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A Moment with ... Art Gallerist Sundaram Tagore

Art gallerist and award-winning director Tagore on the local art scene



sundaram tagore - sundaram tagore gallery

Singapore's arts scene is about to enjoy a major boost within the next few months. Already, 2012 is shaping up to be quite a promising year for the arts, with arguably the biggest and most popular art fair Art Stage Singapore kick-starting the year with a slew of big-name exhibitors from 18 countries showcasing everything ranging from performances, interactive projects and spectacular large-scale installations. And one of them is here to stay for good.

Meet Sundaram Tagore -- New York-based gallerist, art historian and now award-winning director. A descendent of influential Indian poet and the first non-Westerner recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature Rabindranath Tagore, Tagore's carved out an astonishing career for himself in the arts world, opening his very first globalisation-focused eponymous art gallery in New York City in 1999, before expanding to Beverly Hills, then Hong Kong in 2007. His mission? To promote East-West dialogue through curated works, film, poetry, talks and much more through his roster of artists from all around the world.

He's also a regular participant in major art fairs around the world, and recently premiered his documentary "The Poetics of Color: Natvar Bhavsar An Artist's Journey" on the life and work of noted Indian painter Natvar Bhavsar.



"It's useless to emulate another Western art fair," he says of Art Stage Singapore. He is in town for the art fair, where his gallery will showcase the works of numerous important artists, as well as a special focus on works of world renowned photographers like Annie Leibovitz, Robert Polidori and Edward Burtynsky. "When you focus it on Asia, even the Western art collectors are interested -- Art Stage has that freshness."

The globe-trotting art gallerist, who's lived in a dozen cities across the world, will next be relocating to Singapore from Hong Kong in preparation for the opening of his new art gallery sometime in April. He's reluctant to reveal anything more, and will only say that they're still "fine-tuning the details".

So why was Hong Kong first, and not Singapore, we ask half-jokingly. After all, both cities are extremely cosmopolitan, with comparable purchasing power and standards of living.

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It was actually the Hong Kong government [Invest Hong Kong] who came to me and said 'we'll do everything for you to come and locate your gallery here'," he explains. "I had a very welcoming client base in Hong Kong from the participation in the art fairs there, and we became the first international gallery to locate in Hong Kong in 2007."



But 2012 does seem like the right time for Tagore to move his focus to the Singapore market, especially following the massive investment into infrastructure such as the ArtScience Museum and Marina Bay Sands Theatre by the government, and a growing group international collectors with an eye for art and serious cash to burn. Tagore himself is extremely optimistic about Singapore's future potential.

"I see the future here. People are very welcoming and earnest, and, the fact that it's a blank slate as opposed to already conditioned, you can really engage people in a cultural discourse," he enthuses.

"Based on the current planning -- and if they're executed and managed properly -- Singapore would become an absolute major artistic hub."

LifestyleAsia: Why do you think Hong Kong managed to pull ahead so fast of Singapore in terms of growing as a regional arts hub?

Sundaram Tagore (ST): Hong Kong has a huge market in China backing it up, and mainland Chinese collectors use Hong Kong as a base, which gives it an automatic boost. As a result, they get interest from Japan, Indonesia, Taiwan and [fine art auctioneers] Christie's and Sotheby's starting moving in. What's important about Singapore how however, is that Singapore is a hub between India, China and Indonesian (three emerging markets) and they can tap into the same resources.

LSA: What are your thoughts on the local arts scene in Singapore, and its potential as an artistic hub?

ST: There's a tremendous amount of potential. Museums are being built, art districts are created, more galleries are coming in, Art Stage has happened… all these combined together becomes a force. Whether or not there's longevity, it's hard to tell right now. But if they all have longevity, clients will come. So far, the signs have been very positive.

LSA: So do you think we would ever catch up with Hong Kong?

ST: You don't want to be like Hong Kong. I hear people saying 'we're just like New York' all the time -- what does that even mean?

Then why not just go to New York? Singapore needs to create its own identity. You want to be as big as Hong Kong however -- they have made the right decision to focus on Asia, and have thrived because of its openness to culture.



LSA: There seems to be almost a lack of national identity in the local art scene -- there's a lot of support for foreign and Western art, but at the heart of it, we don't believe in our own homegrown talent.

ST: It's hard to have both, unfortunately. Singapore has grown to become a cosmopolitan city because of the global thinking, and it's tough to want to go back to your roots suddenly. Singapore's plus is that its culture is partially determined by a planning committee -- and it's worked! You've got to go with that, and that's your identity, no matter how fragmented it seems. A lot of countries bemoan that they're so rooted in their culture that they can't get out of it, and not being able to move forward.

LSA: What pointers do you have for budding art investors?

ST: Be very cautious about that. Art is not property, not stocks and bonds. Art doesn't work in a linear way. For example, a Picasso is not worth the same in a flea market, art gallery or even major art centre or museum. Nothing has changed, but the knowledge of the people, and history of the art gallery holding on to the piece has changed. Who you buy it from, who gives you the advice, how much knowledge they have, and how much respect they have in the global artistic community becomes part of the art work, and that has command.

It's a very nebulous world -- anyone can open an art gallery, that's why you need to read up. When you buy a piece of art out of love, and after doing extensive research, generally it'd be a good investment that will go up in value. For example, the Portrait of Dr. Gachet by Vincent van Gogh's post-war value was worth millions, from its original price of four to five thousand dollars. The trajectory of the value is astonishing if the right type of people is associated with a particular art piece.

Art Stage Singapore is open to the public from 12 to 15 January 2012 at Basement 2 of Marina Bay Sands at Exhibition Halls D, E and F. Tickets are available for sale at www.marinabaysands.com/Singapore-Entertainment/Shows/Art-Stage-Singapore-2012 . Please visit the official website at [www . artstagesingapore . com](http://www.artstagesingapore.com) for more information.