



Sundaram Tagore: "This documentary is about your life"

The first international gallerist to come to Hong Kong, Sundaram Tagore is now premiering his debut documentary

Sundaram Tagore is hardly your average gallerist. Besides manning three galleries – in Hong Kong, Los Angeles and New York – Tagore has just made his first documentary film.

Following the world premiere in New York and a glitzy debut in New Delhi, Tagore's documentary "The Poetics of Color: Natvar Bhavsar An Artist's Journey" arrives in Hong Kong today.

"This is a story about your life," Tagore declares. "It is about how we live in a globalized world where there is a constant movement of people."

Through the lens of immigrant artist Natvar Bhavsar, the film touches on universal issues of identity, globalization and East-West exchange.

Tagore tells the story of how Bhavsar left his village in Gujarat, India in the 1960s and carved a place for himself in the New York art world.

Tracing Bhavsar's career, "The Poetics of Color" reveals the invaluable contribution of Asian artists to U.S. art history.

Here Tagore describes what it was like to step out of the white cube and onto the film set.

CNNGo: *You've been a gallerist for more than a decade. What inspired you to make a film?*

Sundaram Tagore: I wanted to show that being a gallerist means you are making decisions about aesthetics every day.

To be a gallerist in the true sense of the word requires an element of connoisseurship. That process of selecting artists can spill over into another medium like film.

CNNGo: *Tell us about your approach to making this film.*



"All the struggles that you face when working on something alone can make you question 'why am I doing this.'"

Tagore: When I structured the documentary, I looked at both popular Indian films and the high version of Indian films like Satyajit Ray's work.

If you look at Bollywood films, you'll see they have conversation and elements of drama for perhaps 10 or 15 minutes but then they'll break away into music and dance.

Here, what I've done is create a template with very deep conversations and interviews. But I break away every four or five minutes to give you a completely visual world whether it's street scenes, temples, sculptures or Natvar painting.

So it doesn't have anything to do with Bollywood directly but there is a resonance to that.

In terms of Satyajit Ray, who I admire greatly, if you see one of his films like "Charulata" (The Lonely Wife), there is a scene where the protagonist is smoking. The smoke weaves through the space and the camera follows this. It's like visual poetry. It's very cinematic and

painterly. The camera essentially becomes a brush.

I tried to recapture this when I was going through the artist's tools and the camera glides from object to object supported by certain musical scores.

CNNGo: *Is it this visual thrust that sets the documentary apart?*

Tagore: Yes. I intended it to be a visually pleasurable film.

For instance, when you are listening to really beautiful music, you are transported to another world. Likewise I have attempted to transport the viewer to a cinematic world.

The documentary deals with art history, East-West dialogue and global art and culture -- but it's absolutely visual.

CNNGo: *How did you select Natvar as the subject of the documentary?*

Tagore: Being a first time filmmaker I needed to be close to my subject. This proximity would allow me to make a good film as opposed to a long-distance affair where you have to forgo control.

I needed to be in a setting that I knew like the back of my hand, and I knew the physical world that Natvar occupied. I had followed him through time and space, meaning chronologically from the 1960s until present day as well as geographically from India to America.

Moreover, I have devoted my life to the idea of East-West dialog and he encapsulated those values.

CNNGo: *Would you say that you have a parallel path to Natvar as you moved from Calcutta to New York?*

Tagore: Yes, it's similar. I believe I have always existed on the margins. I come from India but I'm seen as an outsider there to a certain extent.

Similarly in America, I'm an outsider but also an insider at the same time. That idea is like tightrope walking. I like that because you are always on your toes and never accepted. I'm never in my comfort zone and that keeps me aware and alive.

CNNGo: *Hong Kong walks a similar tightrope between cultures. What do you think the response will be here?*

Tagore: I'm very excited to show the film in Hong Kong. I felt that screening the film here would engage the population and move them to another level of understanding of global art and culture through the lens of Natvar's life.

The Hong Kong population is very receptive to new ideas. In the last three or four years the city has transformed dramatically. People have changed their attitude towards art and the international artistic community.

Previously Hong Kong was dominated by a kind of Chinese perspective. We were the first international gallery to locate ourselves in Hong Kong.

Since then, Gagosian Gallery has set up. Now Pace and other international galleries are on the verge of opening a space here. There is a reason for this. The Hong Kong population's taste is becoming increasingly international and they want more.

CNNGo: *You have screenings coming up in Toronto, Los Angeles, Singapore, Milan and London. Did you ever imagine the film would be this successful?*

Tagore: Absolutely not. I just wanted to make the film. The process was very important to me.

When people told me that they cried at the end it was very moving. All the struggles that you face when working on something alone can make you question 'why am I doing this' but it becomes worthwhile when people come up to you and say those words.