

JOHN BERGGRUEN GALLERY

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Berggruen Gallery hits 45 and relocates for Millennials

By Sam Whiting

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The 45th anniversary show at John Berggruen Gallery is called “Looking Back,” and there is a lot more to look back on than major paintings by the likes of Willem de Kooning and Richard Diebenkorn.

Berggruen will soon be looking back on Grant Avenue and Union Square, too. The gallery is moving out, making it perhaps the most prominent art dealer to join the Great Art Exodus south.



Photo: Gabrielle Lurie, Special To The Chronicle Scott Schryver (left) and Naaman Rosen (center) carry a painting through the John Berggruen Gallery, as Edward Sickel (right) looks on, in San Francisco California on Tuesday, November 3, 2015.

“The demographic has changed in the 45 years that I have been downtown, and I want to be rejuvenated among young energy,” says Berggruen, 72. He is not yet ready to disclose exactly when or exactly where he is moving other than “somewhere south of here between Market Street and Gilroy.”

This probably means the new DoReMi Arts District (Dogpatch, Potrero Hill, Mission) where he has been spotted of late. If it is, they will have to redo the DoReMi walking map for the second time since last April when it was issued. In six months the art venues have doubled from 24 to 50.

“Berggruen Gallery is a cornerstone of modern and contemporary art in the city,” says Catharine Clark, a founding member of the DoReMi Arts District. “If Berggruen were to relocate to DoReMi, combined with other new members, it would further suggest DoReMi *is* the art world in San Francisco.”

Geary Street *was* the art world in San Francisco, but among those that have been chased down to DoReMi by high rents and tight quarters are Catharine Clark Gallery, Jack Fischer Gallery, Brian Gross Fine Art, Hosfelt Gallery and Rena Bransten Gallery. Bransten and Fisher will be among 10 galleries when the warehouse-size Minnesota Street Project opens in March.

High rent and tight quarters are not the problem for Berggruen, who says he will have the same amount of space and pay equivalent rent for a ground-level space in an historic building that is being renovated.

It will be ready by spring, making “Looking Back,” the last comprehensive show at the old Berggruen, which occupies two full floors of 228 Grant Ave. with picture windows looking out on the street. The six-floor building around the corner from Geary was once a “gallery building,” Berggruen says, but he is the last gallery to leave the building, which is owned by Litchmann and Co. of Los Angeles.

A young president

To smooth the transition Berggruen has hired his first outside president — Sarah Wendell, a 29-year-old energizer who comes from Christie’s in New York. Wendell managed the contemporary art auctions that set a record last spring, with more than \$1 billion in sales.

She also has an art history degree from Williams College in Massachusetts, and a Peninsula pedigree. Her late grandfather, George Quist, was a Stanford football star who later co-founded Hambrecht & Quist, the

pioneering investment bank on Montgomery Street; her grandmother Robin Quist Gates is a sophisticated art collector in Woodside, where Wendell grew up.

She is expected to build an exhibition program that will take Berggruen Gallery where all galleries want to go, which is into the homes and offices of the Millennials. There is a lot of new tech money out there that does not yet know it wants to be spent on art.

“The reason I came to work for Berggruen,” Wendell says, “is that I believe the way you get people to care passionately about art is by building relationships one by one.”

This is what Berggruen has been doing since May 1970, but it took Wendell to remind him of this and get this last major show, “Looking Back,” onto the walls.



Photo: Gabrielle Lurie,
Special To The Chronicle
Len Weiss (left) reads the
title of a painting, while his
wife Ingrid Weiss admires a
Roy Lichtenstein painting at
the John Berggruen Gallery
in San Francisco, California
on Tuesday, November 3,
2015.

Anniversary show

The actual 45th anniversary had passed, and by August. Berggruen and his wife and business partner, Gretchen, were vacationing in East Hampton, N.Y. He was staring at the Atlantic and procrastinating on his anniversary show. Wendell had been a summer intern at Berggruen Gallery and had accepted a position to return to the gallery.

After traveling in Europe she stopped in East Hampton to visit the Berggruens.

“We went out to dinner the first night and the next morning Sarah got up and said ‘It’s time to get to work,’” Berggruen recalls.

He was handed a telephone and told to start dialing. He thought of a Mark Rothko painting called “Untitled, 1960” he had sold to a collector in Maine 20 years ago and dialed him up. The request to borrow that Rothko went well so he asked to borrow four more works by four artists.

He got a ‘yes’ answer on four out of the five and “Looking Back: 45 Years” was on its way by the time the Berggruens got home to San Francisco in September.

Among the artists whose work joins Rothko, de Kooning and Diebenkorn on the walls are Wayne Thiebaud, Alexander Calder, Mark di Suvero, Helen Frankenthaler, Philip Guston, Frida Kahlo,



Ellsworth Kelly, Roy Lichtenstein, Georgia O’Keeffe, Diego Rivera, Ed Ruscha, Frank Stella and Clyfford Still.

Photo: Gabrielle Lurie, Special To The Chronicle

John Berggruen, owner of the John Berggruen Gallery sits in his office for a portrait in San Francisco, California on Tuesday, November 3, 2015.

How he pulled it off

Those are all names that normally show in museums, but if this were a museum show it would have taken two years to organize. Berggruen pulled it off in two months, which is a lot of shipping expense and insurance and hassle, especially considering that just three of the works are for sale, a cake painting by Thiebaud, an abstract by Frankenthaler and a steel I-beam sculpture.

“A loan exhibition is only for goodwill,” Berggruen says.

“Many of the paintings in this show our friends and clients don’t know have passed through here because they weren’t here that long.”

Many of the works in the show have not been seen in public since he sold them 25 years ago or more. Pieces by Roy Lichtenstein and Ed Ruscha, he sold not long after he opened his gallery, across the street from the current location. Berggruen had grown up in the city and graduated from San Francisco State in 1966. He’d worked at a few galleries and was looking for “my own little space so I wouldn’t get lost in the shuffle of life.”

He had an advantage in that because his father, Heinz Berggruen, was a well-known dealer in Paris, where he was one of the major print dealers in the world, representing Matisse and Picasso, among others.

Heinz Berggruen, who had come to San Francisco in the 1930s as a refugee from Nazi Germany, served in the U.S. Army in World War II and had remained in Paris after the war.

He viewed San Francisco as a “cultural backwater” and tried to talk his son out of this foolish gallery idea. When that did not work he loaned some etchings and lithographs by the Spanish surrealist Joan Miro. They formed the inaugural show at Berggruen Gallery, in a second-floor walk-up at 257 Grant.

Diebenkorn show

Within two years he had moved across the street to 228 Grant. He got the back of the third floor and opened it with an exhibition of the Berkeley paintings by Diebenkorn.

To get that, Berggruen employed his second great advantage, which is that he has the size and looks of the actor Wallace Shawn. There is an intriguing aspect that enables him to walk right up to any artist, which is what he did with Diebenkorn, at a museum opening



Photo: Berggruen Gallery, Handout
Richard Diebenkorn, “Ocean Park #18,” 1968, oil on canvas,
93½ by 80¾ inches. Private collection.

“I don’t know if I was introduced,” he says. “I walked right up and said ‘Hi, I’m John Berggruen.’”

He met Thiebaud in the same way. Then they became tennis buddies; and now Berggruen has eight Thiebaud paintings on display, from six different owners. That is the greatest concentration of an artist’s work in the show and was never by intent. The paintings are not hung in chronological order or any other order, other than what was visually pleasing to the Berggruens.

And it was only after the show was hung that anybody bothered to count the paintings in “Looking Back: 45 Years.” It added up to 45, exactly. “Totally coincidental,” Wendell says. “But we just added a Giacometti, so there are now 46.”

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About the exhibit

Video: Tour the Berggruen Gallery with Sarah Wendell at: <http://sfchron.cl/1ku4NrC>.

“Looking Back: 45 Years”: Runs through Nov. 25 at John Berggruen Gallery, 228 Grant Ave., San Francisco. (415) 781-4629. berggruen.com