

Sunday Morning Post

A SOUTH CHINA MORNING POST PUBLICATION | VOLUME LXIV | NO. 6

January 6, 2008
postmagazine

24hours

Sundaram Tagore

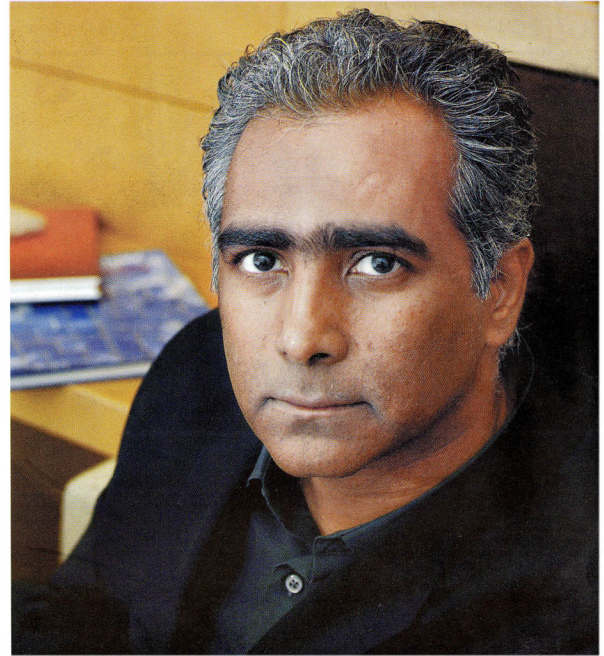
Descended from a long line of artists and writers, the New York-based gallery owner tells Kevin Kwong why the eyes, like the mind, need to be exercised daily.

“Because I travel a lot, when I am in New York I wake up fairly early, around 6am. I like to reflect and meditate. That is very important to calm myself and create equilibrium in life.

Then I pick up the newspapers for my daily diet of titles such as *The New York Times* and *The Independent*. I read them from cover to cover. It relaxes me and prepares me for the day. I make a particular blend of very strong coffee ... it's really important, especially in this day and age when things happen so quickly.

I leave home between 9.30am and 10.30am. It takes me about an hour to get to work, which is in [the gallery district of] Chelsea. I walk to work; it's the only form of exercise I get. We have a gym in the building but it's boring and tedious.

On arrival I look at all my e-mails and letters. That is followed by a staff meeting when we brainstorm plans for the next two or three months. We do a lot of cultural activities, more than some non-profit making organisations, and we fund them completely. The recent book by Robyn Meredith, *The Elephant and the Dragon*, was launched in the gallery. There was a Mongolian dance troupe passing through New York and they didn't have a place to perform so we invited them to do a show in the gallery. We also have lectures about philosophy, art, collecting and films, and we have movie screenings. Every week there's something going on.



Some time ago we did a charity event to raise money for orphanages in Kathmandu, Nepal. We have a huge mailing list, more than 30,000 people worldwide, so you can imagine how much work is involved in that.

Originally we wanted to create a non-profit cultural organisation, but then you have to go out and raise money every day. In the end I [decided] we'd have art we are interested in, sell those art works and plough the profits back into the system. So now we have a non-profit branch, called Tagore Foundation International, which is for intercultural dialogue and for the education of disadvantaged children.

Lunches are always work lunches with the people visiting us – cultural figures and writers. We engage a lot of writers from across the world for our books and publications. Invariably, there will be a museum curator coming in because we are having a retrospective on one of the artists in a museum. Our clients include curators, collectors and corporate clients.

I give lectures in different museums. I have to prepare for that: get the slides ready for the presentation. Because I am Indian, I'm good at lecturing on Indian art. My interest is intercultural but I'm invariably asked to talk about Indian modernism, for instance.

I left India at the end of 1979. I went first to the US ...

then I spent a lot of time [studying] in Vancouver, Canada, then I was in Ohio, Los Angeles and New York. Then I was in Venice, Italy, then England. I came back to New York to finish my dissertation; my topic was 'Indian artists' response to European modernism 1940-1980'. I was writing it up when I got a job with Pace Wildenstein [a private gallery in New York]. They sent me [to Hong Kong] largely to promote their art in Asia. That's why I used to come to Hong Kong, Taiwan and Tokyo all the time.

My father was an artist, poet and writer [Tagore comes from 14 generations of artists and authors and is the great-grandson of Nobel Prize laureate Rabindranath Tagore], my mother was a singer and a writer ... there is a long tradition of artists in the family. It's a strange thing: we came from a family of writers so we collected inkwells. We have about 2,000 inkwells from around the world. Then my father said, 'I am getting old and I like canes' ... so he collected canes from remote places, from Patagonia, for instance. He had a strange collection ... he was building a museum that never came to fruition because he died. My mother died in 1979 then immediately after that my father passed away. That's when I left for the west.

I've been based in the US ever since. But I've been ... lucky to travel to 80 to 90 countries. I am very comfortable with people, regardless of where they're from. It's more about finding a kindred spirit.

Late in the afternoon I may take some time off to go to the latest exhibitions at galleries and museums. That is the best part about living in New York, but it is also my job so I take it very seriously. The eye is a muscle: you have to expose it to beautiful and powerful things to make it stronger. It's like music: if you listen to bad music, you get used to it. Bad wine – you wouldn't know the difference. Luckily, we are in a cultural hub. There are 326 galleries in Chelsea and it takes time to look at all these places. I have guests, curators and influential collectors visiting and they expect to be taken around, so in that respect it's exciting.

I feel lucky to be part of the art world. Within a range of two weeks I was in London, Berlin, Athens, Guatemala, Los Angeles, Hong Kong, India, London and back. I am travelling about 70 per cent of the time.

Last time I was in Hong Kong there was an [American abstract expressionist] Mark Rothko show. You are beginning to see some good art here. You have sophisticated works brought in by auction houses for previews. But you need to galvanise the right kind of people – people not just with money ... very few people have money *and* culture. When you have money and culture then you are truly an aristocrat. That is the kind of people you need. Hong Kong probably has many of them ... if the right kind of people are brought together they can build cultural organisations that become institutions.

In the evening, there will be a dance performance or a film presentation or lecture at the gallery. If an event is not taking place then we will go to another opening at a gallery or museum.

After that we'll meet up with friends or visitors and take them to dinner – invariably a new restaurant has opened and you want to try it. We have dinner fairly late,

between 9pm and 10pm. Then we might go to SoHo to listen to music or to a theatre performance.

I get home after midnight almost every day. No matter how late it is, though, I like to read, even if it's only for an hour. One of my biggest regrets about my busy schedule is that I don't get to read as much as I'd like. ”