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John Berggruen Gallery turned into art museum of great works

By Leah Garchik

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John Berggruen is celebrating 45 years in the business of selling art with a show that turns his Grant Avenue gallery into a small (and free) art museum. Both floors of the gallery are hung with works by such 20th century masters as **Willem de Kooning, Richard Diebenkorn, Sam Francis, Robert Motherwell, Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, Georgia O’Keeffe, Alexander Calder** and **Wayne Thiebaud**.

They’re all artists so familiar that it seems natural to take liberties; it almost seems we know them personally. But (with a few exceptions owned by museums) these are in private collections. If you haven’t hung around in the salons of the Bay Area collectors who own them, you probably have not seen them before.

I hadn’t seen them before. But questioned about which works were borrowed from whom, Berggruen is mum. It’s been a policy of his since he went into business 45 years ago. “I’m not mentioning names,” he said. It’s a “confidential matter with the clients. I just don’t talk.” The policy, which not only protects privacy but also aids in preventing art thefts, demonstrates the seller’s integrity to the client.

The earliest-sold work in the show is a Diebenkorn, “Berkeley #13,” which was bought by a couple elated at the purchase. The next morning, said Berggruen, the buyer’s mother came in and said, “Show me what my son bought.” Berggruen was firm. “I can’t do that.” Of course, she found out later. “But she respected that I had done that.”

There’s one work in the show, a black-and-white “Drawing for Landscape” by **Roy Lichtenstein**, that had been donated by John and **Gretchen Berggruen** to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Its provenance is mentioned on its label. Other works lent to the gallery by museums could be identified, said SFMOMA Director **Neal Benezra**, who was walking around the gallery at the same time we were, by ropes creating a safety space deterring the art lover from touching the work.

The overall beauty of the exhibition (open until Nov. 25) is on my mind, but so is the question: Who is it lucky enough to own the Calder “Hanging Apricot”?