



the **ART** of togetherness

*A chance encounter at Documenta with an African art specialist one month before she opened her gallery set gallerist **Kristin Hjellegjerde** on a journey of discovery that she hadn't planned, writes **Sonia Kolesnikov-Jessop***

Installation view of
Sinta Tantra's *Your
Private Sky*, 2018





Left: London space installation view of Ephrem Solomon's *Silence*. 2018
 Below: Kristin Hjellegjerde. Photography by Erica Bergsmeds, make up by Ninni Marklund using Delilah
 Right: London gallery installation view of Celina Teague's *Not For the Kids Room*. 2018



Today, the force behind Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery—established in London in 2012 with a second gallery in Berlin in 2018—not only represents a significant number of artists from Africa and the Middle East (about a third of the 25 artists she represents are from the region), but she has also just curated her first museum exhibition on contemporary African art.

Kubatana, which means “togetherness” in the Shona language of Zimbabwe, now running at Vestfossen Kunstlaboratorium in Norway until 21 September, is a sweeping snapshot of contemporary art throughout the African continent with 33 artists from 18 countries. Coincidentally, several of these artists have also been selected to represent their countries at the prestigious Venice Biennale this year: these include Mozambican sculptor Gonçalo Mabunda; Ibrahim Mahama, who is part of the first Ghana Pavilion; and Joël Andrianomearisoa, who is part of the first Madagascar Pavilion.

“African art is definitely of the moment,” says Hjellegjerde. “Artists have so much to say. Because artists have to be quite resourceful with their use of material, given the cost or the lack of canvas in the region, they create very interesting mixed media found objects, recycled goods. The result can be quite soulful and descriptive of where they are coming from and where Africa is at.” She underlines how contemporary art in the region challenges accepted forms of visual representation and stereotypical depictions of African culture.

This celebration of material is found across the region, from the use of nigari pods and ekpiri seeds by Nigerian artist Niyi Olagunju to the use of weapons by Mabunda and wooden wall mosaics of Nigerian Gerald Chukwuma. Partially covering the façade of the museum, and therefore setting the tone of the exhibition, is the work of Ghanaian artist Serge Attukwei Clottey. The installation was created

with the help of the artist’s entire village in Accra. Men, women and children joined forces to cut thousands of small squares from recycled water containers and then meshed them together.

“With this exhibition, I wanted to show the incredible positive effect art has been having on Africa lately, with successful artists being able to support their families and communities, inspiring others too. Even if artists in the region are incredibly different from each other with totally different cultures, I feel there is still a real sense of togetherness,” she says, adding, “I’m hoping the exhibition will change people’s aesthetic expectations of Africa and its reality.”

Hjellegjerde likes thought-provoking artwork that tells a story and she has found plenty in Africa and the Middle East. Both are regions where the new political and economic realities of the 21st century are explored largely through contemporary art. “When I pick artists, I follow my instincts first, then I look for strong identity and narrative in the work, and incredible good technique and finish,” Hjellegjerde explains. She then smiles and says, “I also need to work with nice people.” Asked about the stylistic commonalities amongst her choices in art and artists, she reflects, “I just try to stay true to myself. I go for artists whose work I fall in love with and then somehow it ends up being a red thread that you can’t put your finger on. I like to surprise myself because it’s so interesting to work with different artists.”

Hjellegjerde hadn’t been destined to run an art gallery. After studying feminist literature in her native Norway, she led a nomadic existence, modelling for a while in Singapore, and then studying acting in New York. She moved to Los Angeles and worked as a small-part actress while writing theatre plays before returning to New York where she worked as a property broker. But her heart was not in property. “I can sell well, but I need to sell what I love,” she admits. Art was what moved her. And so she enrolled in an art business course at New York University and when she moved with







A view of the exhibition
Wrinkles by artist Gerald
 Chukwuma. Courtesy of
 Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery

her family to London in 2011, she decided to open a gallery.

While her first show was with three Norwegian artists, she quickly expanded her horizons and her sophomore exhibition mixed artists from Pakistan (Haroun Haward), Iran (Soheila Sokhanvari), Iraq (Gorka Mohamed) and Israel (Amir Chasson). “I had reached out to Soheila after seeing her graduation show at Goldsmiths, University of London,” she recalls. “She’d made that incredible sculpture (a taxidermy horse straddling a giant blue blob) which is now part of the Saatchi collection. It’s a symbol for stagnating heroism, and I’d never seen anything like it before. She became one of the first artists I represented and she suggested others.”

Sokhanvari recently finished a Public Arts commission for London’s Victoria Station to mark the centenary of the first women in the UK winning the right to vote, and she will be holding a new solo exhibition at Hjellegjerde’s London gallery in November. The title for her exhibition is *Addicted to Love* and Hjellegjerde points out, “Whenever I do a show with an artist, I make sure they have a title early on, because if you have a title, you know what you’re reaching towards; the work becomes more coherent and aligned. Then the narrative gets strong.”

Looking ahead, the energetic gallerist is mounting a show with Senegalese artist Cheikhou Ba at the end of May in London, while this summer she will be holding shows in Berlin with the Ethiopian artist Ephrem and Pakistani artist



Muhammad Zeeshan, who is also currently curating the Karachi Biennale. Hjellegjerde is full of new projects. She’s planning to expand by moving to a larger and more central space near London’s Tower Bridge next year, and is also thinking about branching out to New York and Asia, “if the opportunity arises.” Her long-term dream is to open a hotel with a residency and gallery programme: “In my mind I have Portugal and I keep writing it down in my business plan. I’ll keep saying it until it happens, just like I did with the museum show.” ■ kristinhjellegjerde.com

Above: London gallery
 installation view of Muhamad
 Zeeshan’s *Funkier Than A
 Mosquitos’s Twitter*. 2015
 Left: Kristin Hjellegjerde.
 Photography by Erica
 Bergsmets, make up by Ninni
 Marklund using Delilah