

# Dealer's Notebook: Q&A With Sundaram Tagore

BY SONIA KOLESNIKOV-JESSOP | JUNE 18, 2015



Sundaram Tagore

(Courtesy of Sundaram Tagore Gallery)

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Sundaram Tagore Gallery  
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Hiroshi Senju

Jane Lee

Annie Leibovitz

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**Name:** Sundaram Tagore

**Hails from:** Calcutta, India

**Presides over:** Sundaram Tagore in New York  
(two galleries), Hong Kong, and Singapore

**Artists represented:** [Hiroshi Senju](#), [Annie Leibovitz](#),  
[Donald Sultan](#), [Jane Lee](#), [Golnaz Fathi](#), [Susan Weil](#).

### **When did you decide to start a gallery?**

I opened my first gallery in SoHo in New York City in 2000. I had studied art history both as an undergraduate and graduate student in the United States, and then went to England to do D.Phil. research in art history at the University of Oxford. My dissertation was on Indian artists' response to European Modernism, from the 1940s to the 1980s. I envisioned that I would be an academic or a curator working in a museum, specializing in modern Western and Asian art. However, in 1993, before I had completed my dissertation research, I was offered a job with Pace Wildenstein Gallery in New York City. At that time, Pace Wildenstein was the largest gallery in the world in terms of revenues and assets. It was absolutely the pinnacle in the art world and it was an incredibly exciting opportunity. Pace hired me to develop clients in Asia, which in 1993 was a first. No gallery of real stature at that point was actively engaged with Asia. After traveling all over Asia, my ideas for my own business began to crystalize. In 1999 when I formed my company, I decided to focus on globalism. By then I had lived in many countries in Asia and Europe and in America. Everything about my education, my work, and my life revolved around East-West dialogue. In addition I could not figure out why in a city like New York—a truly global city—no one was focusing on the idea of intercultural dialogue.

### **Who was the first artist you chose to represent?**

In New York, there were lots of artists who had gained a lot of traction in the art world in the '60s and '70s, but hadn't sustained the interest in their work because of cultural shifts. By 2000, they had fallen through the cracks. I started focusing on these artists initially. They were not only serious and dedicated, but they had a mental rigorousness that younger artists did not yet possess. Every one of them had been earning a living as a full-time artist for years without a gallery — meaning they had clients and contacts. They had powerful resumes — with historic museum and gallery shows and work in important museum collections — but no one was paying any heed to them. I also started to show the work of established Asian artists who'd never had an outlet in New York. Their work just didn't fit into the European/American ethos that had prevailed since the 1950s. Showing non-Western art in 2000 was considered really unusual. People used to come in just to see what contemporary Indian art looked like.

### **How did you develop your program?**

I tapped into my academic interests and background, and turned the gallery into a cultural space in order to build audience for our artists and exhibitions. We held book readings and signings, musical events, film screenings, and lectures — about everything from the history of Indian cultural elites in Africa to a panel on globalism in the art world to the world financial crisis. We attracted world-famous authors, academics and filmmakers, since finding large public spaces for events in New York was nearly impossible. We also allowed dozens of nonprofits to use our space and sometimes we would host the events for them. We just made sure to align with nonprofits that shared our interest in globalism and dialogue. At one point, in the early days in New York when the gallery first opened, we were hosting about one event a week. Each one attended by a substantial audience. We turned the gallery into a cultural space, and in doing so we were able to grow our mailing list, cultivate new clients, and firmly establish the values of our brand.

### **What was the greatest challenge in the first years?**

I had come in contact with many of the most influential artists in the world through my earlier work. I was opening a gallery in one of the truly beautiful buildings in SoHo, on the ground level. So I saw success written all over my company and it gave me enough confidence to forge ahead; however, I didn't realize how quickly I would deplete my initial capital. I was in a prime, ground-floor location, spending top dollar for rent. Business-wise, I could not afford to show solely undiscovered artists whose works sold for only a few thousand dollars apiece. I also couldn't sell the star artists I had relationships with because they weren't free to work with me. I had to quickly come up with a strategy. I knew two things: One, that New York



was full of talent and two, that there were few places for artists from outside of the United States and Europe to show their work. My main task after opening was building demand for the works I was showing. There was absolutely no demand for these works. I had to create demand from the ground up.

### **What would you do differently today?**

I wouldn't do anything differently. Although today, I wouldn't be able to use the model I started with; the world has changed.

### **Do you still remember your first big triumph?**

I distinctly remember when I sold a major piece to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. I think that was in 2000, right after I'd opened. The artist is extremely innovative and inventive. Her name is Susan Weil. This sale was a great mental breakthrough for me.

### **Which criteria are important for you when deciding whether or not to represent an artist?**

The selection of artists is based on the idea of intercultural dialogue. Any artist exploring a culture other than his or her own is on our radar. But just because an artist relates to our gallery mission, doesn't necessarily mean they can be part of our organization. I am very selective. Most of the time I'm introduced to artists either through a curator or have seen the work in a biennale such as the Venice Biennale, or I hear about them on the museum circuit. I'm also constantly making studio visits around the world.

I'd been talking about globalization since the late 1990s. From the beginning we talked about world art and intercultural dialogue. We've been building on this idea for years.

### **How has the art market changed since you've entered the business?**

The art world that I entered has changed completely. It used to be small and mostly centered in the West, in New York. Now every city, whether it's a global or regional one, wants to be an art center. Therefore new art fairs, biennials and triennials as well as museums are constantly being created. As collectors travel extensively from art fair to art fair, the brick-and-mortar gallery is becoming either a vanity or obsolete. In the West, people don't come to gallery openings the way they used to. There used to be an art audience within the community, which included artists, critics, and collectors. This audience would attend exhibition openings. Today, you have to seduce people with celebrity artists, food, and drinks as well as other forms of entertainment. Only then will they come. The rise of art fairs has taken steam away from galleries and people want to be entertained while they learn something new. So, the art world has morphed into a different form of business from the one I was introduced to. The very fact that we call it the "art market" as opposed to the "art world" tells you everything you need to know about how much it's changed.

### **What does a good gallerist need to be able to do?**

A good gallerist needs to look for art with enduring value. Art with real intellectual underpinnings, rather than art that's hip and trendy. This is what will have relevance over time. What's popular today is not necessarily going to remain that way unless it has art historical value — meaning it breaks ground by positing new ideas or examining age-old ideas in new ways or actually making art in new ways. History has also shown us that what is of value is not necessarily popular in nature, so you have to project your mind's eye fifty years from now and try to discern whether the ideas the artist is grappling with will still be relevant. Why will a particular artwork still be around amongst the excessive amount of artistic production years

from now? Why will this art remain? A little bit of appreciation will go a long way and that comes with both a deep understanding of art history, marketing knowledge and sociological knowledge about how tastes evolve and change. Gallerists need to do their homework. They need to read, visit lots of galleries, fairs, museums, and artist studios. They must have art historical knowledge. This is a cultural profession.

**And what should a good gallerist never do?**

A good gallerist should always recognize that he or she is in the business of art. Art should be at the forefront. The business should be conforming to the requirements of the art and not the other way round. A good gallerist should be passionate about the artists he or she represents.

**What was the last piece of art that thoroughly impressed you and why?**

I was recently in Reykjavik, Iceland, and I was really impressed by the work of Erró that was on view at the Reykjavik Art Museum.

**Which era in art history would you like to time travel to if you could?**

I'd really like to visit the Moghul era when incredible art and architecture were being created. I would like to have a bird's-eye view of all the great artistic creations that were taking place—especially the ateliers where miniature paintings of great depth, value and richness were produced. Artists whose names we do not know produced all this art and architecture. Who were these people? These anonymous artists had such talent and they were able to freeze their dreams in stone and on paper.

**Which historical figure would you like to share a drink with and where?**

I would like to have a drink with the artist Edvard Munch in Oslo. When I was a student in England, I flew to Norway to see his work and stay at the Grand Hotel in Oslo simply because it was his regular haunt. He has produced some of the most evocative forms of the 20th century using Symbolist and Expressionist language that he internalized. I'd like to hear directly from him about the beliefs and vision that lead him to create *The Scream* and some of the most compelling forms of the 20th century.

**If you weren't a gallerist, you'd probably be a....**

A full-time filmmaker. I would still be in the art world, but using another medium to express what's of importance.

**Art is....**

Art is not a luxury. It is a necessity.