Stepping forward

Sundaram Tagore sees his role as facilitating arts dialogue between cultures, writes Madeline Gressel

"I didn’t know what globalization meant in the 1950s," says one recent afternoon at the Foreign Correspondents’ Club in Hong Kong, "but I knew something was happening. I was such a welling pot in New York. My father’s business partners were mixed, children were mixed, people speaking languages from every corner of the world. But it wasn’t reflected in the art world. I asked why. The art world claims to be so advanced, but really it was quite backward. There were niche galleries—Italian, Chinese, Russian—but they were not aware of the continuum of culture. I said, ‘We’re going to do this.’"

So Tagore left his job at the Pace Wildenstein Gallery in New York in 2000 and opened his now gallery on Greene Street in Soho, where that area was still a niche section of art and culture. "It was a real ground space. A huge ground-floor loft with columns, filled with light," he says, smiling. "The idea was to open a gallery, take the room, and find a cultural centre to open a dialogue between the marginalized and the establishment. We were having so many events, literally every other day. People coming and and we did that for 15 years."

Today Tagore has two galleries in New York, one in Hong Kong and another, newly opened in Singapore. The galleries show a focus on cultural exchange and an international perspective. "No matter what country you go to, I will never change my format. The format is international dialogue," he says. "People have asked me if I change the format for the Chinese market. No, never. I’m not catering to maintain cash. I’m not interested in an international outlook, they’ll come to us."

Perusing Tagore’s focus on cross-cultural dialogue is not so surprising, given his family background. A descendant of Indian poet and polymath Rabindranath Tagore, the art-world-pedigreed Tagore family, the gallery’s director describes his childhood in Calcutta as a series of fascinating encounters with the world. "It was a very unorthodox family. No one ever told you what to do. But as children, we were surrounded by the lifestyle of artists, and the world of adults, and we wanted to be a part of that."

"We were living in two sets of rooms in Calcutta, a few miles apart. The Chauhams house was an old, old house—more or less the Habitat Centre. Whereas Russell Street was in the Victoria palace style, a high-ceilinged home. It was a constant open house." Tagore recalls. "People walked in, and bought art from all over the globe. Someone who came in for a few hours would end up staying for a year. It was a very haute-jure atmosphere—everyone with an introduction knew who was open. It didn’t matter if you had a lot or little. You just plugged part of the house."

Tagore’s gallery does open on many different principles. It offers a democratic home to a constellation of artists from around the globe, making little distinction between the art world’s biggest names—such as US portrait photographer Nan Goldin, featured at the Hong Kong gallery in 2012—and the least known. "Tagore, too, has hired a cosmopolitan lifestyle. From India he relocated to Canada and then the US, followed by Italy and England. ‘I just went on an acid trip from there,’" now he calls Hong Kong, home, although he grew in New York for two weeks out of eight and spends weekends in the Singapore gallery. Tagore first came to Hong Kong in 1998, with Pace Wildenstein, to seek a hold on the Asian market. "It was immediately after the financial crisis," he says. "The Chinese were not excited. I was just starting." Tagore recalls. "Everyone was so excited. ‘Will you be a part of this? We’re going to do business here. It’s one of the oldest cities in the world!’ I say, ‘There’s a historical reason for that. The Chinese mindset is one of relating to people through business, not through business compounded by the nature of Hong Kong, which is built on the platform of 24/7 business through the British. It was that ruling India—how it was efficiency, efficiency. Efficiency, it’s in the city’s DNA, really."

Tagore was originally approached in New York by former Hong Kong, who told him they were looking for arts and culture organizations to establish a presence here. When Sundaram Tagore Gallery opened on Hollywood Road in 2007, it was the first international gallery in the city. "Since then, it has been joined by some of the biggest names in art—Gagosian and White Cube, for example—but it has maintained a unique niche in a city that largely serves the Chinese market. "When we first came, people here were literally embarrassed," Tagore recalls. "Everyone was so excited. ‘For the first time we are getting contemporary art that’s outside of Chinese art.’"

"People want instant gratification. They want a Facebook understanding of art. Sundaram Tagore, Galaxy

Since the inception of his gallery, Tagore has ensured participation in fairs such as Art Basel. Instead, he plans a show contemporaneously to scoop up the stay-footfall. Last year saw the LeBourgeois show, this year he is focusing on Japan’s Hiroshi Senju. The body, roller feeling that has co-opted the art world as a part of globalization, Tagore says. "Whether you like it or not, we live in a global age. On one side, art is expanding, it’s engaging more people; it’s becoming more diverse. ‘On the other side, people want instant gratification. They want a Facebook understanding of art. I’m not being judgmental. It’s just being anthropological and saying—great, we’re going to do something different.’ He reflects on this and adds, ‘I believe that in a post-modern age, we can’t create anything new. Everything has already been done. But we can combine in new ways, and therefore reveal a new vision. “Postmodernism allows us to understand that there’s damage taking place, and to find ways to cope with it.”

What Hiroshi Senju is doing through his art that beauty exists beneath our feet—damaged goods, perhaps, but still we can find beauty. It’s about our ability to see it. Tagore is now focused on travelling the world, opening dialogues, and celebrating beauty. He is working on a documentary chronicling architect Louis Kahn’s creation of the National Assembly building in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The world is not as small as we think, and that’s why we continue to grow. There’s still hope. Without hope we stop being human. People may have grown scarce, but the dominant culture happens to be art and music, but the art world will re-emerge. Art will reassess itself."