

The Unexpected and Influential Berggruen Gallery

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Barely a stone's throw from the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, I recently discovered Berggruen Gallery, a three-story art gallery with bright and airy windows. The unusual setting immediately piqued my interest, as most galleries prefer to wall over the windows to create studio lighting.

Walking past the location on my daily trek to work, I am able to catch glimpses of sculptures and paintings inside the sparsely decorated building. Finally my curiosity gets the best of me and I decide to use my lunch hour to explore the unique space.

My first impression of the gallery with its natural-colored woods and simple white walls is that it feels welcoming and friendly. Although I walk in without an appointment, the receptionist enthusiastically greets me and encourages me to explore the space.

As I wander around, my eye is immediately drawn to a split staircase on my right. When I look downstairs, I can sense a large cavernous space beneath me, and glancing up at the soaring ceilings, I can make out a few pieces on the upper landing. It creates the sense that the entire building is open and transparent.

While I'm there, I have an opportunity to speak with Gretchen Berggruen, who owns the gallery along with partner and husband John Berggruen. Originally located on Grant Avenue for four

BERGGRUEN

GALLERY

decades, the gallerists relocated to Hawthorne Street in early 2017 with help from architect Jennifer Weiss (who also happens to be Gretchen's daughter). While the new space features 10,000 square feet of exhibition space, the historic building is protected by law which explains why the windows remain.

"It's very full of daylight," Gretchen says. "However, what we once saw as a constraint has become quite a plus for us. People are very happy to walk in and see how art will look on their own walls, which are also filled with sunlight."

Being the art enthusiast that I am, I choose this moment to pick Gretchen's brain and ask about the best way to go about acquiring new pieces. She tells me to take the time to wander through a variety of galleries and shows. She explains that by figuring why some pieces appeal to me while other do not, I can begin collecting with a clear vision.

"I find that people who collect from what I call 'by ear' really miss out on developing their own taste and quirky style," she says. "From the absurd to the slightly surreal, everyone has their own aesthetic. They just don't know about it until they keep looking to see what interests them."

The Berggruens' aesthetic is a mix of historic and contemporary styles. Rather than sticking to a specific genre or style, the gallerists love to show artists that they find interesting. A few high-profile artists whose work have been featured in shows include Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Andy Warhol, Georgia O'Keeffe, Julie Mehretu, Vija Celmins, Wayne Thiebaud, and many more.

"We are very different from other galleries," Gretchen says. "We will do exhibitions with artists that we want to bring to California. Some of the artists are shown by major galleries in New York or Europe, but we're not a threat to any of the large galleries. We have a lot of agility to what we can bring to the area, and we do think we bring things of interest to San Francisco."

Although many colleagues have asked the Berggruens over the years why they haven't opened a gallery in New York City or Europe, Gretchen said she couldn't imagine living anywhere other than the Bay Area.

"We love our life here. It's a wonderful place to live," Gretchen explains. "We love the lifestyle, the culture, the institutions. And now it's where our children and grandchildren live, with the exception of one son who does live in New York City. Our friends and family mean the world to us, and the quality of life in San Francisco is just very special."