

BACKUP

First Person

Art heavyweight **Sundaram Tagore** opened the Hong Kong branch of his eponymous art gallery in 2007. As the first international gallery in the SAR, it sparked an influx of big names in the art world opening outlets in the city. He sits down with Andrea Lo to talk about his early days living all over the world, his philosophies and why he believes in creating a dialogue between east and west.



Without art,
we are nobody.

I was born in India. I left in 1979. I did an undergraduate degree in the US, and I shuttled between the west coast of Canada and the American mid-west.

I moved to New York, Los Angeles, then to San Francisco, then to Europe, and then the Far East. I became a nomad.

All of this happened purely because of my studies, or finding work.

When I was finishing up my dissertation, I got a very good job with the Pace Wildenstein, which was probably the biggest gallery at the time.

They hired me to go to Asia to promote their artists. That's how I came to Hong Kong in 1993.

I was orbiting around Asia. I thought: I love the city. It's an amazing geography. The people are very open. At the back of my mind, I wanted to do something in Hong Kong.

In 2007, Invest Hong Kong came to me in New York. They were looking for international galleries to create businesses in Hong Kong. I jumped on that idea.

Initially, I was drawn to abstract art. But when I came to Asia, I saw more authentic works. I needed to create a bridge between the two.

Yes, there are pieces [in the gallery] that I like. But in a globalized world, diversity is the name of the game. You cannot restrict yourself to one particular way of looking at them.

The best thing about running a gallery is that you're constantly exposed to very interesting

groups of people. You have very rich encounters, and the lifestyle is amazing because there's never a dull moment.

I meet people off the street who come in, and leaders of the world—I ended up dining at the White House.

The worst part is the idea of constantly engaging the population. It's a treadmill and it's never-ending.

Art makes us who we are as human beings. Without art, we are nobody. Human communication and creative expression is a must.

[Without art] what happens? We stop being human beings. Animals don't sit around and say, "How beautiful the sunset is." They're not able to conjure up poetry or music.

You can never have negative criticism—it's called perspective. My perspective happens to be different from yours, based on cultural experience.

You can't criticize me based on how I run the gallery, because I'm more knowledgeable about art. I've studied it, I worked in museums, as an art critic, and I run a gallery. I have a bird's eye view, let's say. For someone to criticize the position I take, they have to have those experiences.

I never look at competitors negatively. They're the best asset you have. They are constantly sharpening you and giving you more clarity.

I try to drag my family with me when I travel for work. But I can't do that for too long because

my daughter is young—she's 6. I'm trying to reconfigure my own work, so I don't have to fly out every three days.

My least favorite thing about Hong Kong is that I don't get to meet with the local population. They finish work, then take off and go home. What you're left with is the expat crowd.

The moment you don't speak the language [in a culture], it kind of creates a bubble.

I promise myself every day that I will go to the gym. You have intentions, but when are you ever going to get it done?

I am demanding, but at the same time, I can be forgiving. If you make a mistake, that is no problem. But if it becomes a pattern, you want to correct that.

You want to treat other people with respect. That's become a key. The world becomes much more palatable.

I don't like politics. It has a way of creating fragmentation and doesn't bring people together.

But I recognize that, without politics, there's no reality.

I tend to look at things philosophically and deconstruct them. It doesn't have to have all this edge.

In today's global, entrepreneurial world, Hong Kong is an amazingly inspiring space to occupy. You feel the pulse. The pendulum has swung.

I have thought about moving to a more relaxed pace—to have a little place in Bali, Greece or somewhere on the oceanfront.

But I can't retire and play golf for the rest of my life.

Sundaram Tagore Gallery, 57-59 Hollywood Rd. Central, 2581-9678.

