

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

San Francisco's Growing Heart of Art

John and Gretchen Berggruen expand to reach the city's small but growing art market.



George Condo's 'Abstracted Figures' (2011) will be in the exhibition, 'The Human Form.'

PHOTO: GEORGE CONDO/LICENSED BY ARTIST RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK/BERGGRUEN GALLERY

When John Berggruen told his father, Heinz, that he was going to open his own gallery in San Francisco, the celebrated German art dealer replied, "Son, you're out of your mind." John recalls, "What it really meant was...San Francisco was the end of the world in terms of a collector base."

That was in 1969. Forty-seven years and a series of tech booms later, Mr. Berggruen and his wife, Gretchen, have expanded their gallery from a small walk-up space selling prints on Grant Avenue to a completely renovated three-story, 10,000-square-foot space in a historic building on Hawthorne Street, across from the renovated and expanded San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. The new gallery sits in the center of the city's growing arts hub, which includes the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts and the Contemporary Jewish Museum. Around the time the Berggruens announced they were going to open their space, Larry Gagosian announced plans for a gallery next door, which has already opened.



Pablo Picasso's 'Yellow Nude' (1907). PHOTO: PABLO PICASSO/LICENSED BY ARTIST RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK

The Berggruen Gallery will open Jan. 13 with an exhibition called "The Human Form," featuring works starting in the early 20th century. Henri Matisse, Lucian Freud and contemporary artists such as George Condo will be represented. The 50 works range from Pablo Picasso's 1907 "Yellow Nude," an angular, figurative watercolor, to James Crosby's 2016 "Deconstructed Hoodie," a conceptual piece consisting of a hoodie covered in cement. The show will end on March 4.

Three works come from the Berggruens' private collection, two from institutions and the others from friends. "The Human Form," as Mrs. Berggruen tells it, shows the range of possibilities in both representational and abstract depictions of the figure, as well as how artists capture personality. Even though the exhibit is structured chronologically across the gallery's three floors, the goal, the Berggruens say, is to provide unexpected comparisons between artists of different eras.



Christopher Brown's 'Sailor Steps' (2016). PHOTO: CHRISTOPHER BROWN

Over the years, Mr. and Mrs. Berggruen, ages 73 and 71 respectively, have put on more than 760 shows. Mr. Berggruen says of his old location, “I walked into Grant Avenue after 45 years and said, ‘I’m tired of this. I want to be energized.’” Mrs. Berggruen adds that the couple has no plans to retire.

Mr. Berggruen chose to open a gallery in San Francisco because he was born there: His father, Heinz, had fled Germany and was working at SFMOMA. Heinz went on to become an assistant to the famous Mexican painter Diego Rivera in the late 1930s and then one of the world’s major Picasso and Klee dealers. He died in 2007 and left most of his works to the Museum Berggruen in Berlin.



David Bates's 'The Oyster Shucker' (2016).

PHOTO: DAVID BATES

John Berggruen says that it was not until he was a young man that he really came to know his father. Heinz was sent to Europe to serve in World War II when his son was 2 years old and stayed in Paris after the war. John was raised partly by relatives and his grandmother and went to boarding school at age 7. He was in his early 20s before he met Heinz again, after writing and asking to visit him.

By then, Heinz had remarried and had two young sons, Nicolas and Olivier. His father’s profession fascinated John, and soon after they reconnected the younger Berggruen started working in a gallery himself. After stints in Paris, London and New York—where he helped to color the mobiles of Alexander Calder, according to instructions sent by the artist—Mr. Berggruen decided to strike out on his own and head home to San Francisco.

His father, despite his ambivalence about the city, consigned John a series of prints to help him get started. In 1977, John hired Gretchen, who had volunteered at the Oakland Museum of California, specializing in contemporary art. “I thought I would do it for a year, for the experience before going to graduate school,” she remembers. But she loved the gallery’s pace and creativity, as well as its owner. They married nine years later.



Henri Matisse's 'Large Seated Nude' (1922-29, cast 1952). PHOTO: HENRI MATISSE/LICENSED BY ARTIST RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK/RAYMOND AND PATSY NASHER COLLECTION, NASHER SCULPTURE CENTER, DALLAS

Over the years, Mr. and Mrs. Berggruen have championed such artists as Wayne Thiebaud, known for his colorful paintings of commonplace objects, and Richard Diebenkorn, famed for his abstract landscape paintings.

The Berggruens have seen their base of collectors grow to hundreds. They have sold pieces to Anne Wojcicki, who co-founded the biotech firm 23andMe in 2006; Thomas Weisel, an early Silicon Valley investor; and Jeanne and Sanford Robertson, the latter a founder and chairman of a technology investment bank.

Mr. Berggruen concedes that it has been a challenge to convert members of the San Francisco tech world into art buyers. "There is still no major art market in San Francisco," he says. "To get people who are focused on their companies, who have studied computer science and don't have a lot of time to go to galleries, isn't easy."

But collectors are starting to come in more often. Mrs. Berggruen notes that the Silicon Valley crowd is "creative, and they're curious, and there's a lot of camaraderie among them."



Nathan Oliveira's 'Cobalt Dancer' (2001). PHOTO: ESTATE OF NATHAN OLIVEIRA/BERGGRUEN GALLERY