

Birds of Paradise Sinta Tantra

Five hundred years ago, in 1519, a fleet of Spanish ships set out on a voyage around the globe in search of distant lands, and amongst the many wondrous things they bought back were the skins of birds of paradise and the various tales that mythologised their presence. For her latest solo exhibition, entitled *Birds of Paradise*, at Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery Berlin, Sinta Tantra weaves together painting, sculpture, slides, sound and archival material to lead the viewer on a journey through three distinctive spaces that chart the bird's transformation through history in the context of contemporary discourse around otherness and post-colonialism.

The exhibition begins in a darkened room where a multi-sensory installation made in collaboration with academic and historian Dr. Natalie Lawrence. Two whirring mechanical projects play a curated selection of slides of archival imagery, historic illustrations and maps, some of which Tantra has embellished with her own playful drawings to inject a sense of colour and dynamism, while a voiceover narrates the transformation of the bird of paradise from sentient being to highly coveted, decorative object. "While the bird of paradise may not indigenous to Bali, I saw this beautiful creature as a metaphor for my own identity. I have recently been drawn to moments or signifiers between the East and West and the bird of paradise came to represent all this cultural history and these contemporary issues around colonisation since it was sold and traded from the 16th century," says the artist.

In the second room, Tantra alludes to the mythical and exotic qualities of the bird with an immersive installation of pink painted walls and vinyl applied onto the windows. A new series of large-scale paintings employ muted, monochromatic tones with delicate touches of gold leaf. Marking a departure from the more minimalist language of the artist's previous works, amorphous, curvaceous shapes suggest the silhouette of the birds while others evoke fleeting, dance-like gestures. The painting entitled *Lovemaking & Cirri*, for example, evokes the mysterious courtship of the birds through smooth, sensual shapes rendered in muted tones while the artwork *Black and White is Writing*, which borrows its name from Jean Arp, balances organic and geometric forms. Throughout the exhibition, there is a palpable tension between movement and stillness, which resonates with the narratives surrounding the bird of paradise. Hunters in New Guinea traditionally removed the legs of the birds before drying the skins to decorate themselves for tribal dances. When these skins were brought to the West, it led to a warped perspective of the birds' mobility; some reasoned that since they were unable to land on earth, the birds of paradise must be eternally airborne and as such, they were likened to "fallen angels."

In the final room, Tantra draws on bright saturated colours of the birds' extravagant feathers to create bold visions in emerald, yellow and pink alongside a collection of brass sculptures that protrude from the wall, evoking cosmic forms that reference the bird of paradise's mystical status (in 1598, Dutch astronomer Petrus Planchius made the bird into a new constellation). The space is further elevated by the atmospheric sounds of two birds of paradise making love, which plays out from two vintage speakers, creating a sense of circularity as the exhibition comes to a close. At the same time, it is significant that birdsong takes over from human narration, perhaps gesturing towards a sense of freedom just as the paintings embrace a new-found sensuality.