

ART

DRAWING PEOPLE TOGETHER

MUHAMMAD YUSUF REPORTS
ON AN ART GALLERY,
PRESENT AT ART DUBAI,
WHOSE MISSION IS TO
BRING THE EAST AND
WEST TOGETHER



Zheng Lu, Water in Dripping



Miya Ando's abstract painting

Hiroshi Senju's artwork



Hiroshi Senju



Zheng Lu



Miya Ando



Sundaram Tagore

Sundaram Tagore Gallery, with two locations in New York and branches in Singapore and Hong Kong, brought to Art Dubai (Mar. 15 - 18) a curated exhibition of work by three Asian artists, who embrace traditional visual tropes and techniques rooted in their cultures to create works with strikingly modernist sensibilities. The presentation focused on work by internationally acclaimed artists Hiroshi Senju (Japan), Zheng Lu (China) and Miya Ando (Japan).

Japanese-born painter Senju is noted worldwide for his sublime waterfall and cliff images, which are often monumental in scale. Evoking a deep sense of calm, his waterfalls, which he creates with incredible delicacy by pouring paint onto mulberry paper on board, conjure not only the appearance of rushing water, but its sound, smell and feel.

New York-based artist Ando combines the traditional techniques of Japanese sword-making with modern industrial technology, skillfully transforming sheets of metal into ephemeral, abstract paintings suffused with colour.

The gravity-defying sculptural works of Lu are deeply influenced by his study of traditional Chinese calligraphy. He inscribes the surface of his metal sculptures with thousands of Chinese characters derived from texts and poems of historical significance.

"The diversity of content, technique and medium is a testament to the gallery's long-standing mission, which is to spark cross-cultural dialogue", said Sundaram Tagore, Founder and Chairman, Sundaram Tagore Gallery. He adds more to his views below

*** WAS IT AN UNCONSCIOUS SELECTION OR WAS IT BY DESIGN YOU CHOSE WATER AS ONE OF THE THEMES TO PRESENT AT ART DUBAI? (WATER IS A PRECIOUS AND VALUED COMMODITY HERE).**

Yes, we chose water by design. We were presenting a curated show, based on the theme of water, a source of life and a topic that is critically important today — especially as we are seeing the devastating impact of climate change in our lifetimes. This is a topic that affects everyone on the planet, but we thought it might particularly resonate in the Middle East.

*** WHY WERE NO MIDDLE EASTERN ARTISTS BROUGHT? (WE ARE SURE YOU HAVE AN ENVIABLE PORTFOLIO OF MIDDLE EASTERN WORKS).**

Yes, we do represent quite a few Middle Eastern artists. In fact, we were one of the first contemporary galleries in Asia and the West to mount major exhibitions featuring artists from the Middle East.

Right now, in both our New York galleries, we have work by Iraqi-born artist Hassan Massoudy, a renowned painter and classically trained calligrapher, on view. He creates vibrant, visually striking works using traditional Arabic script and poetic and literary passages. He brings a very traditional practice into a contemporary context.

However, this art fair wanted us to bring a selection of work from artists not commonly seen here. There are of course many high-quality Middle Eastern galleries showcasing fantastic works of Middle Eastern artists here. So, the organisers of the fair suggested we bring artists that would be new to the Dubai audience and we were happy to oblige.

*** HOW DID SUNDARAM TAGORE DISCOVER SENJU, LU AND ANDO? TELL US THE STORY.**

The first time I saw Hiroshi Senju's work was at the Venice Biennale in 1995, where he was the first Asian artist to receive an Honorable Mention Award. It was a spectacular presentation with a cascading, large-scale waterfall installation and it had a profound impact on me.

I could smell, taste and feel the rushing water on the paper canvas. I was really moved by his obvious veneration of nature, which is so distinctly Japanese, but also struck by how modern his work was. Shortly after, a mutual

friend introduced me to him and that's how we began to show his work.

When it comes to Zheng Lu, a friend who is a professor and author from the Sotheby's Institute guest curated for a huge show of contemporary Chinese art for us, and he included Zhen Lu. We mounted this show in New York a couple of years ago. All the artists were amazing, but we all mesmerised by the fluidity and grace of Zheng's metal sculptures.

They are fascinating spatially and technically. But he's also a very literary person, which resonated with me coming from a family of poets. His sculptures are made of thousands of Chinese characters, which he sources from poems. His work is really multilayered, which I find very interesting.

We've been working with Miya Ando for some time now. She was on the radar of the director of our New York gallery for some time, and she introduced Miya to me. I love Miya's fascination with the natural world and how she merges what seems very fragile and ephemeral with heavy-duty, industrial materials. There's an strength to what first appears to be very delicate work.

*** WHAT IDEAS DO THEY BRING TO THIS REGION?**

Hiroshi Senju's cascading waterfalls evoke not only the appearance of rushing water, but its sound, smell and feel; the artist describes it as the source of all life. Zheng Lu uses a calligraphic approach, transforming words into splashes of water in steel. His sculptures evoke the flow and fluidity and beauty of water.

Mia Ando offers water's reflection — in this reflection, we see ourselves. For each of these artists, water, and by extension, the natural world plays an important role, both philosophically and symbolically, within each of their cultures; but it also resonates in the immediate geo-political sense.

It's a topical subject right now, with issues relating to climate change. The future depends on water as a sacred resource — it's the key to peace and prosperity in the world. Artists are very, very good at reminding us, often in unexpected ways, of what really matters.

*** BRIEFLY, WHAT IMPRESSES YOU MOST ABOUT THEM?**

What impresses me is that each of these artists has a powerful aesthetic, coupled with a deep philosophy. All of these artists have great depth; each is also highly innovative and inventive in their approach. Perhaps because I'm Asian, perhaps because I've been a lifelong student of art history, I appreciate their passion for nature.

Nature worship is a theme that runs throughout various streams of traditional art from many Asian countries. When I see it expressed in a very contemporary way, I find it very exciting.

*** WHY DO YOU NOT HAVE A GALLERY IN INDIA?**

I love India, of course, it's my birthplace, but I can only spread myself so thin! I have two galleries in New York, one in Singapore and one in Hong Kong. My travel schedule is more than full. Also, right now, it's very difficult to operate in India because of the tax laws, but maybe in the future!

*** WHAT QUALITIES DOES AN ARTIST NEED HAVE TO MAKE THE CUT FOR SUNDARAM TAGORE?**

An artist has to fit within our mission of exploring cross-cultural dialogue. That's our reason for being. He or she must also be curious, innovate and inventive.

*** WHY DO YOU NOT OPEN SPACE HERE? IT WOULD NICELY BRIDGE THE WEST AND EAST LOCATION WISE, BESIDES BRINGING CLOSER MANY NATIONALITIES, BOTH FROM THE WEST AND EAST, WHO LIVE AND WORK HERE. (YOUR AIM IS TO BRING THE WEST AND EAST CLOSER ...)**

I was on the verge of opening a gallery in Dubai within a DIFC location years ago and then the recession hit and I was unable to move forward. But if the economy stabilises, well, you never know...