

Art
Mar 27 - Written By Christian Barker

Sinta Tantra: In a Blue Mood

Known for her monumental, site-specific artworks, Sinta Tantra's most recent paintings mark a return to a more 'human' scale – and a fascination with the contemplative nature of the colour blue.



Hard to believe, but it's only quite recently that artists gained ready access to blue paint.

Until the 19th Century, when synthetic substitutes were created, ultramarine had to be painstakingly ground from lapis lazuli stone, found only in a strip of mountains in northern Afghanistan. Its rarity meant ultramarine was frightfully expensive, about as costly as gold, which Renaissance artists would frequently use in unison with blue. Most artists employed this precious material sparingly, but Dutch baroque master Johannes Vermeer was said to be so profligate in his use of ultramarine pigment that he spiraled into crushing debt.

"I think there's something quite special about blue. And I think in terms of colour history, it's sort of fascinating," says artist [Sinta Tantra](#), whose latest works are a symphony in blue. Of the thirteen paintings Tantra showed with [Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery](#) at the recent ART SG fair in Singapore, only four deviated from a palette of blue shades, gold leaf, and the natural linen of the canvas.

"I was interested in seeing how people would react to the blue," Tantra told me. It's a colour that's known to have a psychological effect, prompting quiet contemplation, a state in keeping with Tantra's mood emerging from the pandemic period. "Lots of things are happening now, post-COVID. The world is accelerating," she said. As a reaction to that, "I felt the urge to go, I wouldn't say quiet but quite reflective, and perhaps more minimalist with my practice."

Tantra is perhaps best known for her large-scale, site-specific installations, often producing monumental pieces that dominate the landscape and can only be fully appreciated from a drone's-eye view. With her recent work, "I'm doing the opposite, which is making the work body-scale," she explained. "Focusing on just three simple elements — the linen, the paint, and the gold leaf — there's something a bit more reflective in the spirit of process and making."

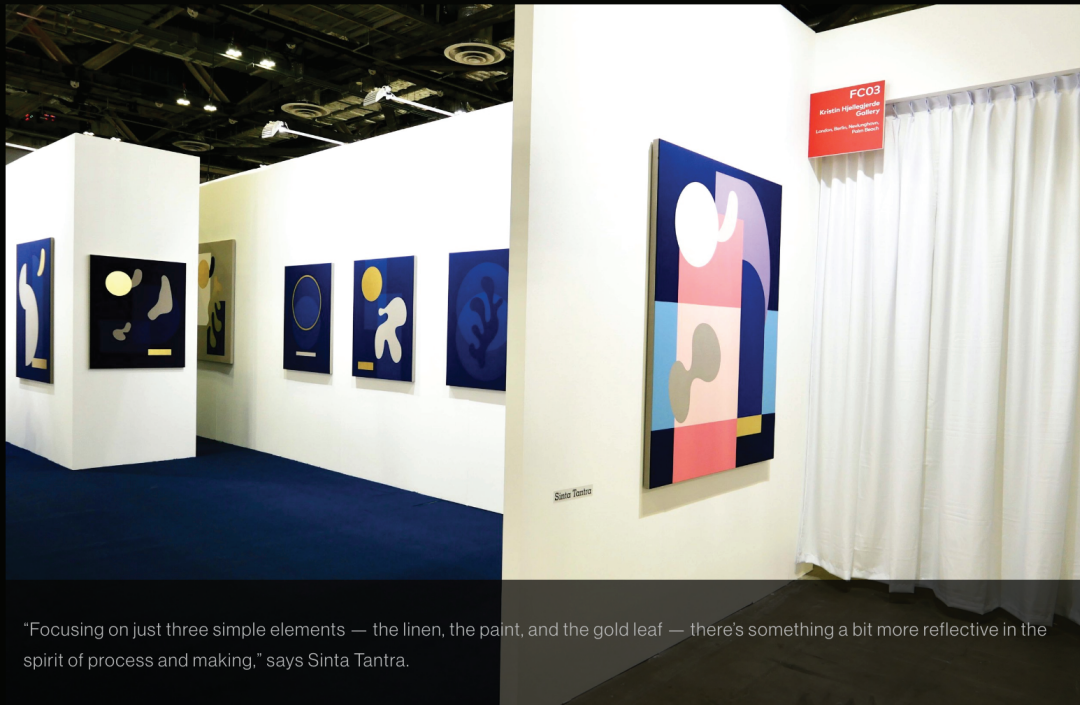


Recent works by Tantra on display at the [Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery](#) booth at ART SG.

Born in New York to Balinese parents, Tantra was raised and educated in the United Kingdom and splits her time between studios in Britain and Bali. Her roots in the 'Island of the Gods' exert a powerful influence on Tantra's artistic modus operandi. "There's quite a meditative approach in terms of how I work," she said. "When I'm painting, I'll go and do yoga at 7am. I need to be in the zone, especially when I'm doing the gold leaf — you need to be quite focused, because it's a difficult material."

Using meditation to get in the headspace to wrangle a tricky substance like gold leaf, Tantra said, "There's something about being in control, but not in control; you can strive for perfection, you can never achieve it. That's a very Balinese thing, in the sense of wanting to create some harmony and balance in your life through ritual practice, but knowing you won't achieve it, knowing there'll always be good and evil and having to accept that. Knowing you could never achieve perfection, but just struggling for it anyway."

Her fondness for big, team-effort artworks also stems to some extent from her Balinese heritage, Tantra said. In Bali, "When you're making items for the rituals and the offerings, everyone gets together and makes things together. Making is not an individual process, it's a collaborative process. I really love being the director in the sense of making an artwork. Rather than working alone in my studio, I'm more of a social person, so my art process, my painterly process is very much run like a design studio."



"Focusing on just three simple elements — the linen, the paint, and the gold leaf — there's something a bit more reflective in the spirit of process and making," says Sinta Tantra.

Tantra is inspired by Sol LeWitt's idea that, just as a structure can be built by tradespeople following an architect's plans and still authentically be considered that architect's work, so too can an artwork be executed to an artist's specifications without their direct, physical involvement. "There's a real positivity in making something together, that collaborative approach," she said. "The concept of a blueprint, and how art can exist in that quite binary form, just simple lines."

Even when Tantra is working on one of her smaller, more individual pieces, she'll pre-plan the composition on computer beforehand — just as an architect would do. "There's a sense of proud craftsmanship that I have about my work, of quality. I think that comes from a Balinese approach to making things, we're very proud of making things that are useful and that look neat." She laughs. "That's not very fashionable. It's funny, a lot of painters like the work to look sloppy, not 'knowing,' sort of blurred. For them, the fluidity is within the process of the unconscious and the unknown."

Tantra, meanwhile, insists on having a clear idea of the end goal. A blueprint. "When I do the designs on the computer, there is intuition involved, but when I produce the painting, I know exactly what I'm making. That might seem boring to some people, but I find there's a purity to having a beginning, middle and end," she said. "It's sort of a Zen approach."

ART - ABSTRACT ART - BALI - SINTA TANTRA - CONTEMPORARY ART

Christian Barker