

the magazine for kee players
issue number thirty three
May 2008

KEE



THE ESSENCE OF LIFE



Sohan Qadri Dan, II (2007)



Words and Portrait: Lakshmi Harlela
Images: Courtesy of Sundaram Tagore Gallery

In 2000, the first Sundaram Tagore Gallery was established in New York, "devoted to examining the exchange of ideas between Western and non-Western cultures." In a world where communication is instant and cultures are colliding and melding as never before, the gallery's goal was and continues to be "to provide venues for art that transcend boundaries of all sorts." The gallery opened its third location in Hong Kong this month, and with Asian art continually on the rise, Tagore explains how his passion for art has enabled him to dissolve differences in cultures and bring them together in a unique and creative way, denoting that art can transcend all culture and social standings.



Morill Wagner, Weed (2006)

“I

have three degrees in art history,” states gallery owner/curator Sundaram Tagore.

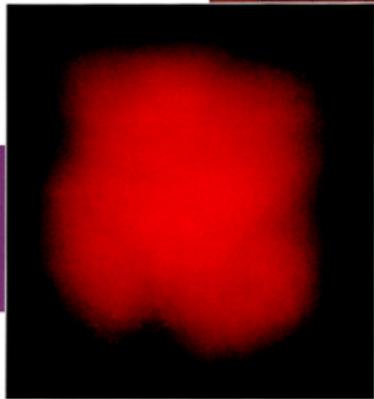
But it's not about having qualifications that matters. Art to Tagore is an integral part of the very essence of life. His family was involved in the Indian art movement, and he comes from a lineage of 14 generations of artists, poets and writers. “My father was the greatest influence in my artistic endeavours, and he was involved in the formation of the Modern Indian Art Movement,” says Tagore sitting almost regally in the surroundings of his newly opened gallery on Hollywood Road, the third to open following successful ventures in New York and Beverly Hills.

In the past, Indian art movements manifested through the influences of numerous rulers and their individual preferred art styles, and included Mughal and Rajput forms. However, the Modern Indian Art Movement was spawned by ‘Revivalists’ who conjured up visions of India's past by depicting legends and folk tales in works of art. These were based on Hinduism and Buddhism and for the most part, the paintings depicted the ancient tales of Kalidasa, Ramayana and Mahabharata. Amongst the Revivalists was Abanindranath Tagore, who was one of the first artists known to modernise Mughal and Rajput traditions. This success led to a popularity surge in Indian styles of art within British art institutions, and one could even go as far as to say that Tagore revived the lost spirit of India.

In 1942, the group spawned its first ever female artist, Amrita Sher-Gil, a major step in terms of equality for Indian society at the time. Sher-Gil started painting at the age of five and began her formal training at eight. It was Sher-Gil who acted as a bridge between Western and Indian art forms, as she travelled to Europe and returned to India at the end of 1934 as a successful painter. In 1933, the group was dissolved, but not without making some kind of statement; that of revival. And Sundaram Tagore continues this legacy. “My father named me after an art magazine that he published... Sundaram.”

A great collector of many different styles of art, Tagore is an appreciator of both Western and Asian pieces. “I collect Indian art and some of my favourite pieces include those of Russian artists, the art that I love is that which deals with impulses.” Tagore goes on to explain that he believes modern artists such as Picasso actually derived their inspiration from the Indian Bhagwal movement. “He was the first to have the guts to explore what other cultures had to offer,” he says. “Many people of Picasso's time thought that these works were savage like.”

Indian aesthetics evolved based on spiritual and philosophical symbolism. All forms of art, whether dance, painting or poetry, were based on spirituality and this formed the core of the Modern Indian aesthetics. These impulses and philosophical values were directly reflected in many Indian artists' works, and Tagore explains that some of these artists



Navar Bhavsar, Atal II (2006)



Art by: Nigel / 2000

were oppressed. "The artists themselves did not even sign their paintings, so they were completely anonymous."

Defining art is a topic of great discussion as it is extremely subjective. So when asked what he looks for in a painting, Tagore merely states, "I look for shapes and colours. Is that not what a piece of art is all about?" Giving an example of a portrait, Tagore continues, "A portrait can have round, oval or square shapes, ultimately it is not necessarily the person but an abstraction of what the artist sees. Each artist is unique, as he extends his own vision of the universe." Also carrying a background as a curator, Tagore claims that his eye is different from that of a gallery owner's eye. "I also studied architecture, so I see things from another perspective."

So why Hong Kong as the location for his third gallery?

Tagore states that it was primarily the efficiency of the city that attracted him. "It appeals to me because of the attitude the people have towards their work, it's different from the West." Tagore has been in and out of Hong Kong for the last 20 years, and with both hands and family here, he feels completely at home. One of his first visits was when he worked in the Asian Division for the Popoff/Widemann gallery in New York and he was sent out to look at expansion possibilities. "But then they had second thoughts, so I had to pack up and go back."

With optimistic plans for the future, Tagore plans to open a gallery in Dubai next, and then London. His favourite cities in the world include New York, Italy and London. New York in particular because of its diversity of art and related knowledge. "Art is ingrained in all its institutions including the Metropolitan Museum and others like the Museum for Himalayan Art, can you believe that there is a whole museum dedicated to Himalayan Art in New York?" In Asia, one of Tagore's favourite countries is Cambodia because "the people there live and breathe art, it is ingrained into their very culture through temples, mosques and churches, which are utilised not monumentally."

Tagore is also involved in a Not For Profit foundation based in East Hampton, which aims to provide scholarships to girls with disadvantages regarding higher education. So far he has sponsored one girl's education and he plans to keep this going. A major proponent of education, especially that related to art, Tagore claims that "children that are exposed to art from a young age are proven to have a higher intelligence level, and they are able to develop more imagination." Tagore plans to expose more local children to the art in an attempt to add to the cultural patina of Hong Kong.

This is the essence of Tagore's work and through his galleries he has been able to accomplish far more than he originally sought to. "Through art, many people can find themselves and their place in the world," states the philosophical gallery owner. And it seems that Sundaram Tagore intends to do whatever he can to help that process.

Nathan Sims, Joseph, PhD 2000