**LIFE**

**Starring with the same brush**

There's one street in Hong Kong that best captures the city's East-meets-West vibe. It is Hollywood Road in Soho district, where modern art galleries and posh foreign restaurants jostle for space with antique shops, furniture stores and vintage clothing stores, the road exudes an atmosphere that is quintessentially Hong Kong.

It also offers an art metaphor for the kind of cultural dialogue that Sundaram Tagore, the great grandson of the master poet and Nobel Prize laureate Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), has championed for over three years. Contributing his share of the effort to stir up the local cultural landscape, he opened his eponymous gallery — the Sundaram Tagore Gallery — on Hollywood Road in April this year.

"I was promised a site twice the size of this gallery by the Governor of Dubai," he says. "But I wasn't tempted because I wanted to be here. It's always a great experience to go to a culture when people want you to be there."

Indeed, all the latest talk about galvanizing the city's creative industries, Hong Kong has created a high-profile addition to its growing list of international galleries.

That said, who would not have opened their eyes to a Tagore given the chance? Almost 70 years after Rabindranath Tagore's death, the family name still echoes around the world.

For Sundaram Tagore, a man who spends 70 percent of his time traveling, the art he displays in his 200-sq-m gallery is a treat to that nomadic spirit. Each artist is a migrating soul in an ever-changing cultural landscape, which they explore with the same intrepid Tagore displays to explore the globe. "I try to seek out artists with a world perspective, who absorb different cultures without homogenizing their own identity," he says.

One of them is the Californian artist Lee Whisler, who uses wooden pegs to outline and highlight the features of his subjects, giving a hailing quality to his portraits of Mahatma Gandhi, Sigmund Freud and the American Chinese across Asia. His way to doing so.

Tagore, a student of art history, says "syn-thesis" is the key word. "Modernism rejects tradition. But for ancient nations like China and India, tradition is too deeply entrenched to be rejected. That's why post-modernism was born — to allow syntheses to take place and to give birth to hybridism," he says. It is a process of cultures combining, with the two forces of tradition and modernity rising above each other instead of clashing. He has his way to make a complicated theory appear less so.

"You're here from India, I'm from India, we eat in a French restaurant, talking to probably Mexican music — this is syn-thesis," he says.

Predominantly, one group of artists that Tagore is interested in showing is Chinese artists living overseas. "They have been affected by experiences outside their own culture and as a result each has a unique perspective to share," he says.

The gallery had a major studio tour to Beijing last February, during which he met local artists and visited their broadening grounds, including the famous 798 Art District.

"The sort of cultural confluence that gives rise to big ideas must happen to an artist as a natural process, a rather unconscious one," he says. It feeds nicely to a swipe at today's ubiquitous jumbling of cultural symbols in artworks as "cheap pastiches".

"In a sense, Hong Kong artists are more genuine, mainly because no one cares about them — all the attention right now is on their mainland counterparts," says Tagore, referring to the meteoric rise of prices for art "made in China".

Despite its reluctance to exploit his name, Tagore admits that it was his family that instilled in him a "world

T here are usually travel alone, without ever feeling lonely. He spent New Year's Eve last year in Shanghai. Some locals he met in a restaurant near the Bund invited him home for a party. When it ended at 3 am, he wandered the city's streets for the rest of the night.

Another time, he was hopelessly late for a flight in Argentina. His local driver called the control tower saying that there was a Tagore in his car who was in danger of missing his flight. "Believe it or not, they brought the plane back," Tagore says, rather disbelievingly.

Tagore, who was born in 1962, 27 years after the death of the grand man, has found it impossible to shun the family name. As a kid, he was always looking for something, having grown up in a Bolivian household with a constant stream of artists and intellectuals, many of them Chinese.

He rebelled as a young man, by not following the obvious route to become an artist — his family already had 14 generations of artists and painters, including the late Rabindranath Tagore, whose paintings were once exhibited in Paris.

These days, the three galleries that bear his name — one in Hong Kong, one in Beverly Hills and one in the Chelsea district of New York — showcase works by artists who have something urgent to say, yet whose voices are somehow drowned in the cacophony of our era.

"We bring into focus what's out of focus," he says.

He has also established Tagore Foundations International, a non-profit organization that educates disadvantaged children and fosters artistic dialogue.

Asked about the secret of his family's intellectual longevity, he says: "We don't convert, we converse."