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Gallery Chat: John Berggruen, Preeminent San Francisco Art Dealer for 47 Years on the New Space Near SFMOMA, San Francisco's Contemporary Art Market and More



*Gretchen and John Berggruen, partners at the gallery and in life.
Photograph by Jamey Stillings. Courtesy Berggruen Gallery, San Francisco*

By Nicole Casamento

John Berggruen Gallery's history is synonymous with the growth of San Francisco's art market. Though Berggruen started his eponymous gallery with just \$5,000 worth of prints lent to him on consignment, he built his business and the gallery's stellar reputation by helping to grow the careers of the city's own luminaries—Wayne Thiebaud and Richard Diebenkorn being the most prominent—and by introducing West Coast collectors to major East Coast artists as they were emerging (such as Helen Frankenthaler, Robert Motherwell, Jasper Johns, and Robert Rauschenberg).

A leading force in the art world for several decades, the gallery regularly produces museum-quality group exhibitions, as well as solo exhibitions for renowned art-historical figures and new talent alike.

When we asked the gallery's founder John Berggruen how he would describe his gallery's programming in one word, he said "eclectic."

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“It’s what keeps me ticking—the intrigue of organizing exhibitions and the thrill of purchasing works of art,” he said. “I still have that thrill, and selling is a justification of my sins.”

Richard Diebenkorn, Untitled, 1954, oil on canvas.

A San Francisco native, Berggruen took an impromptu trip to Paris shortly after graduating from San Francisco State in 1966. He went in part to get to know his father, the late distinguished German art dealer and collector Heinz Berggruen. Spending time in his father’s gallery is what inspired him to become an art dealer as well.



Berggruen moved to London to work for Brook Street Gallery from 1967 to 1968 and then to New York to work for Perls Galleries from 1968 to 1969. In 1970, he founded John Berggruen Gallery in San Francisco (what seemed like “the end of the world” to his father) in a second-floor walk-up at 257 Grant Street. Two years later, the gallery relocated to a third-floor space on 228 Grant Street, where it remained for the next 43 years.

In January 2017, the gallery reopened in a historic building in San Francisco’s new thriving cultural neighborhood SoMA (south of Market) designed by Jennifer Weiss Architecture. Located on Hawthorne Street, the gallery is now very close to the newly expanded SFMOMA and neighbors other prominent galleries including Gagosian Gallery and Crown Point Press.



Photograph by Bruce Damonte Photography. Courtesy of Jennifer Weiss Architecture.

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The luxury website Robb Report wrote that John Berggruen Gallery's new space is "best described as a mini-museum" and it's easy to understand why.

Photograph by Bruce Damonte Photography. Courtesy of Jennifer Weiss Architecture.

The gallery now boasts three floors, 10,000 square-feet of exhibition space, and works by the gallery's impressive roster of 20th-and-21st-century artists, which includes Alexander Calder, Chuck Close, Yayoi Kusama, Bridget Riley, Anish Kapoor and Mark Di Suvero—to name just a few.

The gallery inaugurated the space with "The Human Form," a sweeping exploration of the way the human figure has been represented in art from the 20th century to today by artists from Henri Matisse to Kehinde Wiley.

Following that, it presented a similarly ambitious group exhibition on abstraction, followed by a solo exhibition of new paintings and works on paper by Alicia McCarthy—an integral member of San Francisco's "Mission School." Currently, there are two solo exhibitions on view—one of English-born Lucy Williams' bas-relief collages of modern mid-century pools, and the other of San Francisco based artist Michael Gregory's new landscapes of the American West, highlighting the gallery's ongoing dedication to using its prestige and influence to spotlight younger artists and local talent.



Berggruen chatted with us about how he grew his business, SFMOMA's contemporary art market, his advice for new collectors, and more.

Why did you become an art dealer?

It was a matter of happenstance. I was working in politics for something called the Democratic Party when they were trying to get a man from Texas named Lyndon Johnson elected president. I was working on his campaign committee in San Francisco, and that was my real job, although I was going to university at the time. Two years later, I worked for the campaign for the late Governor Brown, who was running against Ronald Reagan. We knew he would probably lose—and he did—and after that I was out of a job. I thought, "What could I do?"

George Condo, Abstracted Figures, 2011, acrylic, charcoal and pastel on linen

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Can you imagine? I was out of a job, no girlfriend, actually finally finished college—which took me an extra semester or two on account of all the political activism. I was walking down the street with a buddy of mine talking about what we'd do after the campaign and he said, "Why don't you go to Europe?" I thought, "Well if I go to Europe I can get to know my father." So, two weeks later I shipped out to Paris.

Alicia McCarthy, Untitled, 2017, gouache, spray and house paint on wood

Your father, Heinz Berggruen, was a renowned dealer in Paris. Did you start by working with him?

I helped around the gallery but was not employed by my father. I was studying French at the *Alliance Française*, but I actually learned Swedish because most of the girls there were Swedish of course. But I didn't learn *too much* Swedish because everyone there spoke English. And I didn't learn much French either. But in any case, I would go to my Father's gallery in the afternoons and wait for some willing victim to walk in that spoke English, and they were mostly Americans, and I just enjoyed that for a little bit.

It was a way to get to know my father because he was completely consumed by the art world and the business. It was a very rewarding experience. He had a great personality and Paris was very exciting then.

Did he help you open your gallery in San Francisco in 1970?

My gallery was not a branch of my father's. My father and I had a discussion in Paris about what I was going to do, and when I said I wanted to open a gallery in San Francisco he said "What? That's the end of the world!" He'd never had any business here, and when he lived here he was a refugee from Nazi Germany. It was just foreign territory to him.

I told him that it was my home and where my friends were and after a certain amount of convincing on my part, he loaned me about \$5,000 worth of inventory on consignment. I got 20% commission and I had to pay him back the \$5,000 in a year, which I did. He was a very strong man in terms of not indulging me and making sure I learned to stand on my own feet, which was important I think.

What did you borrow from him on consignment?

Prints. My father was well known internationally as a print dealer. He had the largest subscription to Picasso prints of any dealer, as well as prints by Chagall, Miró, Kandinsky, Matisse and others going further back. He also put out a catalogue on a quarterly basis, which was kind of like a little bible for the print collectors and print industry.



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What did you open with?

Miró prints. I probably also borrowed a few from my father's friend Frank Richard Perls, who had a gallery in L.A. and was one of the great eccentric characters in the art world when I was growing up in this business. He was very collaborative and cooperative, as were many other people later on.

Such as?

Klaus Perls, Stephen Hahn, Gene Thaw. They were very generously spirited, particularly in July and August because they would close their galleries. It wasn't like now where it's 24/7 in the art world. I would borrow paintings by Matisse, Cézanne, Léger for summer shows after maybe 10 years after I'd opened—when I had the confidence and the clientele to sell those works. It was thrilling to show them and it helped our reputation.



Mark di Suvero, Dreamcatcher, 2005-12, steel

When did you start showing late 20th century artists?

A couple of years after I opened my gallery in San Francisco, I became acquainted with a man named Harry “Hunk” Anderson, whose world famous collection, known as The Anderson Collection, is now part of Stanford University. I got to know Hunk and Mary “Moo” Anderson, his wife. They had an interest in collecting prints and I had gotten to know the renowned print dealer Tanya Grossman, so I was able to get a subscription. I got two subscriptions, one for me and one for Anderson. That started me on the road to meeting some of the artists working with her at the ULAE—Frankenthaler, Motherwell, Jasper Johns, Rauschenberg—and they began to interest me.

So, that changed my whole gallery program and outlook. It was a gradual process though because we didn't necessarily sell to San Francisco people. Out of town collectors would visit San Francisco and somehow knew about me, and I would travel and take prints with me to various cities. So, I was a traveling salesman. Still am.

You represent many iconic California artists as well.

I got to know artists in San Francisco in the early '70s. Diebenkorn and Wayne Thiebaud were the most significant. I never formally represented either Thiebaud or Diebenkorn but I always had good relationships with them and a real passion for both artists.

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It started out with a group of artists represented by the Hansen-Fuller Gallery, which was kind of the premier gallery in San Francisco showing contemporary art then. They represented William T. Wiley, Roy De Forest, and a number of artists who I liked very much. I bought things because it was my nature to collect a little bit on my own if I could afford it. Eventually I started working with some of the artists from Hansen-Fuller after Wanda retired.

Those artists were really well collected and well thought of in the '70s, '80s, and maybe the early '90s but that's changed quite a bit. The focus on their work is not as strong currently in terms of national and international appeal. It's strange how it's changed.

What are your thoughts on SFMOMA's recent expansion and how it will affect the gallery scene there?

It's a fantastic enterprise. We're very proud of the development of the museum and the patronage. It will change San Francisco for the better. And another great thing has happened. The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco hired Max Hollein as the director of the de Young and Legion of Honor. He is a very highly regarded and lovely man.

It's a great moment in time for the economy in San Francisco because of Silicon Valley and many other things, so the more the merrier in terms of quality galleries that come here. We are certainly not lacking for collectors or museums.

What advice would you give to an aspiring dealer?

Familiarize yourself with your colleagues and have a program that is manageable. Don't overreach.

When I started my gallery, I had several key components in terms of my business plan and how I would operate. Our philosophy was business-like. For example, we were open six days a week when most people were closed on Mondays. We never closed on Mondays because that's a day when people are at their offices. We were also responsive about contacting people quickly and we were always fair in terms of pricing.

I have to say a great part of the development of this gallery—and whatever success we've had—is thanks to my wife Gretchen. We've been married for over 30 years and she's been with the gallery for 38. She's been instrumental in giving us secure footing and a business plan. She's great with people and at handling my extravagancies in terms of my personality. She's a very good anchor and ambassador, and great with our staff. We have a wonderful, incredible staff, so it's all made a tremendous difference, but Gretchen has been a key part.

What advice would you give to an aspiring collector?

Collectors need to think about the art that they're buying and see it in the flesh. Having a relationship with a dealer is so important—somebody who is reliable, responsive, can be held accountable, has taste, and some sort of a vision, and is willing to go the extra mile for you.

Clients should also obviously read but also see the works in the flesh—no matter where—and understand scale and condition. Know that when you make a choice, you're stuck with it, but some galleries will let you take it home and try it out. Some people don't realize that.

This post first appeared on the Art Dealers Association of America (ADAA) Inside Stories blog on June 13, 2017.