

**BERGGRUEN**  
GALLERY

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**Remembering Gretchen Berggruen, 'the heart and soul' of one of  
San Francisco's most influential galleries**

July 2, 2021



**The beloved Berggruen matriarch championed artists ranging from Wayne Thiebaud and Mark di Suvero to Helen Frankenthaler and Lorna Simpson**

A typical weekend for Gretchen Berggruen may have entailed working at her San Francisco gallery alongside her husband John, travelling to an art fair or dinner in New York, and taking a red-eye flight to catch her grandchild's school awards ceremony. As anyone who knew her personally can attest, Gretchen was a woman who really could do it all. She led with passion, precision, and intentionality, and she played as much of a role in broadening the success of numerous artists as she did in supporting and inspiring her own family.

In September 2020, Gretchen passed away due to amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), and as her birthday approaches on 2 July, her son, Alex, and husband, John, share the memories and lessons they learned from their family's effervescent matriarch.

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Born in Massachusetts, Gretchen later moved with her family to California and attended college in San Francisco. Self-taught in art, she volunteered at the Oakland Museum of California, where she played an integral role in developing exhibitions for Bay Area fixtures, Mark di Suvero and Wayne Thiebaud. John opened his eponymous gallery in 1970—a book commemorating the company's 50th anniversary was recently published in honour of Gretchen. A fan of both artists' work, he met Gretchen in 1976. Impressing anyone she met with her poise, ambition, and vision, Gretchen would earn John's praise, too, and after having joined Berggruen Gallery in 1977, the two tied the knot in 1985.

'Gretchen's most signature characteristic was having to deal with me. A friend of mine told me recently that Gretchen always had to clean up my act and amend what I said. Particularly if I made a toast, she'd get up right after,' John, as complimentary of Gretchen as he is jocular, tells Christie's. Calling her 'the heart and soul of the gallery,' he adds: 'Our personalities complemented each other, so that's why it worked well that we were in business together. She had certain attributes that were very good regarding managing our staff, artists, clients, and I was the one who would do organisational things.'

Berggruen Gallery is, perhaps, best known for its championing of Californian artists, including David Park, Richard Diebenkorn, and Nathan Oliveira. John attributes the broadening success of Thiebaud and di Suvero to Gretchen's early working relationships with them. While at the Oakland Museum of California, for example, Gretchen helped organise an outdoor sculpture show that included di Suvero's controversial monumental sculpture, Mother Peace, which is now one of Storm King Art Center's most iconic works. It is the last major piece that di Suvero completed before temporarily leaving America for Europe in protest of the US's involvement in the Vietnam War.

Gretchen was a people person, who held her own in any environment, including amongst the art world's leading, and oftentimes elusive, figures. 'She was a smart, thoughtful leader in her business in terms of working with collectors, presenting beautiful shows, and placing incredible works in great public and private collections (including the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC). She always did so with a long-term vision and a view that working with a collector is not about a transaction but rather a relationship,' remembers Alex Berggruen, Gretchen and John's son. Gretchen also had two daughters, Jennifer (Jenny) Weiss, an architect whose projects include Berggruen Gallery's 2017 renovation, and Meredith (Muffy) Levy, a jewellery designer. 'She didn't add a work to someone's collection just to make a deal; it was to help as a step in a greater story of building a collection.'

Having opened his own contemporary art gallery in New York in 2019, Alex has put many of his parents' professional teachings to good use. From his mom, whom he calls the "slightly more experimental" one, he learned the power of showcasing emerging and lesser-known mid-career

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artists in a serious setting that helps contextualise them. For example, while visitors to his gallery may find works by Jean-Michel Basquiat and George Condo, they will also be exposed to rising talents, such as Dominican painter, Hulda Guzmán, and Chicago-based artist, Brittney Leeanne Williams

‘My mom would say something to me along the lines of, ‘Trust your instincts. Trust your eye. Do all you can to present and collect what you want,’ recalls Alex in admiration of his mother’s conviction. ‘She’d say, ‘If there’s an artist you really care about and want to show, figure out a way to do it.’’

‘She didn’t add a work to someone’s collection just to make a deal; it was to help as a step in a greater story of building a collection.’ — Alex Berggruen

The Berggruens also promoted the careers of East Coast Abstract Expressionists, including Helen Frankenthaler, with whom, like Thiebaud, di Suvero, and Diebenkorn, the Berggruens formed a good friendship. ‘My mom had an eye for quality and a foresight in terms of the importance of a lot of the great post-war female artists before they were really given their due,’ says Alex who remembers meals in his family’s Russian Hill home, where in the dining room, a large-format purple and green Frankenthaler painting has hung for decades.

‘My mom especially saw the importance of her practice within the greater scope of the canon and was keen not only to collect her work but to show it and encourage other people to collect it.’ Gretchen was also an early supporter of women artists, such as Judith Shea and Kiki Smith, as well as artists of colour, including Lorna Simpson, Robert Colescott, and Martin Puryear.

According to Alex, Gretchen was resolute in all areas of her life: ‘Her great taste certainly came through in art, but also in the way she dressed and the music she listened to. She loved Fleetwood Mac and Paul Simon.’ Beyond her widely known passions of gardening and fly-fishing, Gretchen had a ‘famous’ roasted chicken, one of many dishes she’d prepare for frequent gatherings.

‘She was always on the move but always very thoughtful in how she presented herself,’ says Alex. ‘To me, it’s about her eye, and the generosity of her time inside and outside of her business, especially with her family.’