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Sundaram Tagore Focuses on Hong Kong

By Payal Uttam



Sundaram Tagore



Sundaram Tagore Gallery on Hollywood Road in Hong Kong

It wasn't long ago that Hollywood Road in Hong Kong was just a quiet stretch of antique shops. "When we first opened people were really surprised," said Sundaram Tagore, who built a contemporary art space on a corner of the thoroughfare in 2008. "They were excited that they were going to see something new."

At the time, Mr. Tagore was one of the first international gallery owners to open a space in the city. Since then several foreign galleries have followed, including Gagosian Gallery and Ben Brown Fine Arts. "Hong Kong has become an important artistic center," said Mr. Tagore. "There is an audience here that has a voracious appetite for art."

Mr. Tagore, a former director of New York gallery PaceWildenstein, now runs his own establishments in New York and Los Angeles. He is known as an active player in the art-fair circuit — he shuttles between as many as 14 fairs a year. Lately, however, the gallery owner is turning his attention toward Hollywood Road. He plans to relocate to Hong Kong this summer and make it the nerve center of his organization.

This month, it will host an exhibition for the Brazilian photographer Sebastião Salgado. Later in the year the Hong Kong space will unveil work by Canadian photographer Robert Polidori.

Scene Asia spoke to Mr. Tagore about why he is planting new roots in Hong Kong and what he has in store for the city.

Q: Why relocate to Hong Kong now?

A: People from all over Asia are coming to the gallery and acquiring artwork. We are showing in different art fairs and mounting historic shows through our alliances with various organizations. Recently, we've taken a third floor in the building, so even our gallery structure has grown. I feel because so much activity is taking place we need to use Hong Kong as our headquarters. This will allow us to fan out to the rest of Asia

Q: Do you feel that the gallery has integrated into the local art scene? Or do you position yourselves more as an international gallery?

A: The international part will never leave our identity. But increasingly we have been reaching out to the local community and they are starting to see us as an integral part of Hong Kong's artistic patina. We will be the first gallery to have an exhibition of Hong Kong art in New York, which will travel to Beverly Hills before returning to Hong Kong. The exhibition is called "Journey to Nowhere: Marginally Chinese," curated by Oscar Ho. It explores a period of transition when a flight of Hong Kongers took place and how they later returned.

Q: What can we expect next from the gallery?

A: We will bring contemporary Middle Eastern, Latin American and Thai art to Hong Kong, in addition to showing artists from the West. The idea is to give space to people who are marginalized in the art world. We will also continue our role in making films about art. The next film I am working on is about a greater art world. It has to do with Louis Kahn, the American architect and his presence in Asia. The first film we made was about an Asian artist moving to America. Now this film is about an American moving to Asia.

Q: Why don't you have a booth at Art HK?

A: We have never exhibited at Art HK [because] we feel that in Hong Kong we need to draw the people to our gallery. So, we stage significant shows during Art HK in our own space on Hollywood Road.

Also, at Art HK, there are an overwhelming number of people interested in art but they are not necessarily collectors. [At Art Stage] Singapore [where Mr. Tagore's gallery has exhibited], the group of people visiting the fair is smaller, and many of them are serious art collectors.

Q: Is the art market in Asia over-reliant on mainland China?

A: The art market in Asia is not over-reliant on mainland China. However, the art market is dominated by mainland China. India is a strong and quickly growing art market, Indonesia is an emerging market too, and Korea and Japan have always been at the forefront [in Asia]. However, in recent years, China has made huge steps and is fueling the overall demand for Asian art.

Q: What trends in Asian art do you foresee in the next five years?

A: Transnational Asian artists will play a crucial part in the global development of arts and culture in the next few years. [They] play a very important role in the wider art world and they have experienced serious academic and the curatorial success; the market will follow soon. However, Asian artists who are living abroad need to explore aesthetic and artistic issues from their own culture. Without that they will not produce enduring work. [Artists like] Anish Kapoor, Shirin Neshat and Hiroshi Senju are reckoning with their own cultural issues in a way that is extremely interesting.

–Additional reporting by Kristiano Ang

Sebastião Salgado: The Global Photographer, May 24 – June 25; Sundaram Tagore Gallery, 57-59 Hollywood Rd., Central, Hong Kong.