

# Elsa Åkesson in Conversation with Gallery Founder, Kristin Hjellegjerde

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**Kristin Hjellegjerde opened her first gallery in 2012 called the Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, quickly gaining international recognition in the art world. Representing emerging to established artists, Kristin now has art galleries in Norway and London and is currently working on the restoration of an old castle in Berlin, which she is turning into a picturesque art gallery.**

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**MADE IN BED's Editor-In-Chief, Elsa Åkesson, speaks to Kristin about her experience of opening an art gallery, the commercial sector of the art world and her view on different aspects of the art market.**

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*Kristin Hjellegjerde.*

**Elsa Åkesson: Thank you very much for interviewing with MADE IN BED, it is an honour and pleasure to have you amongst us today to share your experience and knowledge of the art world's commercial sector. How did the idea of opening an art gallery originally arise?**

**Kristin Hjellegjerde:** I completed an Art Business course at New York University after which I moved to London to open my first gallery space. It was at a point in my life where I felt that I might be getting too old to start working for someone else, so I took the risk of opening my own gallery - Peggy Guggenheim was an inspiration to me.

**EÅ:** You have four art galleries, two in London, one in Berlin and one in Norway. Could you tell us a little bit about why you chose these countries in particular?

**KH:** I opened the first gallery space in London - with Brexit looming I hurried and opened another space in Berlin. Luckily, I have relations in Germany, so I had plenty of assistance in this endeavour; it was a really natural choice. Then a second space in London became available to me, which happens to be one of the most spectacular gallery spaces I have, I must say. The space is located right next to the Shard [and] its eight-meter ceilings allow for some really creative approaches to exhibitions. We are very much enjoying the space as it is right now.

While I was working on this project, I felt that I didn't have enough time to see family and friends back home in Norway - the space in Norway came about for this reason. The idea behind the opening of this space was to bring foreigners to Norway, exposing them to its culture and beauty. Unfortunately, in the past two years we haven't been able to attract many foreign visitors due to the Covid-19 pandemic, but I had the chance to reconnect with friends and family, and the Norwegian art scene.

The Norwegian gallery is located in a beautiful setting - a repurposed shrimp factory building. Some of the old machineries have been incorporated in the space. Not to mention, you can go swimming right outside - there are sailboats right outside the gallery. It really has become a paradise.

We are also opening a new space in Schloss Goerne, Berlin this August. The gallery will use the 17th century château space to curate annual summer shows. One of the most interesting aspects of this project is the space – it is a run-down castle. The property is being restored and the local community has been involved in the process.





*Schloss Goerne, Berlin.*

**EÅ:** How do you manage four art galleries at the same time?

**KH:** By only having people on my team whom I can trust [and] who put as much love into it as I do. My family is also a huge support and comfort.

**EÅ:** Are you thinking of expanding to another country soon?

**KH:** My dream is to open a gallery in Palm Beach, potentially next year in October. I will travel there soon to see if I can find the perfect space. My husband is an architect, he has been working for art museums doing quite a lot of projects in Palm Beach, which has brought us into contact with many people based there. It is a central location for art in many ways; many board members of museums around the US live partly in Palm Beach. It is really becoming a new cultural destination [and] is a great opportunity to expand to the United States. I thought about starting in New York, but I believe I will have more of a support system in Palm Beach, so it feels like the natural choice for me.



Exhibition View *A New Dawn*.

**EÅ:** As an art dealer, do you also collect the artists you represent?

**KH:** I currently have about eighty artworks in my collection; I mostly support my own artists and I do not purchase works with the intention of selling. I feel it is important to own a piece from each artist that I represent or work with; I only take in artists that I stand behind one hundred percent - so needless to say, I must also collect them. I have collected a little bit outside of my own stable, from galleries and artists that I trust and believe in; I will probably do this more [often] in the future.

**EÅ:** Do you represent predominantly painters?

**KH:** I do think that we are a painterly gallery, I love paintings! However, I show a lot of sculptures, drawings, and digital art as well. A lot of our artists create highly detailed and very time-consuming works, many of them cannot produce an enormous amount of work within a year. That is why we use our space to represent 41 artists in total. I keep them all so busy and I often find that we need to expand to represent more. In the future, I would love to show more outdoor installations and expand this section of my business. In general, I tend to follow my gut feeling when choosing artists; if I see something I absolutely fall in love with, the medium does not matter.





Exhibition view, *Kubatana*.

**EÅ: How did you manage to cope with the pandemic?**

**KH:** We kept our program going even when we could not welcome visitors. We put a lot of focus on documenting our exhibitions via online viewing rooms, social media, and other platforms. We have done well over the past year and a half, which we are incredibly grateful for. We are especially grateful for our artists who have put an enormous amount of trust in me to make this all happen. The artists created some of their best work during the confinement because they had time and felt secure maintaining goals. In any creative field you need to have deadlines and because our deadlines never moved, they kept creating.

**EÅ: Where do you discover new talent?**

**KH:** I talk to my artists a lot to see if they have recommendations or if they have seen something interesting. I have also discovered many artists at graduate shows and find Instagram to be a great platform for discovering new talent too. I really enjoy doing the research, I dedicate a lot of time to it.

To give you an example, I have just discovered a new artist, Nazir Tanbouli, a fifty-year-old Egyptian artist. The Iraqi artist Afifa Aleiby, who is part of our gallery family recommended his work to me. I spent the next month researching him and then got in touch, which led to some wonderful conversations - we are now planning on doing a solo show next year.



Exhibition view, *Long Hands*.

**EÅ: Around how many exhibitions a year does your gallery organize?**

**KH:** With fairs and all other shows outside the gallery space factored in, we put on about twenty-six shows a year. My team works very hard. I open a new exhibition every six weeks at all our permanent gallery spaces.

**EÅ: Art fairs play a significant role for galleries. Is displaying art internationally in collaboration with art fairs a priority for you?**

**KH:** Absolutely, I love it. It is an opportunity for you to network; you meet people from other areas of the industry, and it turns into great friendships. I also treasure travelling, I consider myself a somewhat nomadic character - I am lucky to have a job that requires constant travelling. I love the thrill of [going to] art fairs to show new works.

**EÅ: African art is remarkably in demand at the moment. Have you seen it to be the category of work being sold the most in the commercial sector lately, and do you think it is here to stay?**

**KH:** Absolutely. I have been so fortunate; nine years ago, before I opened the gallery, I made the acquaintance of the former editor of the NK African Journal. He said that I needed to look after African artists and to be honest I had no idea where to start. After that conversation I did a lot of research. It is hard to find talent that looks like it could



have an international appeal [but] I discovered my first artist from Ethiopia, Dawit Abebe, and it escalated from there. Today we have some of the best current African artists in our program.

In 2019 I curated the museum show *Kubatana* at Vestfossen Kunstlaboratorium, which included 34 artists from African countries. The exhibition book is filled with talent that is now flying through the roof. I am proud of having been a part of this journey and I do not think that it is ending.

The African continent is starting to build its own incredible museums, institutions and collectors. The artists that have made it now will stay for the future and be part of those institutions. Also, the announcement of the African Centre in Sharjah is great news.



Exhibition View, *Tete a Tete*.

**EÅ:** Which artistic genre do you currently see the greatest demand for, in the gallery sector?

**KH:** In our shows, I see great sales of our African artists. In general, tastes are moving towards a more figurative direction, I have been selling works of this kind very well lately. A great percentage of our shows over the past two years have sold out.

Abstract artists are having a harder time [right] now, but I can see them coming back as well. It comes in phases; the market is not like it was nine years ago when trends were directing it.



I also see a growth [in the number] of people [who are] really looking for quality art too; people want narratives and works that are well thought through.

**EÅ: Do you think the demand for narratives accounts for the shift from abstract to more figurative art?**

**KH:** During the pandemic we needed people to tell stories. Abstract art is calming, it creates a balance when our lives are super busy. Now that the world is reopening, I would imagine that there will be a higher demand for abstract art again.



Exhibition View, *Wabi Sabi*.

**EÅ: What is your advice to emerging artists working on their careers?**

**KH:** I think the phase just after graduation can be a challenging time for emerging artists to handle. They have [received] so many warnings from educators about galleries; the artists must trust their intuition when it comes to deciding who they work with.

My advice would be to find someone to back you up throughout your experimentation - this can really drive your success. The most important thing for an artist is to dare to be completely true to themselves in their art, go ahead and keep working hard. You are going to be unique whatever you create if you stay true to yourself.

**EÅ: And lastly, what is your advice for aspiring gallerists?**

**KH:** It is like any other business, fifty percent or more will not succeed. I did not take a salary for four years, then I started with five hundred pounds per month. You must have the stamina to continue – there cannot be a backup plan or else there is a big chance you will give up. You must really want it.

Some people do not need financial support, others are looking for a financial backer. However, the risk of having a backer is that they can pull out; I have seen this happen and it will cause your endeavour to fail. All the challenging work can fail just before you complete it because your backer changes their mind and does not believe in it anymore. Another issue that can occur with backers is that they have the power to dictate what is being shown.

So, my advice would be to take the risk of being completely independent, making your own decisions and following your own intuition - this is what sustained me. If I do not follow my intuition things often do not go well. It is a process of really learning to listen to yourself.

It can take a lot of time before you start earning anything, so you must be in it for the passion.

***Thank you very much, Kristin!***

*Image courtesy of Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery.*

To discover more about the gallery please visit Kristin's [website](#) and [Instagram](#).

**Elsa Åkesson,**

Editor-in-Chief, **MADE IN BED**



Elsa Åkesson