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# Sinta Tantra: 'People say my art makes them happy'

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Next week the Folkestone Triennial begins with the unveiling of the latest artworks to transform this formerly rundown seaside town. Rather than rocking up every three years, dumping a load of contemporary art around and disappearing quickly and forgettably, as some similar events do, the organisers have ensured that much of the art remains and becomes part of the fabric of the town —

works by Mark Wallinger, Cornelia Parker and Tracey Emin, among others, are now part of the [Folkestone](#) townscape.

Among the new permanent pieces in the fourth Folkestone Triennial is a work by Sinta Tantra, the London-based creator of colourful, geometric public [art](#). She's been tasked with transforming The Cube, an adult education centre that sits awkwardly and lumpenly at the top of Tontine Street, the much-regenerated road leading to the city's harbour. The triennial's curatorial team, led by Lewis Biggs, asked Tantra to turn The Cube "into the landmark building that its site at the top of Tontine Street deserves".

I meet Tantra in her studio, a room in her flat in a 1930s apartment block in Hendon. She was born in New York 37 years ago to Balinese parents but grew up mainly in London, eventually studying at the Slade and Royal Academy schools. Her parents have since retired to Bali and while she travels there a few times a year, has a gallery there showing her work and is regarded as an Indonesian artist, she is "pretty much a Londoner", she says. "I feel accepted here, and that I couldn't do what I do anywhere else in the world."

It would make more sense financially for her to move to Indonesia she says, "but I wouldn't get the same buzz as I do here. London has this amazing attraction — it can also be a poison, but the energy spurs me on, and the internationalism that you get in London is amazing."



Sinta Tantra, 1947, commissioned by the Creative Foundation for Folkestone Triennial 2017 (Thierry Bal)

She feels that her Balinese heritage has affected her work less in its appearance than in the way that art is "embedded in life — which is what public art does — and the idea of working together with people

which again public art does” she says. “And I guess that it is like a celebration. I don’t know whether it is a good thing or a bad thing, but people say that my art makes them happy.”

I suspect that Folkestonians will agree that it is a good thing when they see her revamped Cube. Tantra describes it as “a challenging building”. It had already been altered once, from a boring brick-and-glass block to a trying-too-hard-not-to-be-boring magenta monstrosity. She says she “went through hundreds and hundreds of sketches” working out how to overhaul it and shows me a series of effervescent geometric compositions, full of colour and dynamic movement.

Her final design is called 1947, named after the year of a painting by the French artist Sonia Delaunay, whose circles Tantra’s design echoes, and a poster advertising Folkestone made for the Southern Railway. “I wanted to have a retro feel, because I was thinking of Folkestone as a seaside town,” she says. “I was thinking about post-war Britain and what that meant, and the idea of holidays, because after the war it was obviously quite difficult.”

Tantra is a student of colour — she shows me her “recipe book”, a colour-experiment diary — and knows that she can animate a static building just as one can the picture plane of a canvas. At different times of day parts of The Cube will recede or stand out, its edges softened, its form almost fading into space. “That’s why I wanted to have lots of black, to dissolve it,” she says. “I’m interested in how a space like this can look quite 3D, this pushing back and pulling forward.”

Her nod to Delaunay represents a fascination with “a woman who was able to overlap art and design”, she says. She’s conscious that artists using colour can quickly be dismissed as decorative and trivial and mentions a quote from Le Corbusier, the Swiss architect: “Colour is suited to simple races, peasants and savages.” But she adds: “I’m interested in how passionate people are about colour. That’s why I do public art, that’s why I work with colour: it engages people automatically, and they like it or don’t like it.”

She experienced the full force of public opinion, both good and bad, in Siena last week. She designed the drappellone, a silk banner given to the winner of the famous Palio di Siena, the bareback horse race around the city’s majestic Piazza del Campo. She describes the commission as “the ultimate public art experience for me, because I was creating something for the public — and they were waiting for it”.

The mayor of Siena invited a British artist to take on this prestigious commission in the wake of Brexit, speaking of “the desire to maintain strong ties between the UK and our city, reinforcing a historical and cultural link that must not weaken”. Tantra was already on a British School in Rome residency and was a natural choice given her public art record. But she’s never experienced anything like it.

She had to follow certain strict rules relating to iconography, including an image of the Virgin of the Assumption, in whose honour the race is run, and of the coats of arms of the various contrade, the Sieneese neighbourhoods that do battle in the race. It also had to reflect the 200th anniversary of the birth of the Sieneese sculptor Giovanni Dupré.

In a rather critical review of her banner, the former mayor of Siena, Roberto Barzanti, acknowledged that it was a thorny mantle to take on. “There are few works of public art that have such a solid and controversial relationship with popular feeling,” he said, and suggested the banner must “find prudent compositional balance and trigger a true emotional hold”.

But Tantra clearly moved many people. “I had a lot of women coming up to me saying how much they liked it,” she says. “The women used this word — they talk about feelings all the time — emozionata. At every step of the way they would say, ‘Emozionata! emozionata!’ Three or four women came up to me crying, saying how much they loved it, because it was more feminine. I was trying to do that — to show the women behind the scenes.”

This may have been among the reasons for adverse reactions: Tantra quietly undermined the Palio’s macho aspect, which she saw in Cosima Spender’s 2015 documentary about the race. It’s no coincidence that to commemorate Dupré she chose an image of the ancient Greek poet Sappho. “She represents a lot of things to people,” Tantra says. But to her, this ancient heroine represents “being a strong woman”.

Photographs in the Sienese newspaper that Tantra shows me reveal how the community embraced her — quite literally, as she is being hugged and held aloft by the winning contrada, Onda.

The sculptor Dupré had lived in that district and, as Tantra says, “there’s a lot of superstition in what the flag symbolises”: Dupré’s work’s prominence on the banner was seen by the contrada as a premonition of triumph. “There is this real magic element in the artist, the artist is seen as somebody that can see things that other people can’t,” says Tantra, clearly bewildered and delighted.

She was heartened that art could have such an impact, she says, “because here sometimes it can be quite jaded, especially public art, considering that now a lot of projects are mainly for developers with the money. This has really opened my eyes to what art can do.”

It would seem unlikely that the people of Folkestone will be holding Tantra aloft on their shoulders in Tontine Street when her revamped Cube is unveiled next week. But she’s an artist intent on bringing colour and pleasure to the people, something deserving of acclaim.

*Folkestone Triennial 2017* ([folkestone.com](http://folkestone.com)) runs from Sept 2-Nov

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