

Inward Investors

HK a new palette for US gallery (02/06/2008)

When it came to choosing where to open his first overseas gallery, Sundaram Tagore, operator of the eponymous US-based gallery, knew it had to be Hong Kong. His experience over the years travelling to the city, which he used as his Asia business base, convinced him that it was the ideal place for his new venture.

"Hong Kong is a world city and is one of the easiest places to do business," Mr Tagore said. "Even as an outsider, I have a sense of what Hong Kong is like."

He said the same could not be said about other potential sites, including Shanghai. "I love Shanghai, if not for the language barrier." Dubai, where officials there tried to entice him with a 5,500 square foot place in a prime spot at half the going rent, was not good enough either.

"I decided that Hong Kong would be most efficient to do business because of its support structure. He said the city's transport infrastructure, logistics and extensive experience in handling art made it the best choice.

Then there's also Hong Kong's reputation as the place where East meets West, which fits in perfectly with the gallery's mission: to promote and celebrate cultural differences. Ten artists from around the world are featured in the gallery's debut showing, with more than 30 works valued at between US\$50,000 and US\$380,000. But Mr Tagore, the great grandson of Rabindranath Tagore, the first Asian to win the Nobel Prize for Literature, is quick to point out that his galleries are not merely art shops. He said they are cultural spaces in which artists come together and share their experiences.

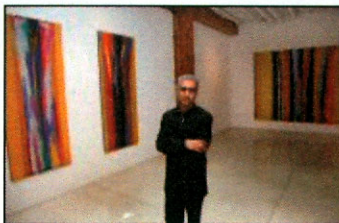
Combining visual arts

His galleries in New York and Los Angeles combine visual arts with other types of expression, including poetry reading, dance performances, music and film. He has similar plans for his new outlet in Hong Kong. The gallery, which opened last month, is not planning to exhibit Chinese mainland art, which is currently in high demand. Instead, Mr Tagore said he wants to help further develop the local art scene in Hong Kong by promoting local artists abroad.

The plan is to feature a group of promising but little-known Hong Kong artists at cultural exhibitions in New York and Beverly Hills. "The Hong Kong art scene right now is feeling insecure because of all the international focus now on mainland Chinese artists," Mr Tagore said. But that, in turn, is sparking some promising artists to produce "interesting things," which he wants to showcase internationally.

Another plan is to introduce artists from the Chinese diaspora. The gallery owner said that members of this community, from North and South America, Europe and Asia, all have unique perspectives to share because their work is affected by experiences outside their culture. He said there is a vacuum in the art scene focusing on this group. Those plans fit in with the gallery's mission of giving voice to "the voiceless," to those who would otherwise not be familiar to mainstream society.

The renowned gallery's decision to open its first overseas branch in Hong Kong comes at a time when the Hong Kong SAR Government is positioning the city as a cultural centre as well as a business capital. Mr Tagore said he's upbeat about where the city is headed and hopes to contribute to its development. "There's a momentum building in Hong Kong's art scene," he said. "I would not have invested here if I didn't believe in it."



Sundaram Tagore, pictured in his New York gallery, believes in the Hong Kong arts scene