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CURATOR SUNDARAM TAGORE TELLS **MARIEL RITTENHOUSE** HOW HE IS TRANSPLANTING HIS 'GLOBAL COMMUNITY OF ARTISTS' TO HOLLYWOOD ROAD. ARTWORK SOLD SEPARATELY

# Art, Not Commerce

"I THINK MOST people who work in the art world are dysfunctional in the corporate world," declares Sundaram Tagore, executive director of three eponymous galleries in New York, Beverly Hills and soon Hong Kong. "Our lifestyle is such that we get to live partly in Hong Kong, partly in New York, and in some other part of the world. And we're always having these really long philosophical discussions about different aspects of life and we get paid for

it. And that, to me, is very interesting."

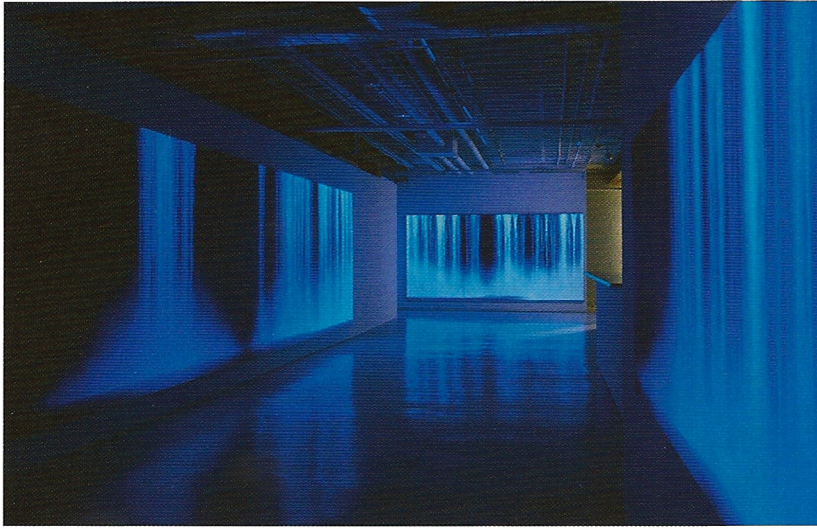
These "philosophical discussions" are fundamental to Tagore's vision for his galleries, or "cultural spaces" as he prefers to call them. Unlike galleries that buy and sell art solely as a monetary transaction, Tagore has a mission to create a global community of artists and foster a dialogue between Western and non-Western cultures.

New York-based Tagore is of Indian descent, but it's

Clockwise from above: Sundaram Tagore; Lee Waisler's *Ethel Rosenberg*, 2003; guests at the Beverly Hills gallery





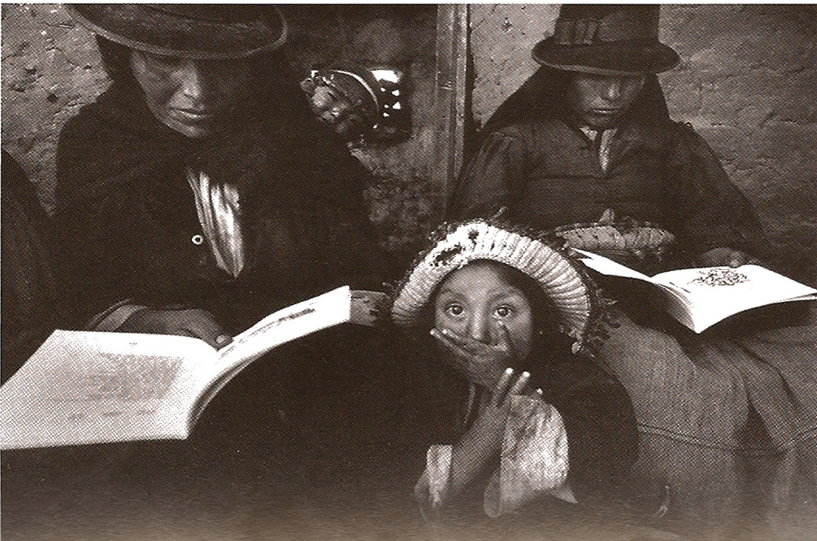


Above: Hiroshi Senju's *Day Falls/Night Falls X*, 2007. Below: Ken Heyman's *Peruvian Adult, Frightened Child*, 1965

creativity that flows through his veins. A descendant of Nobel Prize-winning poet Rabindranath Tagore, Sundaram's father was an artist, poet and writer, his mother a singer and writer. For Sundaram, then, a career in any realm other than the arts wasn't even discussed. While writing his PhD dissertation on "Indian Artists' Response to European Modernism," Tagore got his first big break. Acclaimed New York gallery PaceWildenstein came knocking "and the whole equation changed."

It was under PaceWildenstein's wing that Tagore got to know Hong Kong, when the gallery asked him to promote its art in Asia. "Hong Kong became my hub, and Taiwan and Tokyo," he recalls. "I became very familiar with the city and I befriended a lot of people. As you say in Chinese, 'A journey of a thousand miles begins with a first step,' and the first step was my introduction to Hong Kong through Pace, in a working capacity."

After his tenure at PaceWildenstein, Tagore worked as a consultant at several prestigious international institutions, including the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice, New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and Museum of Modern Art, and the National Gallery of Modern Art in New Delhi. Frustrated that "there wasn't a great deal of interest in Asia" in the Western art world during the



1990s, and tired of looking for another job as soon as each exhibition was over, "I decided to open my space." Which he did, in 2000, in Manhattan's Soho. In 2006, Tagore relocated the gallery to Chelsea, New York City's art epicentre.

After opening a second Sundaram Tagore Gallery in the US, in Beverly Hills, Tagore has deemed it time to open a third outlet, in Hong Kong – a city where "people from different parts of the world could easily settle and be comfortable, because that's the kind of art that we're gathering." The space at 57-59 Hollywood Road was formerly "an old Chinese tea store," Tagore says. "It's a good corner location."

Tagore isn't worried about how to stand out in the thick of Hong Kong's thorniest art hub. "We're an art space," he explains. "We're not just a shop that sells art. It's a cultural space and, well, of course we sell art, but we sell art and we take the resources and plough them back into the system to promote other areas of art like music, dance, theatre, film and lectures – there's continuously something going on."

As of this writing, Tagore was still fleshing out details of the schedule of Hong Kong events, including an opening pencilled in for May 9. "We're developing who's going to be there for the opening," he says. "All of the Hong Kong elite will be invited, in the context of both the Chinese and expat communities." As for exhibitions, "We will curate a show with this dialogue base: five Western artists and five Asian artists creating a dialogue – a visual dialogue.

"We only show certain kinds of artwork and it's the only gallery devoted to this idea of a global community of artists," Tagore says by way of elaboration. "All our artists have a certain philosophical and intellectual quest and, when they fit that idea, then they can come from any culture."

One of the gallery's most notable exhibitors is Japanese artist Hiroshi Senju, who fuses modernity with ancient Japanese painting techniques and was the first Asian artist to receive an individual fine arts award at the Venice Biennale, for his renowned *Waterfall* paintings in 1995.

Another Tagore visionary, Sohan Qadri, is a modern tantric painter who has spent long periods in remote Himalayan temples meditating and practicing tantric yoga to better understand himself. His monochrome surfaces with repetitive structural effects on paper convey a certain rhythm – in colour.

Pulitzer Prize-nominated photographer Ken Heyman, whose "Humanity" exhibition will travel to the new Hong Kong gallery, is considered one of the most influential photographers working today and has shot in more than 60 countries. "Humanity" represents Heyman's retrospective: it opens with birth – an honest, provocative, natural birth – and closes with John F Kennedy's funeral.

"We're not looking for artists just because they come from Africa or from Nepal or from Europe," Tagore says. "They have to fulfil the aesthetic, intellectual and philosophical requirements we have, which are based on the idea of spirituality and beauty, some enduring quality that we're looking for. 'What does that mean?' – that's what we're trying to answer through the curatorial process." ■