

## Art Market International

# San Francisco galleries aim to build bridges

While the departure of Gagosian from the city can be seen as a blow, smaller galleries are innovating to survive—and thrive. By **Tess Thackara**

San Francisco and the surrounding Bay Area galleries have suffered an economic blow from the Covid-19 pandemic like all art communities – and there have already been casualties. Gallery 16, a valued resident of San Francisco's South of Market district – which represents local artists such as Tucker Nichols and Alice Shaw – will close its space in the coming weeks, and perhaps the business for good. Owner Griff Williams says he could not weather the dramatic drop in sales and foot traffic to the gallery combined with the “staggering” rent that the landlord was unwilling to negotiate.

Petra Schumann, the executive director of the San Francisco Art Dealers Association (SEADA), says that four of the association's 55 member galleries have also closed their spaces, although some are still active on social media. The city's highest-profile casualty is Gagosian, whose arrival in San Francisco in 2016 was heralded as a gilded stamp on the promise of converting the region's wealthy tech workers into art collectors. But the gallery quietly left the city over the holidays, later issuing a statement saying it would consolidate its West

Coast presence in Los Angeles.

However, the majority of Bay Area galleries are surviving and some are “more than surviving”, according to Schumann, even if that has required rapid adaptation, as well as help from federal stimulus funds and other sources of fiscal support. For mega-gallery Pace, the Bay Area is “core to our mission”, says Marc Glimcher, its president and chief executive. Pace opened in Palo Alto, in the heart of Silicon Valley, in 2016 because, despite being a region with a seismic global influence, it has few art galleries. “We don't want people making a big impact on the world without artists being part of that ecosystem,” Glimcher says.

### Holding steady—or better

Glimcher says that, while Pace has taken a major hit in sales revenue over the past years, the decline has been significantly lower at the Palo Alto branch. Among San Francisco's established galleries, several say they are holding steady, or better. Wendi Norris – who auspiciously gave up her large space to go itinerant in 2017 – reports a 25% increase in sales, which she attributes to the growth of interest in artists such as Leonora



San Francisco has a “small, dedicated group of collectors”. Below left: Minnesota Street Project in the Dogpatch is home to 13 galleries. Below right: Gagosian's now-closed space

Carrington and María Magdalena Campos-Pons, investments in publishing, and having more time to speak with clients.

For many galleries, such as Jenkins Johnson Gallery, survival has meant remaining visible by using online platforms such as Artlogic to host virtual exhibitions, cultivating institutional buyers through educational Zoom programmes, and maximising sales in online art fairs. Others have organised curbside window exhibitions and live-streamed artist walkthroughs (Catharine Clark Gallery). And some have been helped by collectors who have fast-tracked acquisitions of major works (Thelma Harris Gallery).

Galleries have joined forces, as in the development of 8-Bridges, an online exhibition platform founded by nine

dealers and advisers, including Jessica Silverman and Kelly Huang (former co-director of Gagosian San Francisco), in order to share audiences. 8-Bridges hosted offerings from 30 galleries last month for San Francisco Art Week, designed to fill the void created by the absence of the FOG and Untitled art fairs.

At Minnesota Street Project in the city's Dogpatch district, a renovated warehouse that is home to 13 commercial galleries, the building's management has organised socially distanced group exhibitions and built an online platform for resident galleries to host virtual exhibitions.

Et Al and Ratio 3, neighbouring galleries in the Mission District, are sharing an appointment scheduling system for visitors. “It's been a coming together,”

says Frish Brandt, the president of Fraenkel Gallery, referring to the collaboration among Bay Area galleries.

### Gagosian's missed opportunity

While local galleries are sorry to see Gagosian go, according to most, the mega-gallery's tenure in the city was too short-lived to leave much of a void. “It's a disappointment when any gallery closes,” Schumann says. “Gagosian coming to San Francisco was a welcome move because it increased the status of the art gallery scene here as a whole. But will it affect galleries here? No.” She adds that Gagosian had declined to join SEADA and that it was “not very involved in the community.”

Others see the gallery's departure



*San Francisco is not a place that responds to grandiose braggadocio*

Marc Glimcher, Pace gallery

as a missed opportunity. “Gagosian misread their market,” Norris says. “San Francisco has a small, dedicated group of collectors but also is one of the wealthiest cities in the world and [there is] a lot of opportunity to create new collectors.” Glimcher suspects the closure was a case of belt tightening, of “last in, first out” – San Francisco was one of Gagosian's newest locations. “I really don't think it's any reflection on San Francisco.”

On how to succeed in the Bay Area, both Norris and Glimcher suggest a different playbook is needed. “It's not a place that responds to grandiose braggadocio – the trappings of power and exclusivity,” Glimcher says. In San Francisco, Norris says, “people tend to care what you bring to the conversation at that moment rather than where you've been and where you came from.”



GOLDEN GATE PHOTO: JANA NEUDOMANUPUSH; MINNESOTA STREET PROJECT COURTESY OF THE GALLERY; GAGOSIAN: LAURIN SHAN/REUTERS VIA GETTY IMAGES

# Asia's art world pins its hopes on vaccines

By **Lisa Movius**

SINGAPORE. Mass distribution of Covid-19 vaccines has begun around Asia, but with restricted borders and strict quarantine regimes for travellers still the norm, the resumption of art fairs this spring is being thrown into doubt.

At the time of writing, a few events planned to forge ahead, such as Singapore art week and the third edition of S.E.A. Focus fair (until 31 January). But Art Fair Philippines, usually held in February, has been postponed as a “mainly digital platform”, says its co-founder Trickle Lopa. Then, all eyes are on Art Basel in Hong Kong (ABHK), which has moved its 2021 fair from March to 21 to 23 May. But that is still contingent upon resumption of some international travel to the city, which currently requires a 14-day quarantine. Covid restrictions aside, ABHK also must contend with worsening censorship and political

crackdown from mainland China.

“The format, timing and scope of our fairs in 2021 will very much depend on the global travel situation,” says Art Basel Asia director Adeline Ooi, adding: “It is imaginable that our Hong Kong fair next year will be smaller and more regional in scale.” Ooi says that Art Basel in Basel, now scheduled for June, could be pushed back if conditions require, but “we remain fully committed to holding our fairs in Hong Kong, Basel and Miami Beach”.

While Singapore's borders remain open only to residents and permit holders (with 14-day quarantines), art can come in even if people cannot. Fifteen of S.E.A. Focus's 27 participating galleries are based outside the city state. Shasha Tittmann, the director of Lehmann Maupin Hong Kong, says the gallery's team cannot travel to Singapore, so it will join the fair's showcase with a single work by Mandy El-Sayegh.

“With borders closed, these regional art fairs have become local fairs again,” Tittmann says. “In both Shanghai and Busan [in November 2020] we saw strong support and were able to sell to first-time buyers of the gallery. Without the international travel and the buzz of dinners and parties, the fair experience has had to adapt and simplify in many ways – but at its core, it's still delivering an experience that's worthwhile.”

In mainland China, currently open to only nationals and special exceptions, subject to 14-day quarantines, nine million vaccines had been administered as of mid-January, with Gallery Weekend Beijing still due to go ahead from 19 to 28 March. However, even previously open-door states such as Japan and Indonesia are now restricting entry to prevent the new UK strain of the virus from gaining a foothold. Taiwan, meanwhile, closed in spring 2020 to most non-residents.

Tittmann says: “The current situation



Singapore's borders are open only to residents and permit holders, subject to quarantine

is really unprecedented. Two months ago, we thought we would be in a better global position with the pandemic. On the upside, we didn't expect so many vaccines to be approved so quickly. It will come down to how fast they can distribute and when international travel agreements can be made.”

Travel bubbles have largely proved false hopes – for example, the Hong

Kong and Singapore corridor was cancelled almost immediately due to a fresh Hong Kong outbreak.

As Tittmann says, “there is even less leniency from governments for international travel that could derail domestic efforts. Galleries will have to continue adapting to the various situations until we can see results from the global vaccine programme.”