.

Last year I had a great opportunity to work with artist **Roberto Cortazar**, who is well known as one of the greatest painters in Mexico. He helped reconstruct the national art education program. The exhibition was promoted in relation to the Mexican-English cultural exchange year.

I don't have another Mexican artist scheduled at the moment, but I'm working on an opportunity for one of my represented artists to exhibit in Mexico city in the future.

Please tell us about your participation at Volta 12.

We will be exhibiting the Norwegian painter Martine Poppe at VOLTA 12, with a new series of paintings. After finding herself out of a studio space in London and with nowhere to stay, she took off on a road trip, travelling along Route 66 in the American Southwest. After a residency last summer in Los Angeles, Martine found she favours the Californian light. Light and its effect on colour are important aspects of her artistic projects. Her paintings are, should I say, seductive in a very quiet way, like a silent revolution.

Together with her, we will be showing the very talented British sculptor Richard Stone. His mountainous bronze sculptures work so well with Martine's paintings. I can't wait to install the exhibition and to see and feel the reactions from our friends and new acquaintances.

Lisa Pollman