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Ambitious Dealer Maria Bernheim Bets Big on London, Expanding Her Gallery While Others Contract



BY KAREN K. HO October 9, 2023 10:06am



Maria Bernheim has big plans for her gallery's new space in London. COURTESY OF BERNHEIM GALLERY

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An ambitious gallery focused on young and contemporary artists is changing its name and moving to a much larger historic space in London.

After more than a year of planning, paperwork, and renovations, Bernheim, previously known as **Galerie Maria Bernheim**, will open its new five-story flagship in the Mayfair neighborhood on New Burlington Street on November 30. It will also maintain its space in Zurich.

The gallery's first group show in the new London location, "**The Big Chill**," will include all of the artists it represent as well as close friends of the company and its roster. They include Ebecho Muslimova, Denis Savary, Mitchell Anderson, Tishan Hsu, Juan Antonio Olivares, Ilana Savdie, Tom Waring, and Rico Weber.

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Bernheim established her namesake gallery in 2015. After eight years and locations in Zurich and London, the dealers said she now wants to shift the way she works.

"I wanted to take it away from me a little bit," Bernheim said. "I never wanted anyone to walk into the gallery in London saying, 'I only want to speak to Maria.' I want to give this space for all the people working with me and all the artists. When you have a brand name, like Bernheim, it really helps with that as a vision and as a global thing."

For her new space, Bernheim has refurbished a **heritage building** developed in the 18th century and now owned by the Crown. "There was every obstacle in my way to take this," she said, referring to multiple presentations where she had to justify how she could afford the space of more than 5,000 square feet. "But I was so decided on that and I pushed for it."



The heritage building was built in the 18th century as part of the Burlington Estates. Courtesy of Bernheim Gallery.

London's art scene appears to be more broadly going through a shake-up. Some galleries, such as **Marian Goodman**, **Tornabuoni**, and Kamel Mennour, have closed their London spaces following Brexit, while others, like Stephen Friedman, Pilar Corrias, and Alison Jacques, have recently expanded. Although other young gallerists are going "small and scrappy" in **inexpensive** neighborhoods, Bernheim is going big in one of the city's most famous and affluent, where she will be located only a few feet from the bespoke tailors of Saville Row. She'll also be on the same block as the London location of Hauser & Wirth.

The economic and cultural significance of new location is something Bernheim is hyper-aware of, as a young art dealer. She compared the dominance of mega-galleries in the art industry to the situation in Hollywood with major studios. "There's nothing in the middle anymore," she said. "I think that that's totally uninteresting. I think that part of what makes the art world so amazing is the diversity."

Three floors of the new gallery will be devoted to exhibition spaces. One will be offices and a "little bit of showroom," and the last floor will be a flexible reception area. "I want to be able to host you for dinner with a couple artists with friends. I don't have to always invite you to a fancy restaurant."

Bernheim also wants the three exhibition floors to allow curators and artists to more easily collaborate with friends who are younger or at a different stage in their professional careers. "I think this idea of a community is something that I'm so interested in, because I think that's the only way we get any conversation and any even idea that we could advance culture. It cannot be done without a community."

A Truly Driven Immigrant

Even outside the art industry, Bernheim has led an interesting life. She was born in Romania, grew up in Paris, studied at Oxford University starting at the age of 16, and then ended up in Switzerland. "The art world, however elitist and difficult it is, has also allowed someone like me—honestly, you could not come from a poorer background—to do any of this," she told *ARTnews* from London.

That background shapes many of her ideas about risk, ambition, and work ethic. "When people say I'm crazy to do this, especially at the point where the market is contracting, I actually have nothing to lose," she said. "The worst that's gonna happen is I'm gonna go back to where I was before. You know what? I've done it, and it was fine."

Bernheim's experience as an immigrant, and as the only child of two parents who didn't speak English, also drives her to work even harder to make the new space a success. "There is no option to be mediocre," she said with a grin.

These standards are reflected in some of the gallery's notable shows, such as a solo exhibition of Sarah Slappey that opened at its Zurich location last November. The Brooklyn-based artist made a splash at two different auctions, both held in Hong Kong, shortly afterward; at one of them, a painting of hers sold for more than \$129,000—no small feat for an artist who'd never had an international solo show before Bernheim gave her one.

A strong slate that has also included shows for artists such as Juan Antonio Olivares and Eli Ping has granted her entry to Art Basel Miami Beach, a notoriously selective fair.

Bernheim is still juggling her desires to figure out a more sustainable way to work while also finding ways to save money. For example, she has not hired an IT person to switch the gallery website's URL because she has decided to learn how to do it herself.

She has forgone many of the luxuries many dealers enjoy—she said she was willing to avoid going on vacation for a decade if necessary—and she views these sacrifices as necessary for the sake of her gallery.

"What I do every day, although how painful and difficult it is, it also brings me so much joy," she said. "I couldn't do anything else. And I think that that's why a lot of artists and I have a lot in common is when I go see them. I know they can't do anything else, and I can't do anything else, so we're stuck in it together forever."

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