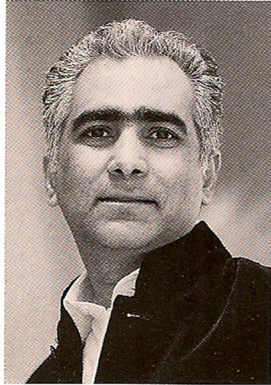


# InsideOut

ISSUE 52 May 2008 Complimentary

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Sundaram Tagore

## The Importance of Art

Sundaram Tagore comes from India's creative royalty, and he was in Dubai recently to bestow some of those genes on our burgeoning art scene, and promote the idea that art is more than just aesthetic, but can in fact heal and fortify societies.

Text: Nyree Barrett, Copy Editor/Writer; Portrait: Kishore Kumar, Staff Photographer

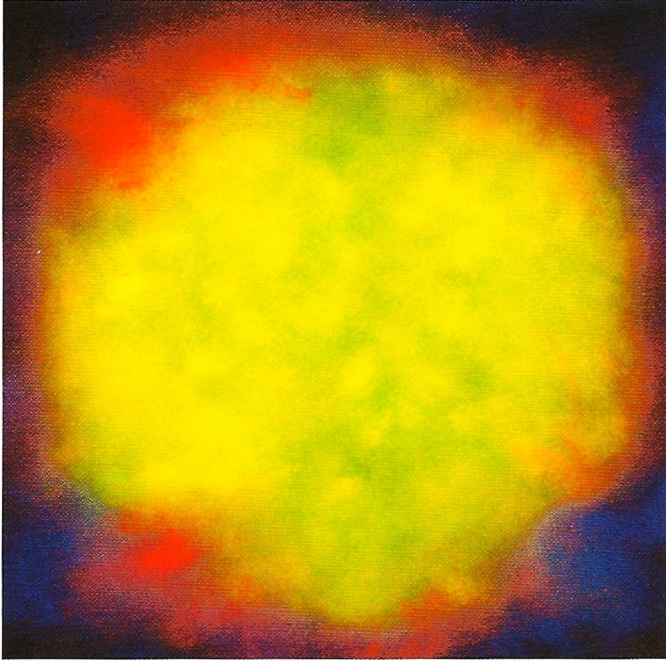
I sit waiting for Sundaram Tagore whilst his right-hand woman Anna explains to me the ethos of his eponymous gallery, a space in Chelsea, New York, which, in Tagore's words is "dedicated to promoting an intercultural dialogue." She then goes on and says, "you know the family history right?" I nod in reply, with prominent artists as his parents and Nobel prize winning poet Rabindranath Tagore as a grandparent, I imagine that the Tagore family name shadows him everywhere he goes.

Considered one of the world's most prominent curators, historians and promoters of South Asian art worldwide, Tagore is wary of being cast as a participant in art from only that region, "I'm interested in the global community of art ... artists who are exploring a culture other than their own." Established in 2000, the Sundaram Tagore Gallery has become one of the most important alternative cultural spaces in New York, with a focus on a dialogue between Western and non-Western

cultures. Tagore is interested in bringing that ethos to Dubai, a city that he considers, "a global base, a cosmopolitan city, a world city in the making."

He was in town primarily for the megastar event Art Dubai, but is also in negotiation with DIFC to bring a world art exhibition over here. He believes that Dubai has to "focus on an art infrastructure. They've built their big complexes and airports and subway systems. Now they have to focus on the other side." How do they do this I ask? Surely events like Art Dubai prove that this is happening. "Yes," he agrees, "but you know art is actually created by individuals not by a community. So they need to patronise those individuals that collectively put together and create artistic material."

For Tagore, artistic growth is not just about aesthetics, he sees art and culture as a unifying force. "How do you unite people? You can't do it through commerce, you can't build a factory and then unite people.



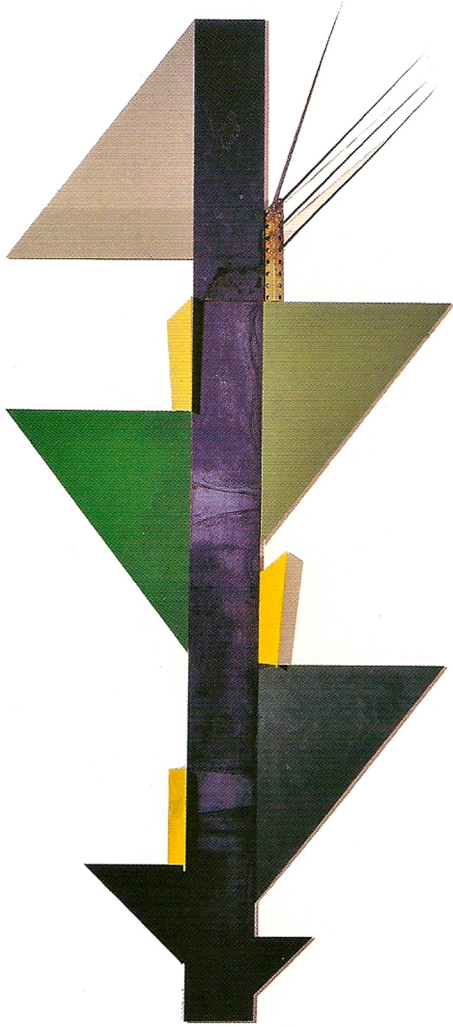
**Above:** Examples of work presented by the Tagore gallery. To the left is Natvar Bhavsar's *Urpaana*, and on the right is Stan Gregory's *Willow Flash*  
**Next Page:** *Weed* by Merrill Wagner featured at Art Dubai this year

Commerce is neutral. They don't care if they like you or not. They don't care who you are, they're not really bothered with your identity, and they're willing to do business, if you're willing to exchange. But what art does, art makes you understand the real person." He cites Nehru's patronage of art during partition-era India as an historical example of this. "He started patronising artists and creating a lot of exhibitions, and he would actually show up and open these exhibitions. He also invited great architects like Le Corbusier to design the modern Indian city. He started galvanizing the people through art."

Tagore discusses that Nehru also promoted inter-cultural exchange, "He supported the idea that Indian artists left and went abroad and explored contemporary cultures. He said, the past is here all around us, for the present you need to go explore. The idea of

modernity is that you open your eyes to the rest of the world, and then go back to your culture with the benefit of this new knowledge." Islamic cultures, he also notes, have a strong history of inter-cultural dialogue, "they were very ecumenical, they embraced people of all cultures, they lived and traded with everyone, and something like that is happening now in Dubai."

He has such a love for it, so has he ever dabbled in art, I wonder out loud? "I sculpted many years ago and I began as a fine artist, but I'm an art historian by profession." Where you any good, I ask? He chuckles shyly, looking down, clutching an arm of his velour jacket, "That depends, I think I would have gone ahead, but there are too many artists in the family." So why stay in the industry? "Passion," he says. He sits on this word for a couple of seconds and slouches back, releasing himself from the



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constraints of an interview prone pose. “You can’t explain passion, it comes from something within us, it swells up. It’s distinctly different from interest. You can create an interest, but passion comes from within your heart and mind.”

It is this idea that he uses to rebut my provocation that art is in fact inextricable from commerce. “Real art is not produced for commercial reasons. Because why does an artist week after week, month after month, year after year, go back to the same studio and produce art whether it sells or not? Not every single artist is a star. There are hundreds of artists that are not selling. Why do they do it? Because they have to.”

We then discuss architecture, another passion of his. He discusses great historical works like the Parthenon, the Pyramids and the Taj Mahal, as works of art. He points out that without these great landmarks, society wouldn’t be what it is now. “And they belong to all of humanity, not just to these cultures.” So we have discussed Nehru, Islamic culture, the Taj Mahal and his gallery, but the whole discussion has circled around this idea of an exchange of ideas and cultures through art and through life. One thing is clear as I shake hands with Tagore upon departure, this man is a global citizen who is well and truly, in the words of his famous grandfather, “drifting in the stream of the world.”