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Berggruen Gallery reopening with buoyant show in new space

By Charles Desmarais
Friday, January 13, 2017



Photo: Lea Suzuki / Lea Suzuki / The Chronicle 2016

John and Gretchen Berggruen have created an inspiring backdrop for the opening exhibition at the SoMa site.

The eagerly awaited, relocated and reconceived Berggruen Gallery opens this week with an exhibition on a tried-and-true theme. “The Human Form” may be paper-thin conceptually, with the intellectual weight of a high school essay. Sensuously, though, it’s a show that will buoy you up and float you away.

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At last count, there were 66 works in the show, by 36 artists; four days before opening, the numbers were still shifting slightly as staff adapted to the new space. All are superb examples of their type: one or another formal variations on images of the body. Forget the thesis — as an exhibition, it's little more than a catalog of types and categories. Taken individually, however, virtually every work is a museum-worthy example.

Galleries are private affairs, and the best such businesses are usually reflections of the owner's personality. John Berggruen and his wife and partner, Gretchen, are personalities worth reflecting. They are the embodiment of the idea of taste, and the new space and the works inside it have a rare, quiet elegance that seems out of a bygone time.

And if there is a name synonymous with “art gallery” in San Francisco, it is the Berggruen Gallery. Starting with a small shop selling prints in 1970, its founder quickly became the Bay Area's most prominent art dealer. After more than four decades, he remains at the top of a small group of gallerists here with an international profile and a central role in the San Francisco art market. The gallery announced in 2015 **that it would leave** its longtime home on Grant Avenue. Later, **an October 2016 opening** was set. As such things go, it is remarkable that the project is a mere three months late. It opens Friday, Jan. 13, in the midst of the city's frenetic art fair season.

The new space, a stone's throw from the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, occupies an entire building of 10,000 square feet at the corner of Howard and Hawthorne streets. The historic brick structure was gutted and opened up, under the guidance of architect Jennifer Weiss, to take advantage of ample daylight. The Berggruens have expressed some concern that the multiple windows, retained to meet historic preservation guidelines, reduce wall space for hanging art. But the windows are an important part of what makes the new gallery distinctive. They also moderate the “white box” effect of modern art spaces: The windowed rooms help one imagine what Berggruen works might look like in your home.

The inaugural show is introduced by an extraordinary work by George Condo, “Abstracted Figures” (2011). A roomful of people — an art opening is suggested, though some figures are nude — is described in Condo's cartoonish signature style, against a loose pattern of what I think of as 1950s

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color. If you don't know Berggruen, let the picture be your introduction. It's part Mad magazine, part "Mad Men," and it sets a tone of stylishness without taking itself too seriously.

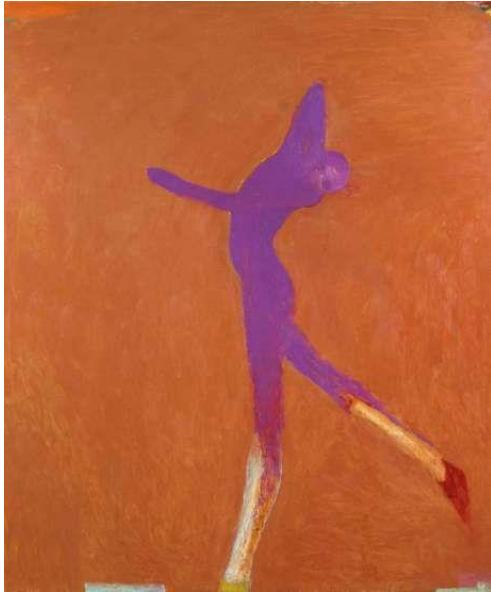


Photo: Copyright Estate Of Nathan Oliveira / Berggruen Gallery

Nathan Oliveira's "Cobalt Dancer" (2001) is part of the inaugural show at the new space of the Berggruen Gallery.

The works on view range in date over 100-plus years. An intense watercolor by Pablo Picasso, "Le Nu Jaune," was made in the same year (1907) and in the same style as the artist's famous "Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. Version O)." That picture alone would be worth the visit, but also on hand is the classic Cubist "Femme assise," an important small Picasso drawing from 1912.

A 1929 work by Francis Picabia, "Transparence (visage et fleurs)," gives a sense of what all the New York hubbub is about, where the Museum of Modern Art's Picabia show is on view through March 19. When I studied art history, the artist was a Dadaist who did some other stuff. This mysterious painting gives a hint as to why MoMA decided to focus, at last, on the larger body of work.

At the other end of the time frame, the exhibition includes works made since 2012 by Michaël Borremans, a painter of enigmatic, hyperrealist portraits; and San Francisco favorites Chris Johanson and Barry McGee.

As a whole, the exhibition is light on works by women and artists of color, but the 21st century selection is nicely diverse, with strong examples by well-regarded artists like Cecily Brown, Elizabeth

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Peyton, Martin Puryear, Kiki Smith, Adriana Varejão, Kara Walker and Kehinde Wiley. Nick Cave's 2005 "Soundsuit" is a striking mashup of African costume traditions and richly decorative European embroidery. Virtually all the artists included are well known, but the gallery does take a chance on the young James Crosby, a 2016 UCLA graduate who has hand-fashioned what appear to be hazmat hoods, lined with the Dutch fabrics associated with women in some African countries. They might be protection from the poisonous atmosphere, particularly for people of African heritage, of our current political moment.

A large part of the exhibition is devoted to artists associated with the gallery's success over its lifetime. An example of one of the greatest of Matisse sculptures, "Large Seated Nude" (1922-29), is currently in the collection of the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas. (It was en route when I toured the show in advance of the opening, but I have seen it at the Nasher.) It once belonged to John Berggruen's father, Heinz, a famous art collector who donated a museum-full of modern art to Germany.

It is hard to think about the market for such towering San Francisco talents as Richard Diebenkorn, Nathan Oliveira, David Park and Wayne Thiebaud without recognizing their strong partnership with Berggruen, and their works are well represented here. To the gallery's credit, however, the exhibition demonstrates the breadth of its interests, secure in the knowledge that its depth is well known. A small work by Tom Sachs called "Man," made just last year, is placed at the end of the gallery on the top floor — at the end of the exhibition. Though cast in bronze, it looks like a carved piece of scrap wood, left over from a safety barrier. It is pathetic, in the way of much great art. It has that touch of wry humor seen in the George Condo work at the entrance and that characterizes many Berggruen Gallery choices. Its placement suggests something about a future for the gallery — that the opening show is as much a closure of a period in its rich history.

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The Human Form: 10 a.m.-6 p.m., Mondays-Saturdays. Through March 4. Free. Berggruen Gallery, 10 Hawthorne St., S.F. (415) 781-4629. www.berggruen.com