'I CAN BE YOUNG AND STUPID TOO'

Josh Groban talks about growing as an artist, his African experience and guilty pleasures.

Fantasia moves out of the past lane

Singer says that by focusing on her work she's able to keep herself from being subsumed by celebrity.
‘Dubai needs to identify the

City Times talks to Oxford-educated art historian and gallery owner Sundaram Tagore, who came this week to Dubai about how the UAE can become one of the world’s most powerful art centres.

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GLOBALISATION HAS created unprecedented change in the art world. Emerging economic superpowers around the world have unleashed an avalanche of new dynamic markets for art, as countries and individuals are purchasing art in record numbers. Case in point: Dubai, where the first ever Gulf Art Fair kicked off yesterday.

With over forty galleries and hundreds of notable contemporary works from around the world, the event is a first ever. Yet how can Dubai become one of the world’s great art centres and establish its cultural legacy? City Times talks to Oxford-educated art historian and gallery owner Sundaram Tagore, who came this week to Dubai about how the UAE can become one of the world’s most powerful art centres.

In 1989, Rabindranath Tagore was the first non-westerner to win the Nobel Prize. His difficult and dissatisfied life is still studied today. Tagore’s heart was lifted with his accounts of friendships with Albert Einstein, Bernard Shaw, and Romain Rolland. In 2000, Tagore established his gallery in NYC’s Chelsea, the world’s largest art district which contains over 326 galleries. He comes from a long lineage of artists, poets, writers, and who are, as he calls them, ‘staunch internationalists’. In fact, his great grandfather Rabindranath Tagore was the first non-westerner to win the Nobel Prize. History books are littered with his accounts of friendships with Albert Einstein, Bernard Shaw, and Romain Rolland.

How can Dubai develop and position itself as a global player in terms of art and culture? First, Dubai needs to identify the right thinkers of culture. This is not some nebulous thing; it is very methodical. How do you identify who is credible and expert enough to develop your cultural institutions?

Playing to the gallery: Tagore mesmerises another art lover with his knowledge of art

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1902, Rabindranath established Vishwa Bharati or World University near Calcutta, which became an epicentre for international dialogue and where east still meets west today. It is fitting that 45-year-old Tagore would descend upon Dubai, with its intercultural mix, to extend the dialogue where his ancestors left off.

Why did you come to the Dubai Art Fair?
I am intrigued by Dubai. It’s fascinating, the mix of cultures is unique and the city is poised to become one of the great centres of art because it possesses a vibrant, cosmopolitan and international population to play a role in this emerging artistic atmosphere of ideas.

But is it enough for Dubai’s leaders to just have ideas?
No. Put simply, in the modern world ideas cost money. However, Dubai and Abu Dhabi are putting billions of dollars into this effort that includes partnerships with the Louvre Museum, the Guggenheim, and others. Naturally, being placed with cultural institutions of stature will continue to draw a large number of people with serious art backgrounds and experience in the field of culture. Thus, the industry in Dubai should develop very quickly.

Immediately, Dubai should look at the curriculum vitae - which galleries have candidates worked for, but equally important is someone who embodies the spirit of Dubai, which is very cross-cultural. Thus, someone with cultural background, with professional and personal experience in east and west, since this is what Dubai is. Someone who is a global citizen, because Dubai’s population is global. The person must relate to their audience and their artistic needs.

Playing to the gallery: Tagore mesmerises another art lover with his knowledge of art

Why is Dubai an important place geographically? How can the arts community serve Dubai?
Dubai is at the crossroads of east and west, and it is taking charge as one of the great centres of commerce, tourism, and art. It is proactively taking the helm - and that is impressive. Everyone wants to be a part of Dubai’s activity because the UAE is embracing the rest of the world, and the arts and culture community wants to be a part of it.

How can the artistic community contribute to Dubai’s development? The world arts community is always looking for a venue and if it happens to be a new venue there is more excitement, so people are not jaded. Excessive amounts of culture already exist in New York, Tokyo, London - this is high culture that is promoted, disseminated and consumed. Dubai is a new space and it is very exciting to open up the possibilities of new ideas and vital for interesting ideas to take place and blossom. Old established

Dubai has firmly established itself firmly on the global art canvas, believes Tagore

‘Running a gallery is both complex and complicated to create - because it has to have a spiritual and intellectual mission. It’s a propelling forward to follow - that means every day, we must convert one individual to that mission’

Well, I guess so - though I was just thinking in general terms. However, the Sundaram Tagore gallery from its inception has devoted itself to examining the confluence of cultures - and the ideas of tradition versus modernity. We promote artists that are involved in examining cultures other than their own - it makes for an interesting mix. We also want to help shape intercultural and international artistic dialogue, and we do that by hosting non-profit events of other art forms, such as poetry, dance, literature, and film. I also established a not for profit organisation named the Tagore Foundation International, which works to educate children in developing countries, especially girls.

Has anything like this been done before? Not really. We are extremely mission-driven and every artist and activity we promote must have this kind of idea of transcultural understanding and dialogue. If cultures don’t speak to each other, they continue to misunderstand. In the early days, as long as 15 years ago, I was interested in bringing forth an artistic idea that had to do with the global community and a world.

In the mid 1990s, I was involved in an organisation called Art for the World. Most people would ask, “What does it mean, this world art?” Today, people understand what this means with the ever-present buzz of globalisation.

Who is your inspiration? Larry Darell, the character in the book Razor's Edge. He was a rebel who was rebelling against the establishment. He is a ‘quiet rebel’.

How have you defined your life? I have defined it by the way I want to lead and it hasn’t always been easy because I haven’t taken a conventional route. Breaking new ground takes enormous effort and conversion of others to our gallery’s mission. Running a gallery is not about slapping a painting on a wall. Boutique galleries are in excess.

However, running a gallery is both complex and complicated to create because it has to have a spiritual and intellectual mission. It’s a propelling forward to follow - that means every day, we must convert one individual to that mission. One by one, month by month, year by year, you are converting people. Then there is a tipping point, through osmosis, the gallery gains a public trust and that is what it’s about. Or else it’s a

Is there a way to avoid buying bad art? The art fair has gone through vetting process, only galleries were allowed in if they were of a certain standard. Also, assessing quality comes through education and experience and being around people who have certain understanding of people.

Who is your favourite artist? Difficult to say. That could get me in trouble. I have many from the Lascaux and Ajanta cave paintings to Munch to Pollack and beyond. My great grandfather Rabindranath too, not because he was a relative but because his work has a maverick quality and is powerful - haunting images of people full of deep emotions, with moody, dark, silhouetted forms - power that strikes you directly in the heart and eyes. Luckily I own quite a few - in case I get into trouble someday.

What advice do you have for people attending the Gulf Art Fair? Be excited, really excited. This is the first time that the roster of galleries are truly from all over the world - not just west, but from east too. Once people arrive, they should just look and absorb. Looking is different from hearing - keep the eyes open. Art is about looking and most people forget that. If they look, the quality becomes obvious. I would say 70 per cent of the world consists of the visual. Without your sight you’d have nothing.