

Art Radar

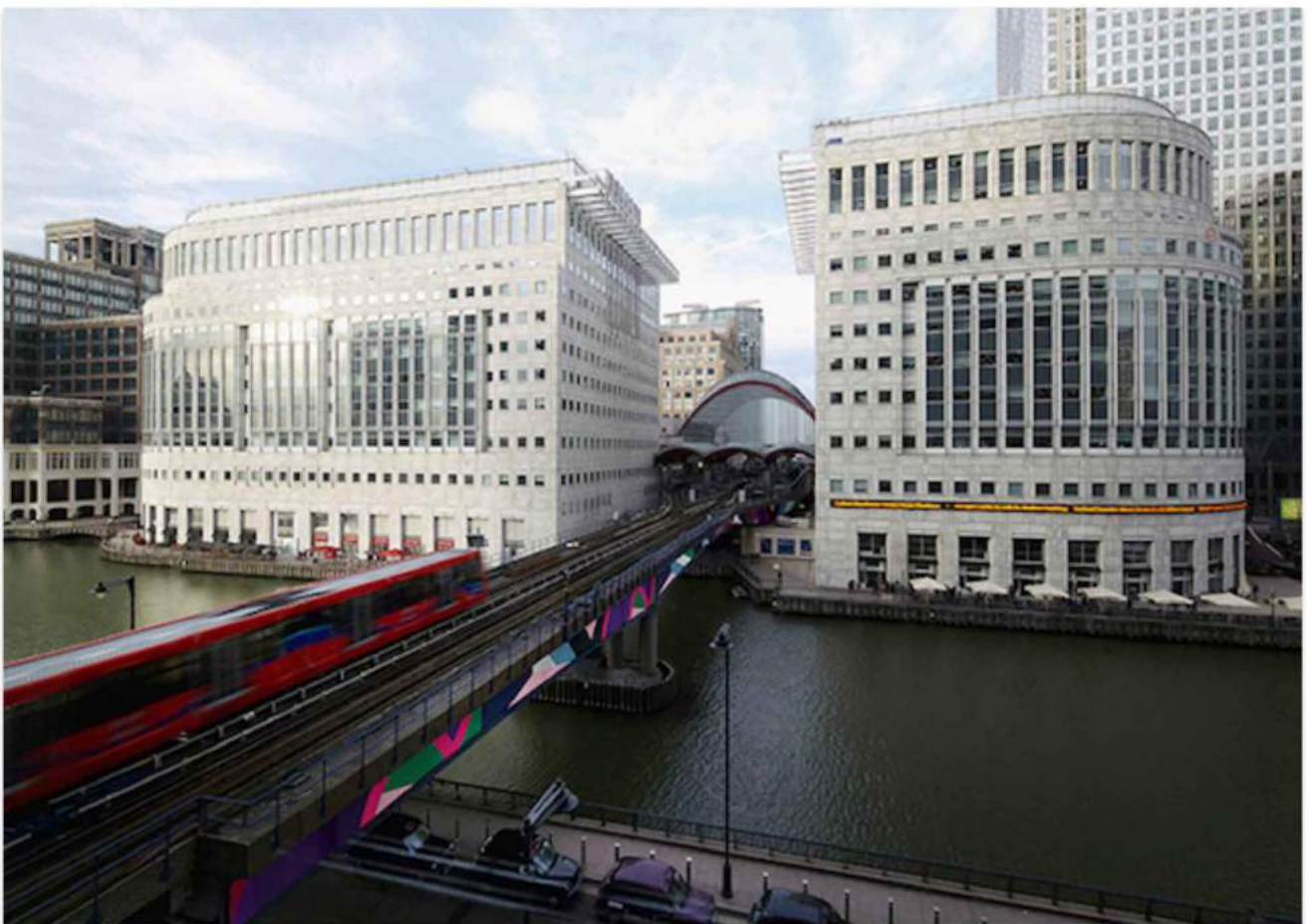
Contemporary art trends and news from Asia and beyond

Seeking semiotics in colour: British-Balinese artist Sinta Tantra – interview

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The young, British-Balinese artist Sinta Tantra “injects” colours into her vast architectural projects.

Art Radar speaks with Sinta Tantra to learn more about her site-specific work in the world's largest private development project, and how she blends colours and patterns to question communication and identity.



Sinta Tantra, 'A Beautiful Sunset Mistaken for a Dawn' commission for Olympic Games, DLR Bridge, Canary Wharf, London, 2012, paint on steel bridge, 2 x 300 m. Image courtesy the artist.

Sinta Tantra (b. 1979, New York City) earned her BFA with First Class Honours from the **Slade School of Fine Art, University College of London** in 2003 and a Post Graduate Degree in Fine Art from the Royal Academy Schools in 2006. Tantra is currently working on two public art commissions at the Newnham College in Cambridge University and the public square in Songdo, South Korea. Her work can be found in public and private collections, including the United Kingdom's **Government Art Collection**. The artist has won several awards, including the prestigious **Deutsche Bank Award** in 2006.



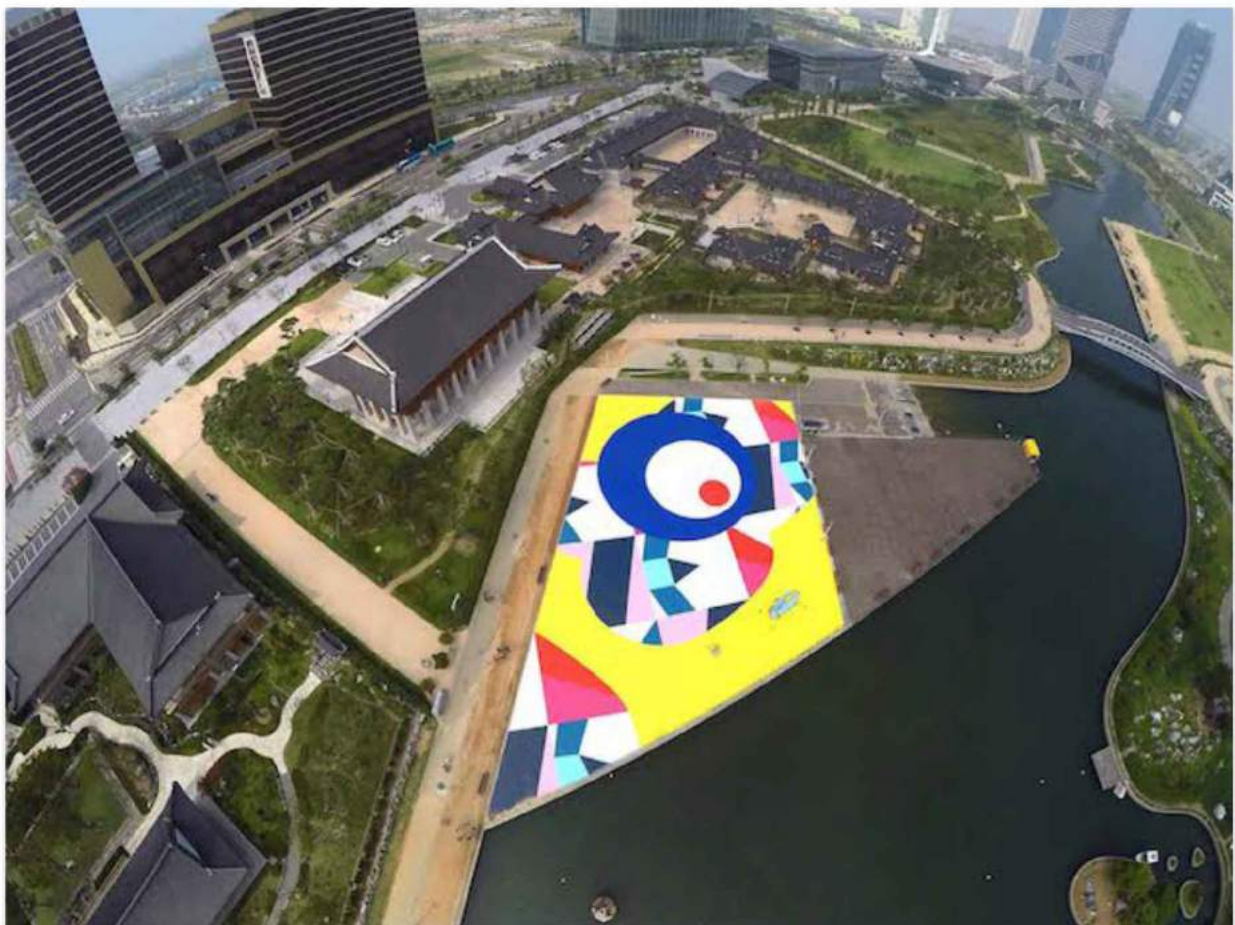
Sinta Tantra. Image courtesy the artist.

You are a British artist of Balinese descent, born in New York City in 1979. How have your experiences spanning these three distinct cultures impacted your work and your sense of identity as an artist?

Growing up in both London and New York, I was very much aware of my Balinese and Indonesian heritage. When I was young, I found it frustrating how Western culture clashed so much with a Southeast Asian one. Like many first generation children whose parents migrated, I could never really identify with being from just one particular place. My work explores my identity and the layering of cultures specific to my own experiences. I am inspired by the colours of Bali, an English Heritage palette and 1980s pop Americana.

What is it about public art that particularly interests you?

Since art school, I often created site-specific works either on walls, floors or ceilings. Painting on canvas didn't really appeal to me. I was more interested in playing with an architectural space – injecting colour, line and form into new environments. Admittedly in the early days, there was also the desire to challenge the gender stereotype – that both men and women could make large-scale works. Each commission brings with it an intimate and unique insight into both location and culture. There's a sort of "constructivist" approach to the entire process which I like and there are the practicalities of making the work itself whilst giving the artwork a "social function".



Sinta Tantra, aerial shot of public art commission in Songdo, South Korea. Image courtesy the artist. Photo by Kim Sung-Hwan. © Sinta Tantra.

Can you tell us more about your recent project in **Songdo, South Korea. Your installation is located in the world's largest private development project – how did the project come about? And were there any constraints or major differences in the process compared to creating installations in the United Kingdom?**

I was introduced to the director of Summ Projects, an art consultancy firm based in Korea and the United Kingdom, a few years ago in London. Since then we've stayed in touch and they've kept me in mind for projects. I got the commission in Songdo mainly based on my previous work for Canary Wharf, London, where I painted a bridge for the 2012 Olympics.

Both Canary Wharf and Songdo share similar features – business developments built from scratch, ambitious in scale and wanting to mark their claim in the global economy. There really wasn't much difference in terms of working in Korea and working in the United Kingdom. When it comes to construction, blueprints and numbers seem to form a universal language. Having said this though, I've never experienced a delay due to a typhoon before!

For your public, site-specific installations, I'm curious to know how the process works: how much of the work do you do yourself – from the renderings, to the installation and the painting?

It really depends on how big the project is, [in terms of] location, budget and client. For a major international commission such as Songdo, the scale of the work means that I am not expected to undertake everything myself. In this case, the design and renders were made by both me and an architect in London. All the information, instructions and samples get sent to the project manager in Korea who then works with the clients and fabricators to make it all happen. On the other end of the spectrum, I've also spent plenty of time in my life climbing up scaffolding, covered in paint and dust! Having practical experience has helped me appreciate and judge what can and can't be done on-site.



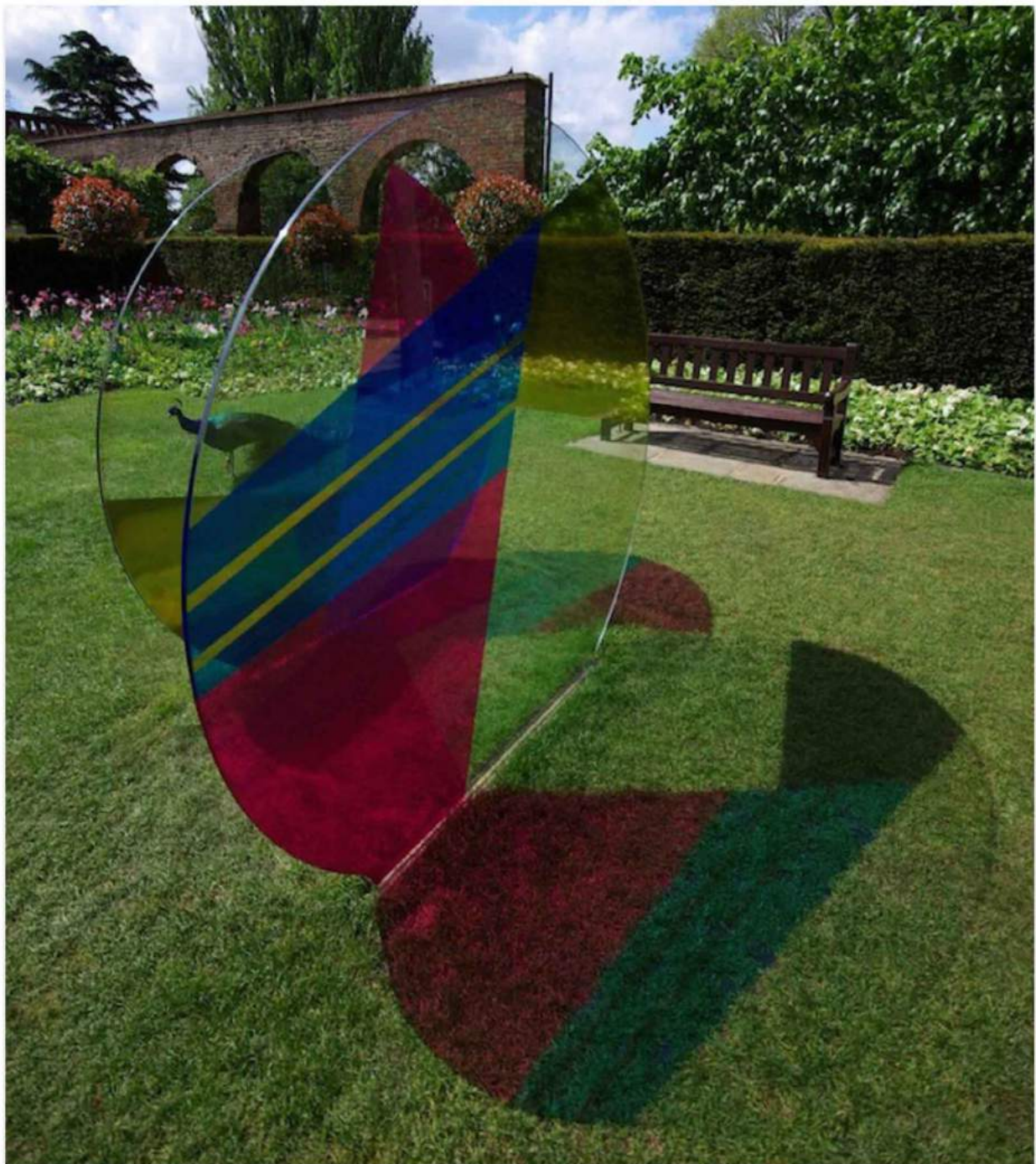
Sinta Tantra, 'Le Bonheur' installation view at NEST, Den Hague, 2012, acrylic, dimensions variable. Image courtesy the artist.

You spent your artist residency in Yogyakarta. Could you tell us more about the local art scene there? What surprised you the most about it?

The local art scene in Jogja (short name for Yogyakarta) is exceptionally thriving. I often describe the city to people as a sort of "Berlin of Asia". Cheap rents and cheap living allow for both artists and curators to have a more immediate approach to art making. Compared to living somewhere like London, it's inspiring to see how much could be done on limited resources. There's an international flair to the city too, as half of the artists there come from abroad to take part in residencies. It's refreshing to be part of an art scene that is so young and progressive. Indonesia's oldest art organisation, **Cemeti Art House**, is based in Jogja and has been running for only 25 years.

I read in the *Jakarta Globe* that Indonesian Batik artist Mochtar Apin influenced your work. Can you speak about how Indonesian traditions have been woven into your practice?

There's this idea that there was never an "abstract" movement in Indonesian art and that Indonesian painting and sculpture consisted of figuration only until the 1970s. Outside the fine arts, you can see how geometric pattern, colour and composition play an important role in Indonesian crafts such as textiles, architecture and wood carvings. Mochtar Apin (1923–1994), was one of the first Indonesian painters to include batik designs, thereby making the link between decorative and abstract. In my work, there are specific elements inspired by Indonesian patterns. These patterns are reduced, distorted or enlarged to such a scale that the viewer becomes submerged in the decoration itself.

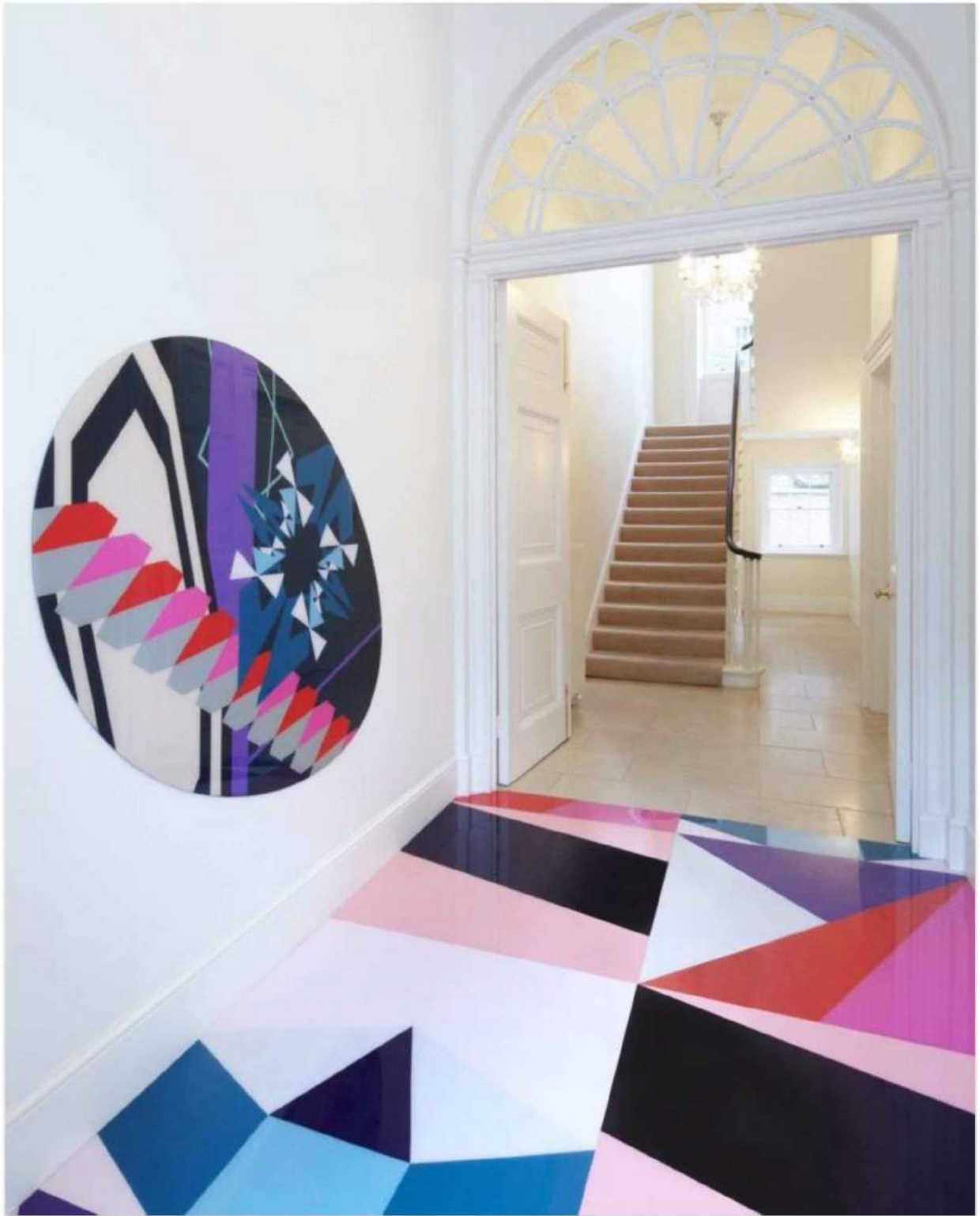


Sinta Tantra, 'Eccentricity of Zero' commission at Napoleon Gardens, Holland Park, London, 2013, glass panels, 2 x 2 x 2 m. Image courtesy the artist.

One of your designs, commissioned for the 2012 Olympics, is painted on the DLR Bridge across London's Canary Wharf. Can you tell us more about the design behind the DLR Bridge and the creative source behind it? What challenges do you face when painting on an architectural scale such as a 300-metre long structure?

My first challenge was to figure out how to create an artwork that would hold its own whilst creating a playful tension with the skyline. If you look out onto Canary Wharf, the DLR bridge appears as a lost, thin, horizontal line surrounded by skyscrapers. As part of my research, I created a 24-hour timelapse film from sunrise to sunset.

I wanted to understand how the bridge looked like at different times of day; how it functioned and how people, trains, buses interacted with it. You could say that the inspiration for the design was taken from the bridge itself. The colours, for example, were inspired by the film. Blues, greys and greens were selected for a daytime palette, whilst pinks and purples for a nighttime one.



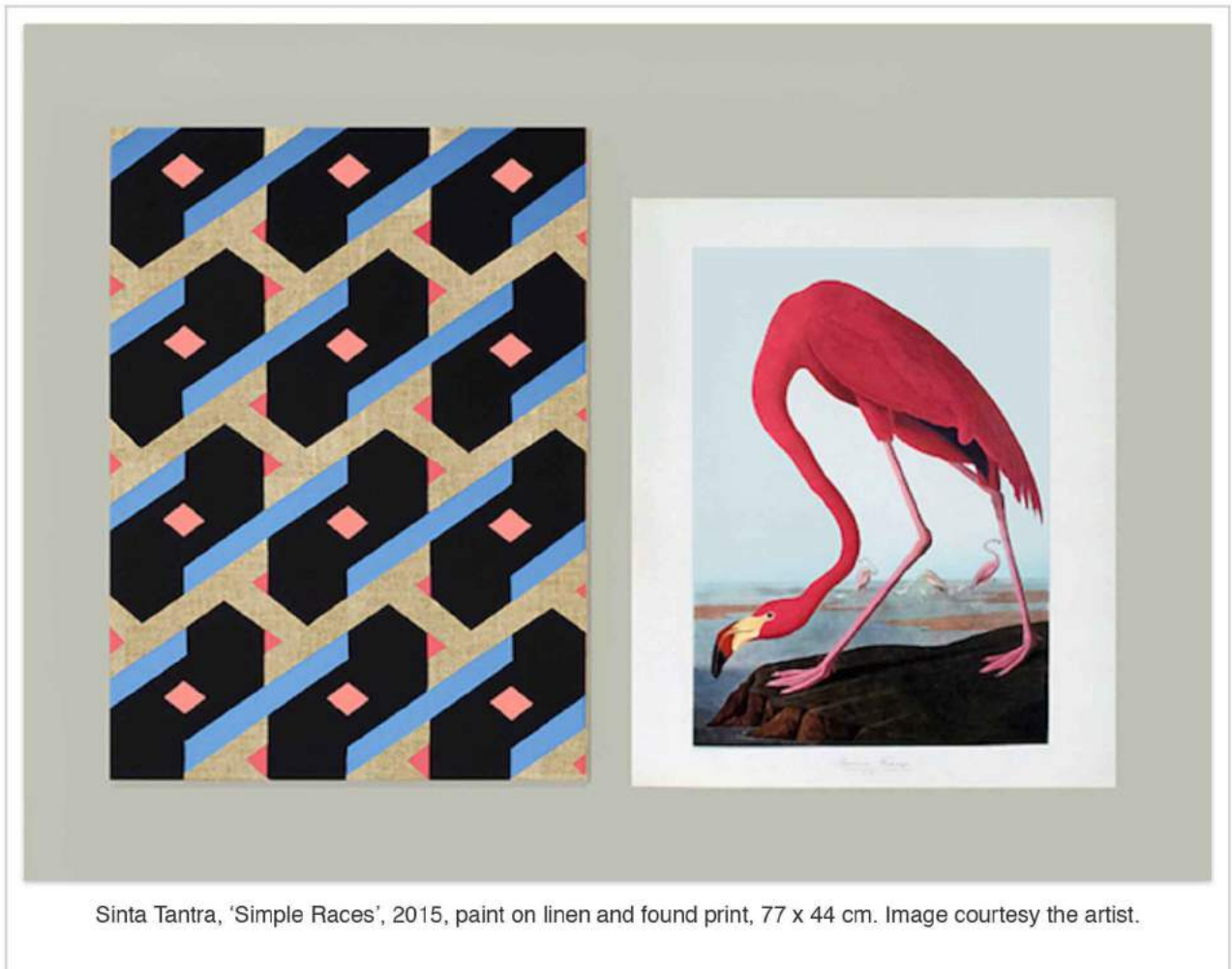
Sinta Tantra, 'Gentlemen Prefer Blonds' (floor) and 'Miami Dizzle' installation shot from Canal Project's "Zinger!" group show at Salon Vert Gallery, 2014. Image courtesy the artist.

Your upcoming solo show, “*Fantastic / Chromatic*” (11 September – 10 October at Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, London) includes both paintings and installations. Several of your large works were influenced by American novelist William H. Gass’ *On Being Blue: A Philosophical Enquiry*. How did this book lead to the creation of these particular works?

One of the reasons why I was so inspired by this book was because it’s so different to any other colour book that I’ve read. It rejects the typical scientific approach to colour theory, harmony. Instead, it explores playful colour associations. The references are varied, from high art to low art, from mundane to sexual.

I would say that this series of paintings have a “cooler” palette than early works, which focused more on pink. I’m interested in the semiotics of colour. [In particular], the complex nature of how we communicate through colour and how these

associations reflect our own identities, tapping into our unconsciousness. In these new paintings, I enjoy creating a back-and-forth tension between the hot pinks and the blues.



For this exhibition, you also create what you call “hybrid assemblages”, which include wall paintings, canvases and found prints. I have read that these assemblages were inspired by American naturalist and painter John James Audubon’s *Birds of America* folio (1827–1839). Can you explain these works and why his work is such an inspiration to you?

The exhibition explores the word “chroma” itself – its etymology, history and contemporary significance. Including Audubon’s prints as part of an installation adds another level of complexity. For the contemporary viewer, Audubon’s prints give historical evidence on how – like colour itself – these birds were seen as part of the New World, exotic, other.

Lisa Pollman