

An Interview with Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum

Akin Oladimeji

Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum was raised in a multicultural family across different regions of Africa, Southeast Asia and North America.¹ Her artistic practices include performance, installation, drawing and animation. Her exhibitions are multilayered and frequently weave together cultural and art-historical references with elements of fantasy, addressing themes of power dynamics and the human condition. To better delve into her personal experience of Blackness, she created an alter-ego named Asme. This character, which appears throughout her work, is a time and space traveller who navigates various cultural, historical and geographic settings. She has been cited in most surveys of major contemporary artists from Africa and her work is in collections such as the A4 Art Collection, Cape Town; TATE, London; the National Gallery of Canada; Hessel Museum at Bard College; and FRAC des Pays de la Loire Contemporary Collection, Carquefou, France. In her highly ambitious and riveting exhibition at The Curve gallery at the Barbican (19 September 2024 – 5 January 2025) she has created a series of sets and passageways (with the help of architect Remco Osorio Lobato) to tell the story of Bettina, who has left her rural home to go to a big city to pursue her dreams of stardom. Bettina is a femme fatale trying to adapt to the circumstances she finds herself in by committing a crime with serious consequences. In this interview conducted at the Curve's Member's Room on the 17 September 2024, she discusses her inspirations and her hopes for the future.



Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum in her studio in The Hague, Netherlands, 2024, courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery, photo by Lotte van Uitterst

¹ See David Trigg's entry on Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum in *African Artists: From 1882 to Now*, Phaidon, London, 2021, with an introduction by Chika Okeke-Agulu, p 305



Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum, 'It Will End in Tears', installation view, The Curve, Barbican Art Gallery, London, 19 September 2024 – 5 January 2025, photo by Jo Underhill, courtesy the Barbican Art Gallery

Akin Oladimeji: So the show at The Curve is called 'It Will End in Tears'. Which person is meant to utter those words in the narrative that you're presenting?

Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum: There is no easy answer to that question because I think the title, much like some of my other titles recently, are meant to be a reclaiming of threats that I have received, or that maybe women who are like me receive – women who choose to pursue their own path that might be unconventional, or in direct opposition to the expected or the required path. So, for instance, my show in Johannesburg last year was called 'You'll be sorry', and this one is called 'It will end in tears'. These are things that you hear, right?

AO: Yes.

PPS: 'You go and do your little thing, you'll be back and you'll be sorry... whatever little dream you're trying to pursue, whatever little thing you're trying to do.' Already the threat of violence and retribution is wrapped up in that. And so I'm putting it out there to kind of deflate it. But I'm also making it possible that maybe these are the words of the former victim and now the heroine of the story. That makes the audience ask 'whose tears are we crying?' Who's gonna be sorry in the end? So I think that is the intention of the title here.

AO: It's fascinating to see a new alter ego, Bettina. I saw Asme at your Bloomberg show,² and I know she has been in various films. I thought, ironically, that there is no film component in this Barbican show. Is there a reason why?

² See the Bloomberg Space website for a summary of the exhibition (27 July 2023 – 20 January 2024): www.londonmithraeum.com/bloomberg-space-pamela-phatsimo-sunstrum

PPS: So the experience is meant to be the film. I guess the experience of seeing the work in this really specific architectural intervention is meant to offer the experience of being in the story itself. You are kind of experiencing the theatricality of it in your body as a viewer, and I find alter egos to be a really convenient way to embody my work and to create a very necessary distance between me as the maker and the story I'm trying to tell. It's so cool that you got to see Asme in the works that I presented last year because she was the first alter ego, even when I was just a baby in school. That's when Asme was born in many ways. And so it's cool that you've got the perspective of the first alter ego and now the most recent iteration. Asme was a bit of a mythical origin character, a shape-shifting, ancestral, multibodied being, not necessarily of this firm earth, but occupying multiple iterations, whether it's the spirit world or the ancestral world, or the distant future even, whereas Bettina is very much of a specific time, of a specific landscape. And even though she is also kind of mutable, as you see her in the show, there is a lot more specificity in the way that I have rendered her and the way I'm offering her to be sort of viewed, I guess, whereas maybe with my other alter egos, it was important that they operated at multiple historical moments or across multiple geographies. Bettina is of this mid-century moment in this rural colonial outpost. And those choices were really deliberate. On the one hand, it's a deliberate choice, because of the aesthetic that I'm playing with here, this kind of film noir, this sort of mid-century Western film historical moment, but also what that moment was on the continent [Africa], you know, the 1950s and '60s. This was the beginnings of the whisperings of the independence movements across the continent. It was also the height of the European influence when it comes to fashion and music and beauty standards. And I really wanted to play with all of that complexity. So, Bettina is both very modern and very rural at the same time. She's a woman of the world, but a woman who has to now navigate this much smaller space of a colonial rurality, domesticity, etcetera. So, yeah, to me, she's a really exciting new character to play with.



Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum, *It Will End in Tears, SCENE 19*, 2024, courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery, photo by Alexander Edwards

AO: Is it possible to talk about the process? Did you plan each and every single wood panel and what was going to be shown? It seems like it was quite deliberate.

PPS: Yes, it had to be. And that was very different compared to the way I have made work in the past. In the past, there was less of a demand of a kind of totality. I was able to grow bodies of work a little bit organically and let things happen as they happen, let problems be solved on the surface; a painting starts in one direction and then starts to become something else. That's OK, and it's part of the process. But this one, because I knew I wanted this thing to read in totality, I knew that there was a certain chronology. I hesitate to use that word because I don't think it's necessarily a chronological narrative. But there was a feeling that there had to be a beginning, a middle and an end here. Even if it becomes cyclical, it had to be something that makes legible sense. So the approach was really different. And so for the first time, I really planned it out, and, as you're asking, panel by panel. The process began with drawings, much like you might use a storyboard to draw out a film. I began with about sixty-five of these sketches that were really designed like a storyboard. So I already knew the scale, the kind of aspect ratio of the scene. I already understood the composition and what kind of narrative moment that was. So there were sixty-five of these, and then like a filmmaker I had to then edit it down, because I knew I couldn't make sixty-five. I did further editing down until I got to the kind of crisp set of nineteen images to really carry the specific and most important moments of this story.



Works in progress for 'It Will End in Tears' in Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum's studio, The Hague, Netherlands, 2024, courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery, photo by Lotte van Uitterst

AO: I wondered if you had done more than what we could see in the exhibition.

PPS: There was much more. And, during Frieze, those drawings will be shown at Goodman Gallery, and so it will be cool to see that.

AO: Definitely. There was a work, *Untitled* (scene 21), where Bettina has left her hometown, entered a relationship with a man who seems to constrict her life and then meets a new man.

PPS: We start to become introduced to this figure of desire – or is he a threatening figure in a way? I am fascinated by the kind of femme fatale as a useful trope to symbolise the stereotypical ways that women’s power is imaged. The femme fatale comes in kind of swirling with cigarette smoke and long nails and the fur always, and that’s quite a patriarchal view of what feminine power is. That idea that it’s sexual, it’s dangerous, it’s destructive. And it’s base, it’s not very clever, not very strategic. It is quite animalistic, in a way. And I wanted to complicate that. Sure, Bettina does embody some of those in certain moments, but I tried to offer a bit more of a background view into the motivations and experiences that might have resulted in a woman who might be described as dangerous, so you know what that looks like and where her power lies.



Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum, *It Will End in Tears, SCENE 21*, 2024, courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery, photo by Alexander Edwards

AO: I noticed that prior to *Untitled* (number 10), Bettina’s hands seem kind of rigid and inflexible. But when she meets him, the hands seem more animated, there’s a delicious nervousness in the way she fiddles with her gloves.

PPS: I’m so glad that that translates. So, in the beginning of the story, there’s a lot of tension. And some of the reference here is a nod to those of us who operate between cultures who have been sent away to study maybe, to get an education and to bring something back home. And there’s a lot of judgement there, and a lot of expectation and a lot of visibility and scrutiny. So

you see her gripping the steering wheel and her hands are tightly clasped and holding the suitcase. Then this kind of looseness starts to happen when desire enters in a smoky room or glances across the room. I'm so glad that you noticed the hands because I spent a lot of time being extremely specific about 'what is the gesture? How can I most efficiently convey in her body and her posture what's going on internally?' So, yeah, the scene that you mention is her almost pulling this elbow-length glove off. The glove, the pulling it off the fingers, and the way the male is fingering his hat... all of that was meant to really talk about that encounter and how pregnant every detail is in those kinds of moments.

AO: Brilliant. So, you mentioned your knowledge of the genesis of *The Curve* as a kind of liminal space in the Barbican that provided a sound barrier preventing people from being exposed to sound produced during music performances. This exhibition is full of liminal spaces. Why is it important to you to depict that?

PPS: I think it's because it's the space that I've always occupied as a person. And it's also the spaces that I am the most curious about. When I was in college, just like any responsible and good art student, I read Deleuze and he speaks about this notion of becoming, that bodies who are in resistance, or bodies who are in oppression, are at their most powerful when they are in the state of becoming, so not one thing nor another, but constantly escaping this attempt at a kind of capture or categorisation. And from this multiplicity, this background of having grown up in many contexts and many spaces, categories, never satisfied my experience of myself or of the world. And if you look at systems of power now and how they're operating, it seems that one of the greatest challenges and greatest annoyances to systems of power is liminal, whether it's liminal bodies, liminal geographies, these in between spaces that complicate the work of the Empire by forcing you to deal with more than one box at a time. And I find that to be such a useful tool of resistance, of denial of that kind of capturing. And so when I learnt that this space was really a containment for the spectacle inside the concert hall to protect the rest of the compound from whatever is going on in that little spectacle room I immediately was, in the best way, triggered in my imagination that 'Oh, yeah, that's my space. That's my little weird passageway between one thing solid and something else solid.' I reiterate that in the paintings and in the architecture where the painting is static, but then you start to move and you see another one and you see one through a frame, and it all becomes a little bit mushy and complicated. I'm fascinated by that kind of complicated view; it can't just be one word, I guess.

AO: Is the show scheduled to travel elsewhere?

PPS: I don't know yet. It would be wonderful if it did. Really early in our design of the architecture, and in my decisions of how to compose the images across multiple panels, and the idea that it would be – I've used the word 'spectacle' before – but the idea that this could be a travelling spectacle was kind of always built into the design... that all the panels could break down into these tidy, little, easily shipped crates and that the architecture is modular in some way that is composed, redesigned to suit, maybe any context. And even in its core, it will then carry the specificities of that space. *The Curve* will always inform the shape of every room and

the relationship between each set and each work. So, as somebody who grew up always having to be ready to pack up and go, it really feels that the work makes that nod like ‘this is a spectacle’. But at some point, the show then collapses back down, and you put it on the back of the carts and you go to the next city.

AO: If it was, do you think it would be showed in the same way? Is it possible for it to be installed in the same chronological order?

PPS: I’m very curious about that, too. And now seeing it for the first time in reality opens up a lot more possibility. There were a few moments as we were finalising the placement of the works that I was thinking ‘Wow, maybe we need to move these. Maybe we need to switch this one.’ To the horror of the technical team! They were like, ‘Oh, God, don’t make us move these panels again.’

AO: At the last minute...

PPS: Yes, exactly. But it reaffirmed to me the kind of cyclical nature of the story. To use a popular example: choose your own adventure books where you’re not stuck with following just one plot. And this is intentional in kind of any order and my hope is that by the time you get to the end, you recognise that you need to go back to get some more... that you might have missed something, like ‘Wait. Was that the same? Let me go back and see.’ So that feeling was very much intentional.



Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum, *It Will End In Tears, SCENE 16*, 2024, courtesy the artist and Goodman Gallery, photo by Alexander Edwards

AO: That’s brilliant. Near the exits there are two things that I was thinking of mentioning, the dock and the bridge. With the sculpture in the shape of a courtroom dock where the accused usually stands, I noticed that quite a few people were willing to interact with it and get someone to take their photo. How do you feel about that?

PPS: I love that. I'm always flirting with that edge of interactivity. And, you know, there are some kind of taboos about that, artists don't want to be a backdrop to somebody else's selfie or something. But I also recognise that this is the time that we're living in, that this is the way people interact with things, especially younger generations. This is the way they experience space. I worked to design the architectural components. I worked with Remco, who's a trained architect. That was always really important to us, that folks would use the space, would sit and perch and lean and rest and really embody it. And so for me, it's great that they're doing that, they're putting themselves in the story, making selfies. To me it signals that we did it right, that we made it, even though the taboo of interacting with art is there, that we made the right decisions where they can feel free to engage.



Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum, 'It Will End in Tears', installation view, The Curve, Barbican Art Gallery, London, 19 September 2024 – 5 January 2025, photo by Jo Underhill, courtesy the Barbican Art Gallery

AO: That's great. And there's that painting of two people on a bridge as well. I recognise it as a kind of liminal space, an area that takes you from one place to the other. Are people meant to know who those two figures standing far apart on the bridge are?

PPS: It's like the closing scene in some ways. I imagined closing the story in that way; I was curious if it would remind the audience of the beginning where there's one image where through the car window you see these two figures. They're speaking underneath an aeroplane. There's a curiosity there for me. Is this a goodbye? Or is this a greeting? And, again, there are two figures who are in the doorway of the murder scene. Are they witnesses or are they perpetrators in this? And so that meeting on the bridge... yeah, I did want it to be ambiguous about whether it's a reunion or a goodbye. And depending on how you choose to read it, I think it shifts where you place the end of the story. So, yeah, I love that it's a little bit open-ended. Does her story start

again? Is this like a new sort of tragic love story that's happening? Or is this finally the end of one thing and maybe the beginning of something else completely?

AO: It is quite ambiguous, but that's fine. One final question: what future project are you most excited about?

PPS: Oh, gosh. It's hard to think about future projects, especially since I've been working on this one for almost two years now. But, after this, in 2025, I'm really looking forward to a solo show in New York at my gallery, Lelong. And I know that it's going to be very different from this. That's what often happens in the cycle in the studio: these really outward or occupying space projects then make me go back inward and do a much more static bunch of research in the studio. I learnt a tremendous amount in terms of material and technique preparing for this show, the amount of work and the speed at which I had to work... and sometimes I did some interesting things technically in the studio that I am really looking forward to digging into later. But for the near future I am thinking much more simplistically about what I present. I feel like these are just going to be straight-up paintings. Nothing more complicated than that

AO: Thank you once again for speaking to me.

PPS: It was my pleasure.

Akin Oladimeji is a critic, lecturer and writer. He is currently in the first year of a PhD at University College London (UCL) funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.