

## Tour the New NYC Art Gallery Industry Insiders Have Their Eyes On

Alexander Berggruen debuts—with a show featuring John Baldessari, Ed Ruscha, Jonas Wood, Emily Mae Smith, and Richard Prince—in a renovated historic space on Manhattan's Upper East Side

By [Liddy Berman](#)

Photography by [Dario Lasagni](#)



At just 31, Alex Berggruen is one of the few who claim a lifetime's experience in the art world. The third generation in a family that includes art-collector patriarch Heinz Berggruen, whose collection forms the core of Berlin's Berggruen Museum, and Alex's parents, John and Gretchen Berggruen, who have run San Francisco's Berggruen Gallery for almost 50 years, Alex is carrying on the family legacy by opening his own gallery space on Manhattan's Upper East Side today.

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“I was lucky to be able to travel with my parents to certain art fairs and on trips to see collectors and museums, and to learn bits and pieces of the trade through visiting their gallery and meeting artists along the way,” Berggruen recalls when asked what inspired him to open his own space. Studying at Yale and then working at Christie’s deepened his passion for the art world. “I fell in love with the scholarship, the business, the market, and the collectors and colleagues in the art world,” he admits.



The new gallery occupies a floor at 1018 Madison Avenue, a historic Beaux Arts building on the Upper East Side of Manhattan.

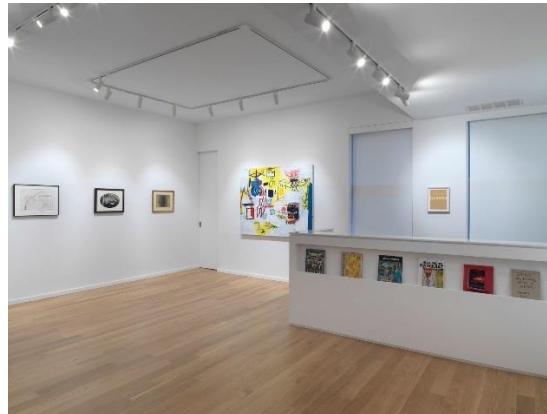
After scouring listings in search of a home for his first independent gallery venture, a lucky chat with the space’s previous tenant, David Nash, of Mitchell-Innes & Nash Gallery, offered the perfect solution—a prestigious gallery space at 1018 Madison Avenue’s historic Beaux Arts building, complete with an Alexander Calder–designed sidewalk installation to greet art-loving visitors out front.

10 HAWTHORNE STREET  
SAN FRANCISCO CA 94105  
TEL 415 781 4629  
INFO@BERGGRUEN.COM  
BERGGRUEN.COM

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Architects Ellee Lee and JJ Yeo of &fold architecture, both veterans of Robert A.M. Stern, were brought on to spearhead the renovation of the space, with Jennifer Weiss, the architect behind Berggruen Gallery in San Francisco's recent renovation, consulting. "Inheriting an existing space is always a challenge," explains Yeo. "In this case, we were presented with a gallery that was more about an idea of rooms that one would enter sequentially, a sort of procession—at times, it felt almost mazelike. After much discussion, Alex agreed to completely open up the space by removing the majority of the interior walls."



The space was refashioned by architects Ellee Lee and JJ Yeo of &fold architecture.

"While somewhat counterintuitive, as doing so reduces the space to hang artwork, the value that the added daylight brings to the space and the experience of viewing art makes it worthwhile," Weiss agrees. This innovation, combined with clean white walls, sleek and eco-friendly LED adjustable track lighting, cleverly hidden doors, and subtle fixtures, gives the space an expansive, light-filled feel and a minimalist elegance that allows the artwork to shine.

"We very much wanted to imbue the gallery with a sense of warmth, while still being able to play host to a wide breadth of art on its walls," Lee explains, highlighting the newly restored wood floors, painstakingly filled in with unstained, carefully milled timber by New York's Signature Builders. The floors kindle a feeling of domestic warmth, bringing comfort and familiarity to the space, along with the subtle creaks and susurrations of wood that sometimes make it feel like a living being responding to the elements around it.

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Another interior view of the clean white space, whose current show is entitled *Words*.

The renovations have created a wonderful framework for the opening show, entitled *Words*, which explores “the development of language and linguistic thought throughout the 20th century as a linking concept for modernism and the contemporary canon,” says Berggruen. Featuring works created as early as 1913 to as recently as 2019, the show, like the new space itself, celebrates finding harmony by balancing history with the present. Works by acclaimed California artists John Baldessari and Ed Ruscha share wall space with pieces by young talents Jonas Wood and Emily Mae Smith, and works from Georges Braque and Paul Klee play with text in surprising and deft ways cleverly juxtaposed with a 1980s Richard Prince

In drawing out the connections between past and present works and finding shared themes across a broad span of time, Berggruen constructs art history backwards and forwards, illuminating the historical framework that underlies contemporary works while also recontextualizing historic works. A similar philosophy guided the renovation of the gallery space, balancing a respect for the past with the promise of the future.

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