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In Conversation: Sundaram Tagore

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Photo courtesy of Jay Mandal

Established in 2000, Sundaram Tagore Gallery is devoted to examining the exchange of ideas between Western and non-Western cultures.

Gallery Founder, Sundaram Tagore, is an art historian, gallerist and award-winning documentary filmmaker. He was born in Calcutta in 1961 and manages four galleries between New York City, Hong Kong and Singapore.

A descendant of the poet and Nobel Prize-winner Rabindranath Tagore, he is devoted to the Promotion of an East-West dialogue not only through his galleries but also through the Tagore Foundation International, a nonprofit cultural organization he founded and directs.

Tagore's debut film, *The Poetics of Color: Natvar Bhavsar, An Artist's Journey*, premiered at the MIAAC Film Festival in New York City in 2010 and has since received several festival awards. He is currently working on his second film, a feature-length documentary about the architect Louis I. Kahn.

Ocula talks to Sundaram Tagore on the occasion of *Frontiers Reimagined*, a collateral event of the 56th Venice Biennale at the Museo di Palazzo Grimani. The exhibition is an initiative of the Tagore Foundation International, curated by Sundaram and mounted in partnership with the Venetian State museum authority, il Polo museale del Veneto.

Your upbringing was by most standards unconventional - a bohemian childhood in India surrounded by creative thinkers was ended by the loss of your parents as a young adult and followed by many years of international study and travel. To what extent is your approach as a gallerist reflective of the experiences of your youth?

I grew up in a house in Calcutta in the 1960s and 70s that was basically a way station for intellectuals from all over the world; my father was a painter, publisher and collector and my mother was a journalist, so there was a constant stream of conversation about cultural identity, hybridity and exchange. That was my education. My academic career was spent exploring the issue of European modernism as it relates to modern Indian art.

I'd say all these experiences have over time led me to formulate ideas about the art world and to concretize ideas about what is of value and what is meaningful. When an idea is engaging, interesting, and somehow grabs you in a powerful way, I am attracted to that and I carry it with me. This is reflected in the kind of art that I present in my gallery today.

The idea of cross-cultural dialogue is a part of my DNA and I have been very fortunate to have access to many different parts of the world and to different people and their generosity. At the end of the day I think my work is autobiographical, but because it is meaningful, it is meaningful for our audience as well.

The gallery roster today includes some of the most well known Asian artists today. Is there a particular quality that defines a 'Sundaram Tagore' artist?

Opening a brand new gallery does not automatically mean access to established artists in Asia or in the West. One has to build a name, trust and a curatorial knowhow before artists of caliber will associate themselves with you.

Increasingly we have been attracting artists of great artistic depth and vision to our galleries. We have been fortunate to have some very important Asian artists. We also represent some noted Western artists in our Asian galleries, including Donald Sultan, Sebastião Salgado and Robert Polidori.

We are proud to say that our artists are some of the most innovative and inventive thinkers and they are producing significant works that motivate us to take them across the globe. The vision and mission will always be about cross-cultural dialogue. Artists who are interested in a culture other than their own are of interest to us.

Please you tell us about the Tagore Foundation International which you founded in 2006? What was your principal motivation in establishing the foundation and has that evolved over time?

Tagore Foundation International is a nonprofit organization devoted to intercultural dialogue and encourages social, spiritual and aesthetic dialogues between Asia and other areas of the world. The foundation promotes the preservation and conservation of indigenous artworks and architecture; draws attention to artistic expressions that are either ignored or under-represented in the larger cultural context; helps to develop intellectually rigorous international exhibitions; and provides a platform for dialogue about arts and culture around the world.

Tagore Foundation International is also based on the idea of helping disadvantaged children in achieving their goals. The thrust is educational.

Our initiatives have included funding a scholarship for a woman from India to study in Pont Aven, France; funding a full scholarship for a student from Mozambique to study in the United States; and funding an ongoing scholarship for young women in need to study art history at the College of Wooster, Ohio.

The idea of creating this organization was also to counter our art world's obsession with glitz, money and power and provide some substance and meaning to our day-to-day work. We work to promote the art and culture of under-represented communities and help the marginalized and the underdog in achieving their goals. We are a small organization, but our plans for the future include building a school in the Himalayas, where I feel the children are completely disadvantaged. These are small but meaningful actions we can build on. This exhibition in Venice will allow us to launch that part of the story.

Turning to the exhibition in Venice, *Frontiers Reimagined*. How did this come about?

In 1989, when I was a graduate student, I was very fortunate to have been awarded a scholarship from the Italian Ministry of Culture to study at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection. It was during my three-month stay in Venice that I was introduced to the wonders of the city and to the Biennale. I was fascinated then, as now, by the city's enduring tradition of cultivating cultural relationships with the East. Venice was the very embodiment of the cross-cultural dialogue that was driving my studies, and later, would inspire my career as a gallerist. I dreamt of one day staging an exhibition in Venice that would bring together the work of artists who were deeply engaged with cultures other than their own.

In 2007 I began to plan this exhibition and I was on the verge of moving forward to mount an exhibit in 2009. Then the recession took place and we dropped that idea. But I never stopped thinking about it. In 2013 we began again.

It became clear that mounting an exhibition of this scale is enormously complex and expensive. In addition, I had to have the right people surrounding me to bring this idea to fruition. A long-term friend, Nathalie Vernizzi, an art historian and curator based in Milan and Nice, joined me as the coordinating director. She was instrumental in bringing this project to life and has a deep knowledge of Venice and the intricacies of mounting an exhibition in such a unique environment.

This year is an important year for us because it is our 15th year anniversary.

At times I thought I would not be able to mount the exhibition. Coordinating the logistics with artists from Brazil to Australia was a learning curve for us and we were only able to achieve this because we have multiple international locations and staff who are highly trained and knowledgeable. Mounting a wide-ranging exhibition such as *Frontiers Reimagined* has been both challenging and exciting, and it is definitely not for the faint hearted.

The exhibition includes 44 artists from 25 countries all exploring notions of cultural boundaries. Share with us some of the highlights?

The highly talented artists are emerging to regionally important to internationally renowned figures. They come from Asia, Africa and the West and each produces extremely inventive artwork, layered with thought-provoking ideas that make sense of this globalized world. Among the younger artists is Aaron Taylor Kuffner, a sound artist who uses traditional Balinese gamelan music and robotic technology. His work greets visitors at the beginning of the exhibition. Moving through to the first and second floors one

is transported into a world of intercultural dialogue. The artists come from a vast geographical landscape, but they are all in conversation with one another.

Also included in the show is Tayeba Begum Lipi, a Bangladeshi artist who was recently part of an exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum; and Jean Lee, a highly sought after Singaporean artist. Works by the famous Korean sculptor Chun Kwang Young, who uses antique mulberry paper taken from Korean periodicals and academic texts to wrap small bits of Styrofoam, have an ancient aura yet they are truly contemporary sculptures.

Large-scale installations by the renowned Japanese artist Hiroshi Senju can be seen on both floors of the museum. The panels painted in fluorescent pigments are particularly striking because they appear black and white in daylight and electric blue when viewed under ultraviolet light.

Of course there are many renowned Western artists such as Robert Rauschenberg, who was instrumental in first creating cross-cultural dialogue. Other important figures including Christo, Sebastião Salgado and Robert Polidori, are also part of the exhibition.

Your personal interest in cross-cultural exchange extends beyond the visual arts into many other disciplines, including poetry, literature, performance art, film, and music. Does the exhibition cross into other disciplines?

Yes, very much so. We plan to have book readings, music and dance performances and film screening at the museum during the course of the seven-month presentation.

And the partnership with the Venetian state museum authority, il Polo museale del Veneto, that in itself a intercultural exchange of sorts?

We are very honored to have il Polo museale del Veneto support our exhibition. This is a huge endorsement for our hard work and our ability to create a dialogue between different international institutions. We are thrilled to be working with them.

Historically, Venice has always been a place of cultural and mercantile exchange between the East and West. I have always been fascinated by the ways in which art and ideas move between places, so, for me it has always represented the ultimate stage on which to mount a show about cultural dialogue.

The Venetian state museum authority recognized the scope and range of this exhibition. This exhibition also intellectually and aesthetically complements the ideals of the Italian people and I'm very proud to associate with them in this grand manner.

And the Palazzo Grimani? The exhibition is the first time the second-floor space has been opened to the public since the museum's restoration was completed in 2008. You are a big fan of architecture, how has your response to the site and its history shaped the exhibition?

If I'm correct, I think this is the first fully-fledged contemporary art exhibition to be mounted at the Palazzo Grimani. We are honored by this opportunity. Having lived in Venice and revisited many times, I am cognizant of the need for building conservation. We have about seventy works to mount in a sixteenth-century palazzo that has undergone decades of painstaking restoration. We can't put a single nail in the wall. How does one go about mounting a major exhibition with such large-scale works without placing a nail in the wall? This has been a real challenge. Fortunately, we have an internationally

known installer and contractor, Apice, based in this region. They have mounted some of the most sophisticated exhibitions in Italy. The reason we selected them is because their workmanship is absolutely superb and very detail oriented.

In addition we had to be careful because we're working amongst some of the most talented set designers and craftsmen in the world based in Venice. We know that all eyes will be on our presentation. Therefore a great deal of thought and care has been put into this. We were also very lucky to have Zattera Marangon Associati Architects work with us, who also helped us navigate and mount this exhibition.

What are your hopes for the exhibition?

The exhibition theme is cultural entanglement. We hope it makes people think about the intellectual and aesthetic richness that can emerge when artists, or frankly anyone, engage with cultures and ideas outside their own spheres.

Cultural dialogue has been the driving force of the studies in my life, and in a globalized art world—a microcosm of the globalized world into which we've all been thrust—there is no more top-down authority or hegemonic relationships, but only decentralized points of artistic production and consumption. The positive outcome is that ever-widening swaths of previously local artistic production are gaining exposure—and acceptance—on international platforms.

This is an exciting time.

Your background is very international so you have a lot of experience of intercultural dialogue. With ever-increasing cultural globalization bringing about greater connectedness what do you see for the future of cultural diversity?

In this highly mercantile and globalized world how do we find meaning? We in the developed world have to transcend our national and regional needs for internationalism and humanism and that will be the glue that binds us together.

What's next for the Tagore Foundation International?

We will launch the foundation in several countries, to provide awareness and generate proceeds toward building a school.—[O]

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