

## INTERVIEW WITH MR SUNDARAM TAGORE, FOUNDER OF SUNDARAM TAGORE GALLERY



*Established in 2000, Sundaram Tagore Gallery is devoted to examining the exchange of ideas between Western and non-Western cultures. With a focus on developing exhibitions and hosting non-profit events that encourage inter-disciplinary dialogue and cross-cultural exchange, Sundaram Tagore Gallery currently has four spaces between New York, Hong Kong and Singapore.*

*On the occasion before 'Anthropos' New York opens to the public, The Artling catches up with the busy gallerist.*

**1) What inspired you to set up the gallery in 2000? What is the gallery's mission today and has it changed since its inception?**

We were the first gallery to deal with issues of globalization and that has become our trademark. I've always been interested in understanding how different cultures and influence one another—and I recognized a gap when it came to showing artists who were interested in the same thing.

We have built a name for ourselves in the sphere of intercultural dialogue and we are very mission-driven. Our mission centers on the exchange of ideas between Western and non-Western cultures. This reflects the globalized cultural space that we occupy today.

This mission was a natural outgrowth of my living in the West but coming from the East, and multiculturalism was my reality. I wanted to bring together a global community of artists, with the basis of intercultural exchange. I felt and still feel there's tremendous energy at points of intersection.

Operations have grown and since then—we have opened galleries in Hong Kong, Singapore and a second space in New York City on Madison Avenue. Our business and alliances have also grown and increasingly we are promoting artists from all corners of the globe.

***2) What guides you in your selection of type of artists or exhibitions to show? Do you choose different artists for each city?***

I select artists based on the idea of intercultural dialogue. Any artist exploring a culture other than his or her own is on our radar. Most of the time I'm introduced to artists through a curator or have seen their artworks in a biennale or museum show. I'm also constantly making studio visits around the world.

My knowledge of art history and the fact that I've worked in the market for more than two decades means that I have come to trust my eye.

We don't choose different artists for different cities; we show the same roster of artists in all our galleries.



*Photo Credit : Sundaram Tagore Gallery*

[Right] Sundaram Tagore Gallery Singapore, 'Sebastião Salgado', 2014

[Left] Sundaram Tagore Gallery Hong Kong, 'Eye to Ear: Nathan Slate Joseph and Taylor Kuffner', 2013

***3) With more than a decade of experience running an art gallery across multiple cities, what major shifts or changes have you seen in the art market?***

I have noticed a huge change in the Singapore art market. More people are talking about art, which is very positive and exciting. In addition more articles are being written about art and more television programmes and media seem to be covering art-related news.

We're seeing a new audience is being created and obviously this translates to new collectors who are looking at the local market and the global scene. These collectors have started collecting international art and this is a very positive sign for Singapore since it's normally regarded as a regional hub for Southeast Asian art. Now it's slowly becoming a global art destination.

In Hong Kong, many international galleries, including some of the world's biggest galleries, have arrived since we opened our doors. The struggle is keeping the focus on the artistic side of the story rather than the financial side

It's a real negative that the "art world" is now being referred to as an "art market." It's an over-expanded market but with the rapid opening up of Hong Kong (and thus Mainland China), we see it being super-expanded.

We have to keep reminding ourselves that art should always be at the forefront of our endeavors and discussions. Where it comes from will become steadily less important. No one talks about science in terms of Russian science, Chinese science or American science, for example. Art is about humanism and universality, particularly in this day and age when globalization has flattened the world.

Art has been with us since the dawn of civilization and it will continue to grow regardless of economic upswings or downswings. Singapore has the capacity to absorb art from everywhere as long as the focus is on the art and not on the money.

***4) Having spent a significant amount of time in Hong Kong and Singapore, what are your views on the Asian art market? How do these two cities compare to say NY or LA?***

Asia is in "build" mode, there's no question about it. But the West is still leading from a high point, having built its artistic infrastructure generations ago. Numbers are up in Asia, and constantly growing, but the infrastructure—museums, curators, art publications, education—also has to be prioritized.

Hong Kong's great reliance on Mainland China has enabled its position as one of the world's important art centers. If I am not wrong, Hong Kong has become the second or third largest art market in the world. Singapore, on the other hand, is developing and burgeoning and its thrust is more toward Southeast Asia and beyond. I see a compliment between the two markets as opposed to a conflict. For example, in the United States the West Coast and the East Coast are centers for art and they each have a different artistic thrust. I see the relationship between Singapore and Hong Kong in a similar vein. There is tremendous potential for both.

Singapore's art scene is a postmodern experiment in that the government has helped to jumpstart it. And when the government moves, it moves fast. This is a positive because there's been a push for international artistic presence and curatorial know-how. Having art galleries gathering together in a central hub such as Gillman Barracks creates a rich resource.

Singapore is establishing its identity as an art center and as different elements such as galleries, art fairs, auction houses and artistic institutions come together, more people will begin to realize the value of art and how it can enhance their lives.

**5) For this exhibition Anthropos New York, did you play a role with the selection of artists? How did this collaboration come about?**

Anthropos New York was organized by an independent curator, Loredana Pazzini-Paracciani, who I've worked with in the past. She was responsible for choosing the artists.

From time to time, we invite outside specialists to mount significant shows for us. It's part of our method of creating dialogue.

**6) Is this the first time the gallery is showing Asian artists in NY? And if so, what do you hope audiences will take away from this show?**

We have been holding shows by Asian artists in New York since we opened our doors fifteen years ago. We've always had Asian artists on our roster, including Hiroshi Senju, who is from Japan, Sohan Qadri from India, and Hosook Kang and Kim Joon from Korea. We held a large, guest-curated show of Thai art in the New York gallery in 2013.

Our audiences are well acquainted with contemporary Asian art and they're always very receptive and interested.

**7) Lastly, do you have plans to further expand your gallery? Any significant projects on the horizon?**

We're in the midst of organizing a very exciting show during the upcoming Venice Biennale at the historic Museo di Palazzo Grimani. We're planning to mount an historic exhibition of global art focusing on intercultural dialogue.

The museum wanted to hold an especially significant show during this particular Biennale since Italy is also hosting the World Expo in Milan, from May 1 to October 31, 2015. Hundreds of thousands of visitors are expected in Italy for these events. This exhibition will include works by cutting-edge emerging artists and major international artists.

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**Rapid Fire Quiz!**

***What is your favourite place to see art?***

No matter what city I'm in, I always save a few hours to visit museums. Since the start of the summer I've been to the new Aspen Art Museum, the Louvre, the Musée d'Orsay, the Peggy Guggenheim in Venice, the Whitney, the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Brussels.

My all-time favorite spot: standing in front of Velazquez in the Prado.

***Do you have a museum or gallery-going routine?***

I squeeze visits into every trip, whenever I have more than half an hour to spare!

***What's your favourite post-gallery watering hole or restaurant?***

In Singapore, I head to Raffles Hotel. I love the old-world atmosphere, especially the Tiffin Room.

In Hong Kong, my all-time favorite destination is the Foreign Correspondent's Club. I've been a member for years and there's no better bar in the world.

And in New York, I beeline to the HotelAmericano on West 27th Street in Chelsea. It's across from my gallery. It was designed by Mexican architect Enrique Norten; I love his work.

*Do you collect anything?*

Yes, I'm a collector. I collect the work of the artists and photographers I show.

***What's the last artwork you purchased?***

A huge Annie Leibovitz photograph of Philip Johnson in his Glass House. It brings together my two favorite things: great artistry and great architecture.

***What work of art do you wish you owned?***

I wouldn't mind having a Jackson Pollock.

***What would you do to get it?***

We'll I'd have to earn a lot more money. Maybe I could come up with a great idea for an internet start up.

***What's your art world peeve?***

The superficiality.

***What international art destination do you most want to visit?***

I want to go to the São Paulo Biennale.

***What under-appreciated artist, gallery, or work do you think people should know about?***

Golnaz Fathi, an Iranian artist who divides her time between Tehran and Paris. She's creates beautiful, minimalist works using traditional calligraphic forms.

***What is the last great book you read?***

Murakami's *1Q84*.

*Interviewed by Ning Chong.*