

THE CANVAS

MONTHLY

July / August Issue

Third-Generation Berggruen Carries His Family's Legacy Forward

The Yale-educated, San Francisco-born, Alexander Berggruen cuts an impressive figure at thirty-one years old. The son of Gretchen and John Berggruen, owners of the well-respected Berggruen Gallery in San Francisco, and grandson of dealer, collector, and philanthropist Heinz Berggruen, it might surprise some to discover that Alex didn't always intend to follow his family's path in the art world. But after stints at BlockRock, Google, and ArtBinder, he ultimately ended up in the nexus for much of the art world, as a junior specialist in Christie's Impressionist & Modern department in 2014.

At Christie's, Berggruen followed the traditional path of an auction house specialist, going from junior specialist to associate specialist, and then from specialist to associate vice president. Midway through, he transitioned from Adrien Meyer's Imp/Mod department to the Post-War & Contemporary where he became head of the afternoon sale. In his five years at the house, he went from bringing in one lone consignment in his first season, to bringing in 29 consignments worth an aggregate \$7 million in value for the day sale in his last season.

It was, therefore, even more of a surprise when he officially submitted his resignation to Christie's this past December. The Reason? Berggruen is now embarking on a career as a dealer, with his own gallery scheduled to open in the fall of 2019. Located in Mitchell-Innes & Nash's former space on the Upper East Side, the future home of the gallery is currently undergoing some light renovations to improve the space.

On a brutally hot July afternoon, we sit in his blissfully well-air-conditioned downtown apartment as he explains his decision-making process in choosing the Upper East Side as the home for his gallery; divulges what the programming and focus of the gallery will look like; and walks me through how he plans to attract collectors to the gallery at a time when collectors are increasingly gravitating towards only the biggest galleries in the business. What follows is a refreshingly honest and insightful look into the choices and options any dealer – regardless of age – must confront when deciding to start a new gallery in New York City.



Alexander Berggruen

Interview begins ▼

● **The Canvas:** What spurred your decision to leave Christie's after working there for five years? There have obviously been a lot of auction house specialists and business-getters who have either been moving from one auction house to another, been lured away by some of the larger galleries, or who have left to open galleries on their own. Did this pronounced trend over the past few years have any kind of an effect on your decision to leave?

Alexander Berggruen: To a degree. Keep in mind, though, that I started out at in the Imp/Mod department, and with the exception of Brooke [Lampley], the house didn't lose that many specialists. I noticed the trend a lot more when I made the switch to Post-War & Contemporary. But my decision to leave was really about following my own path and my own timeline. I was ready to start a new chapter of life by opening my own gallery. It was something that I had been thinking about over the last two years and I carefully considered my options.

The Canvas: What kind of options were you considering? Do you mind elaborating a bit about the choices you faced?

Alexander Berggruen: Sure. In deciding to leave to do something in the gallery realm, I think a natural question could have been – and was – whether I would do something with my parents' gallery. I could have moved back to San Francisco and worked with their gallery directly, or I could have opened up an outpost of Berggruen Gallery in New York. Ultimately, through encouragement from my parents that was only positive and wonderful, and from my own careful consideration and planning, I was able to realize that what I really wanted was to form my own gallery and call it Alexander Berggruen in New York City.

At this point, I'm very lucky to have signed a lease in the 1018 Madison Avenue building, which is on Madison between 78th and 79th. I'll be on the third floor which used to be Mitchell-Innes & Nash's space. David Nash and I are close friends. He didn't need that exhibition space for what the gallery is currently focusing on, and I was able to take it over without it ever going on the market. It's a great building with Stellan Holm on the floor below me, Richard Gray Gallery right above, and Christophe Van de Weghe on the fifth floor.

The Canvas: When you were deciding on a neighborhood to locate the gallery, what led you to the Upper East Side versus Chelsea versus Tribeca?

Alexander Berggruen: That was something I gave a lot of thought to. I did a sort of process of elimination. I live on the Lower East Side. I love the Lower East Side. But most of the galleries down here tend to be contemporary programs. My gallery will involve some historic secondary market material, but also some contemporary primary material as well. So, I eliminated the Lower East Side because there isn't really much of a secondary scene here.

I eliminated Chelsea because it tends to have bigger spaces which I don't need at the beginning stages of my gallery. Also, – and I think this is really important to keep in mind – Chelsea is changing a lot. I would say the core focus on my visits to Chelsea tend to be to the mega-galleries, like Gagosian, Zwirner, Hauser & Wirth, and Pace, for the most part. There are many galleries there that I love, that I work with, and that I'll continue to work with, but from my viewpoint, it seems that collectors tend not to go to Chelsea as often as they used to. And when they do, it's for a big gallery show at either one of the mega-galleries or a gallery that's been around for 30 years.

The Canvas: And what about Tribeca?

Alexander Berggruen: So, many galleries in Chelsea have recently

“ If collectors – who tend to be based on the Upper East Side – aren't traveling to Chelsea as often as they used to, then would they really be willing to travel down to Tribeca? I wasn't so sure. ”

moved to Tribeca. Tribeca offers a good amount of space, while being a bit more reasonably priced. I definitely considered Tribeca. However, I still had this question in my mind. If collectors – who tend to be based on the Upper East Side – aren't traveling to Chelsea as often as they used to, then would they really be willing to travel down to Tribeca? I wasn't so sure.

Ultimately, it was a process of elimination. There were the reasons these other neighborhoods didn't make as much sense to me, and then there were those features that drew me to the Upper East Side. It's where many collectors live. It's in great context with the museums nearby. It has a number of the hotels to which international collectors gravitate – the Mark, the Carlyle, the Surrey, etc. – and, it's also a wonderful environment in that great galleries have outposts there, including David Zwirner, Hauser & Wirth, Friedrich Petzel, Simon Lee, and Almine Rech. I wanted to be in context with those types of galleries, so all those factors spoke loudly to me and convinced me to choose the Upper East Side as the place to open my gallery.

The Canvas: You mentioned that the programming was going to be a mix of historical and contemporary. Do you plan on having a roster of artists that you represent, or will it be more one-off projects in terms of primary market material?

Alexander Berggruen: For the artists I'll work with directly over the first, let's say, year or so, my plan will be to do shows with those artists and, over time, most likely formalize a roster of artists with whom I'll work in the longer term. My plan, of course, is to do shows with artists whom I know and have relationships with at the start. I think it's important for us to try working together, see how it feels, how the relationship works, how the show is received, and how it fares commercially. If all those things feel good and it's working, then we can formalize an official representation when it makes sense. It's kind of like dating. You wouldn't want to commit to being in a full-blown relationship with someone until you've been on several dates with them. I think there's a similar parallel in the art world.

The Canvas: I hear you. Do you mind giving an example what a typical show at the gallery would be? For instance, what will be the first show when you open in the fall?

Alexander Berggruen: My first show will be about the use of language, words, and text in art from the early 20th century to now. So, it's a wide span and includes works by a variety of artists. But my hope and goal for this exhibition is to look at how artists would often respond to their surroundings through the use of language in their works via paintings (for the most part), a few sculptural works, and some works on paper.

The Canvas: So, it sounds like everything will be secondary market material. Is that the case?

Alexander Berggruen: No. At its foundation, and for the most part, the show will consist of secondary market material that's been sourced through a wonderful network of collectors and friends. Some are loans that aren't for sale and others are consignments that are available to be purchased. But there's a nice sprinkling of, let's say, six or eight works by contemporary artists who, for the most part, have made works directly and purposefully for this exhibition.

In terms of individual artists who will be featured in the show, there will be works by Joseph Kosuth, John Baldessari, Basquiat, Barbara Kruger, Christopher Wool, Charles Gaines, and others. I'm really excited about the show as it will feature a lot of wonderful artists from different realms, some using language to speak in a humorous or satirical way, and others using language in a more politically charged and active way. As I start to think about how to arrange the works within the show, there are some interesting options that are not strictly chronological in terms of thought process and impetus for creation.

The Canvas: The Upper East Side is a pretty saturated neighborhood in terms of art galleries. You're going to be ensconced amongst some pretty heavy hitters – Richard Gray Gallery, Van de Weghe, Lévy Gorvy, Mnuchin, Gagolian, Acquavella, Venus Over Manhattan, Nahmad Contemporary, etc. What do you want the impact of your gallery to be with these galleries as your neighbors? I think that other than Joe Nahmad, you'll be the youngest gallery owner on the Upper East Side, at least that I know of...

Alexander Berggruen: I think you're right. It's exciting. It's a little bit daunting, but in the best possible way where it's a thrill and a privilege to be able to organize a program that brings a new energy and a new perspective to the Upper East Side, which tends to be a bit more established and traditional. It allows me to continue my relationships with many well-established collectors dealing in the bread and butter of fairly blue chip, secondary market material, while also having the opportunity to offer them works by some contemporary artists they will already know of, and some that are newer to the scene and certainly newer to their vantage points. Also, when a gallery can successfully balance a primary market program

with historic secondary market material, it works wonderfully in that more traditional collectors have a chance to look forward, and younger collectors who are just starting to build their collections can look backward as they become more comfortable developing their style and taste.

My near-term goal is to put on exhibitions that are strong, critically important, and well received by the collectors that become a part of my community. A simultaneous goal, to be realistic, is to be successful in terms of shows that conduct business, as my goal is to build the gallery for the long term and help it grow. Running a gallery requires sales. That's just a fact. I think that's sometimes lost on some people who look to start their own galleries. But my longer-term goal is very much focused on growing the gallery. I don't envision my gallery as a small gallery. I envision it as a growing gallery and as a gallery that is taking its first step.

The Canvas: And finally, how do you plan to break through the noise and get people to actually come in person to the gallery? As a new gallery without much brand awareness – and a gallery that will be on the third floor of a building on the Upper East Side – it could prove quite difficult to bring in foot traffic. Is that even a main goal of yours? I know of many dealers who increasingly view physical foot traffic as a less important factor in the success of their galleries.

Alexander Berggruen: There are many different ways. There's old media and there's new media, and old advertising and new advertising, which all help spread the word about openings and about different avenues to explore for transactions. Thankfully, I already have a ready and willing guest list just from the wide range of collectors and artists I keep in touch with on a regular basis. And, while that personal attention does require a lot of time and is technically part of my work, it's also a pleasure to work with people I care about and who I actually want to work with. There are some people in the art world, as everyone knows, that are not the most pleasurable people to deal with.

The Canvas: Ain't that the truth.

Alexander Berggruen: I simply focus on those collectors that tend to be wonderful human beings. And it's the same for artists, the same for art world colleagues, and of course, collectors. There's also the topic of Instagram...

The Canvas: I'm glad you brought up Instagram. Your Instagram happens to have a fairly sizable audience for someone who's been more of a 'behind-the-scenes' player. I think you have close to 20,000 followers. That's pretty significant. And, it's a fairly prominent following in terms of art world insiders.

Alexander Berggruen: Thank you. That was kind of a lucky coincidence where I started my Instagram while at the Imp/Mod department at Christies. I was seeing so much art on a daily basis, I was traveling more for business to various museums across the country, and I was attending gallery shows and our auction previews, that it got to this point where I just realized there was a chance to share some of the favorites of what I was seeing. And as I learned a lot about what I was either selling or seeing, there was this opportunity to share – in a hopefully not-too-pedantic of a way – some basic information about either the artist or the historical significance behind the work. I didn't necessarily expect it to gain a following. That just happened to be a byproduct of the posts.

“When a gallery can successfully balance a primary market program with historic secondary market material, it works wonderfully in that more traditional collectors have a chance to look forward, and younger collectors who are just starting to build their collections can look backward as they become more comfortable developing their style and taste.”