



Sinta Tantra – Zooming from Micro to Macro

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TEXT: Naima Morelli
IMAGE: Courtesy of the Artist



We all know that artists have superpowers. For example, have you ever heard of Ant-Man from Marvel Comics? This superhero has the power of changing size at will, shrinking himself to the size of an ant or becoming a giant.

This is also British/Balinese artist Sinta Tantra's superpower. She goes from huge public commissions like a 300-metre painted bridge in Canary Wharf, London, created for the 2012 Olympics, to realizing small, thought-out works for private galleries. Clearly the artist is able to adapt her thinking and practice to many different spaces and proportions.



Sinta Tantra, A Beautiful Sunset Mistaken for a Dawn, 2012. DLR Bridge at Canary Wharf. (Courtesy of the Artist)

After all, her personal background already provided her with her fair share of space-shifting. The artist was born in New York from Indonesian parents, brought up in Britain and Bali, and today she travels internationally on a regular basis. She can be found today eating in family-run warungs in Yogyakarta, as well as partying in glamorous rooftop bar in London or Hong Kong.

Right now Sinta is in the Rome for a six-month residency sponsored by The Bridget Riley Fellowship at the British School in Rome, a beautiful neo-classical building tucked in the lush gardens of Villa Borghese.

Cheerful and friendly, the artist welcomes me in her studio – tellingly empty, as all her works have been shipped to many different clients and exhibitions around the world. I observe a series of papers orderly stuck to the wall with notes and sketches for ongoing projects, all extremely diverse.

Sinta explains that with her work she doesn't stick to one single direction at the time, but rather has a contemporary interest which she pursues in parallel: "I always jump from one thing to the next. At the same time, I was working on a series of abstract, neat paintings that went to Art Basel Hong Kong, I also made the screen work for the March exhibition "Mostra", here at the British School in Rome."

For the collective show in Rome she presented a screen inspired by the prints of Neo-classicist Italian artist Piranesi. "I find Piranesi's work quite romantic, full and dense. However, if you really zoom in some of his works, you find really modernist shapes. I love the geometry in his works and I was inspired by it, so I used some of the elements for my screen for the exhibition. I also looked at art deco, orientalism and furniture design."



Sinta Tantra's exhibition Mostra for British School in Rome. (Courtesy of the Artist)

How did your growing up in different places influence your way of making art?

I was born in New York, then my family moved to London when I was seven because of my father's job as a banker. We used to go to Indonesia every single year, spending the summer in Bali, so I have a kind of insider and outsider relationship with the country. Apparently I speak Indonesian with a very English/Balinese accent!

As a child I didn't go to many exhibitions and I didn't really think I'd be an artist. Still I was surrounded by it, because Balinese culture is so visually rich. In going back and forth I was trying to keep a record of my experiences of these places together, I was compelled by the need to reconcile my identities.

As a child I was more drawn to music and perhaps you can see this in my work; especially the idea of composition, harmony and disharmony. I think a lot of my judgement and logical thinking is based on my training on classical music and passion for jazz growing up. The relationship between colour and music is quite important for me.

What was your approach to this residency in Rome?

I think it is always a bit scary visiting a new city. I just tried to immerse myself in Italian culture, watching Italian movies like "The Great Beauty". From the movie I discovered this funny song called Tuca Tuca, from the Italian showgirl Raffaella Carrà. I quite like that kind of playful and unashamed attitude – not being afraid of sex and love and the natural relationship between a man and woman. All these are very different in England. And Indonesia is definitely not a place where you hold hands. But when you walk around Rome, there are always couples kissing and hugging. I tried to capture that vibrancy and that tension in my work, by having masculine and feminine colours battling within a space.



Sinta Tantra, Together Yet Forever Apart, 2013. (Courtesy of the Artist)

Your work is very much about sensations and manifesting the spirit of places through colour. Do you do that always with the places you visit?

Yeah, I think it comes from the way people respond instantly to colour. This immediate connection with the audience relates with public art. There people don't have time to think what the artist was trying to do, they just feel it.

In this residency I developed a colour palette that is more Roman in some ways, a lot brighter and quite brash. A lot of the London and English paintings have more blues and perhaps more sophisticated colours. But here I was influenced by the light and by the way Romans dress, which for English eyes it can be seen as over the top. I really like this confidence, there is a kind of peacocking, and I wanted to capture that.

So before coming here to Rome did you already have ideas about the work you'd produce?

Yes, lot of ideas! My residency is in drawing because the patron/sponsor is Bridget Riley, which is funny because my work is a lot like hers. I was interested also in spending time in Rome, and relate to its architecture. Italian architecture always tries to engage people in spaces, with its piazzas, the churches. These spaces are meant to be quite active, having people coming and meeting, which is different from the English lifestyle attached to architecture.

I'm also interested in the idea of a bi-dimensional architectural drawing becoming tridimensional through architecture, and being "flattened" again through drawing. This idea of 2D going to 3D and back to 2D again, the lines of drawing physically embedded into the earth.

You have been chosen to design this year's 'Drappellone'– the winning flag for the Palio di Siena horse race, which is a very important event taking place in Tuscany every year.

Yes, I wanted to do a public artwork in Italy and in Siena they have these two Palios in July and in August and they ask international artists to design the flag. I'm in the process of researching and learning what it means to people. My work is very abstract and geometric, so very different from what other artists have done with other flags.

In visiting Siena, I have found many similarities between Balinese culture and Sieneese culture, in this idea of community and where you are from. With the Sieneese is the contrada that you belong to, and in Bali is perhaps your native village which is really important. The Palio is about community and history, and the spirit of having something everybody is working towards. Similarly, in Bali we have religious festivals which are very important to us. When you experience them, it is not really about religion per se; it is about how community functions and how people help each other. I think it's quite inspiring especially in the modern world where that sense of community is often lost.

Another thing is the importance of family; in Siena it would be keeping the Palio alive from generation to generation, in Bali it would be passing on the spirit of Balinese dance, poetry, gamelan music one generation to the next.



Sinta Tantra, Zinger! Humdinger, 2014. (Courtesy of the Artist)

It seems that through your observations you are really able to get the humanity which is underlying these different practices around the world.

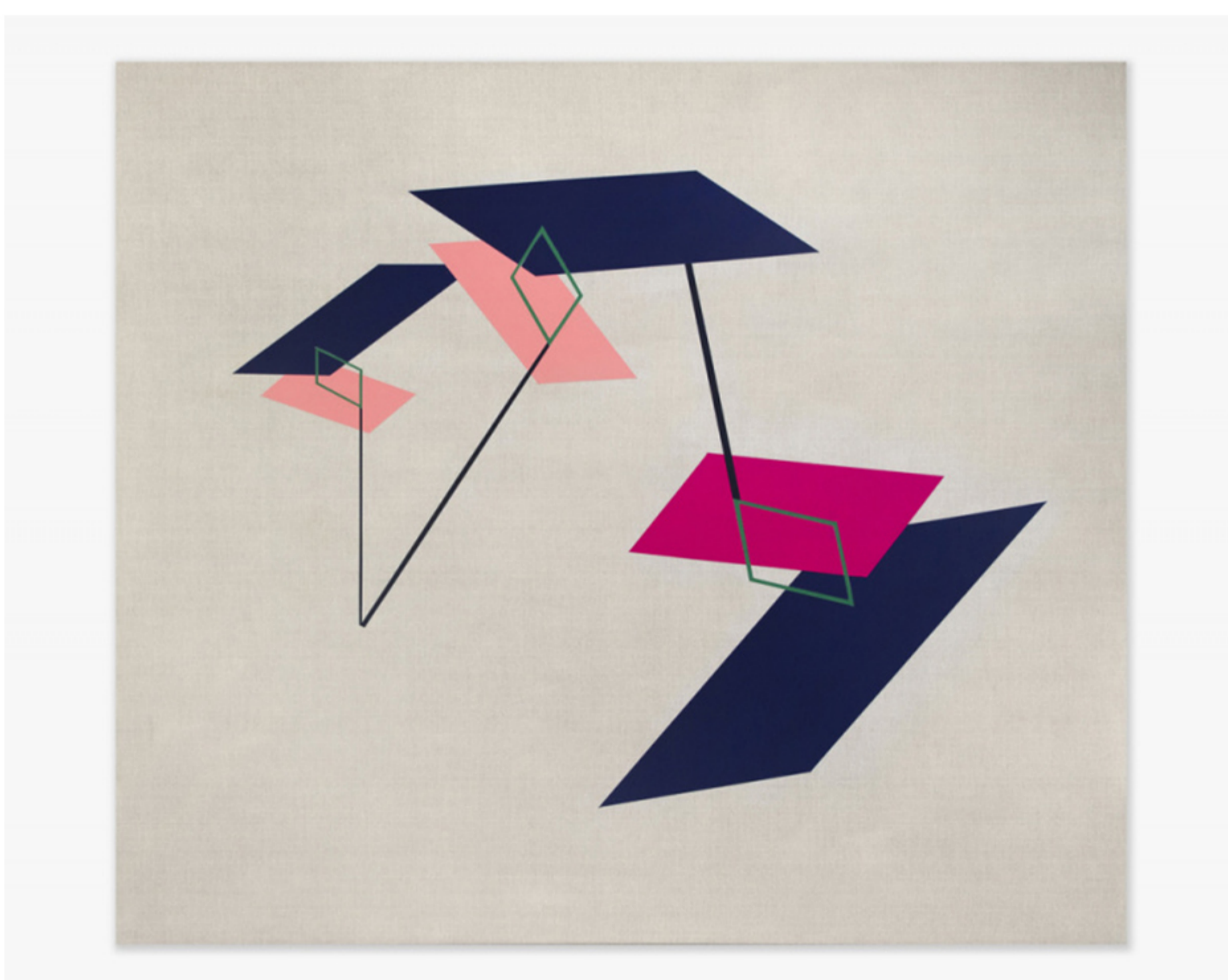
Yes, this idea of building community from the bottom up, rather than from government down is also something I have found in my residency in Jogjakarta. Because of the economy of the city, artists there can set up their own project space with hardly any money. I think it is quite inspiring to see how people can make something out of nothing. Artists often complain about not having enough money – which I think they should have. However, it is quite eye-opening to go to countries where there is no way at all to access money, and yet art thrives.

In Jogjakarta people really help each other and the city is really international. A lot of Indonesian artists are very well-travelled and because many people are interested in the local scene, you get a lot of international curators. The interesting thing is that being a small city, if a very famous international curator visits the city, you'd probably be more inclined to meeting him, unlike artists working in London, for example. London is exciting because people are coming in and out. But I don't think it is really possible to re-create that community spirit of the '60s, or the way the art community functions in smaller cities.

You are mostly known for your public art projects, but you are also a successful gallery artist, realising smaller works. Do these come from a completely different places for you?

I only started to paint canvases recently. The wonderful thing about public art is that I'm working around limitations, which makes me think differently. At the same time, public commissions sometimes can end up being project management, which is not good for an artist. There is not much internal dialogue going on, because you are constantly developing the ideas of others.

Painting allows me to connect with colour in a deeper way. For example, if I was to paint a wall, I would choose a colour from a chart, a given number. More often, I mix colours myself. Painting also allows me a more intimate working process during which many things are happening inside my head. And I can perhaps think more poetically and not so much about safety. My "painting assemblages" for the Fantastic/Chromatic show at Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, for example, were about how colour was perceived as the new world, the other, the exotic. Here I put the painting near an object I found, so vintage prints can have conversations with these geometric paintings I made. I think the public art process can delude my artistic bran, so there are pros and cons.



Sinta Tantra, Fantastic Chromatic, 2015 Solo Show with Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, London.
(Courtesy of the Artist)

It seems that they are just two different parts of your personality, which expressed in different modes of art making...

Right now I'm really enjoying bouncing off the two because it means that I can do monumental work as well as small scale works. It makes it feel human, whatever I made. If I'd only make big stuff it wouldn't really feel human because quite often with some of the projects is painted by numbers, even if I'm involved in the process.

I was inspired by Sol Le Witt, his idea of conceptual painting and how you reduce paintings to a series of instructions and drawings. I find this really beautiful. It is like in music composition, where you look at the score sheet and you see all the different elements. I really like the simplicity of that.

Generally, in my life I'm interested in zooming things in and out. It can be the scale of my work, I can make a very big bridge or I can make a small painting. But also I'm interested in the scale people live, from big metropolis to small communities.

Thank you!

About the Artist

Sinta Tantra is a British artist of Balinese descent. She was born on 11 November 1979, New York, USA and spent her childhood in Indonesia, America and Britain. She graduated in London from the Slade School of Fine Art in 2003 and completed her postgraduate degree at Royal Academy of Arts in 2006. In the same year, she was awarded the prestigious Deutsche Bank Award in Fine Art. She lives and works in London.

Naima Morelli is an art writer and curator with a focus on contemporary art from the Asia Pacific region. She has written for ArtsHub, Art Monthly Australia, Art to Part of Culture and Escape Magazine, among others, and she is the author of "Arte Contemporanea in Indonesia, un'introduzione" a book focused on the development of contemporary art in Indonesia. As a curator, her practice revolves around creating meaningful connections between Asia, Europe and Australia.