

ARTS

Gallerist Maria Bernheim On Her London Opening and Getting High on Her Own Supply

"When you pick an artist—for me it's a very old-fashioned thing—it's a life decision, like getting married."

By Daniel Pezzy · 02/22/24 10:55am



Bernheim Gallery in London. Courtesy Bernheim Gallery

One night late last year, Maria Bernheim opened the doors of her five-story gallery in central London for its inaugural group exhibition, "The Big Chill" (recently replaced by "Mirage," the second solo show of Ding Shun). Eschewing a formal or philosophical theory, the show took its name from the eighties movie about old college pals reuniting and brought together artists represented by the gallery, along with their friends, studiomates and assistants. Major names, like Sarah Slaphey, hung alongside hot up-and-comers like Ding Shun and Michelle Ukotter, offering an eclectic survey of what's happening in London and around the world—through the eyes of one of Europe's most exciting young gallerists.



'Antiquity at Dusk,' Ding Shun, 2023. Courtesy Bernheim Gallery

Observer toured the show with Ms. Bernheim a few weeks after the opening when well-wishers had gone home and the lights had finally been installed. The unique architecture of the building is essential to the gallery's raison d'être: formerly occupied by a Ralph Lauren private atelier, it's a Grade II-listed townhouse owned by the Crown, with intimate, salon-sized rooms and large windows that look out on New Burlington Street. Ms. Bernheim sees her gallery as an antidote to the big, boring, blank slates that currently dominate the contemporary art scene. It's a personal and idiosyncratic approach, guided by her penchant for contrarianism.

"At some point, you really have to have faith," she said, standing in front of a delicately balanced sculpture by artist [Eli Ping](#), *Monocarp 3* (2022). What looks at first like an improbably spindly piece of Carrara marble is, in fact, a canvas draped and stiffened to stand on tip-toe. Like the art on view, the gallerist was candid, cosmopolitan in her views and never boring.

Tell me about the concept behind the group show, "The Big Chill," which sounds like a house party.

My main focus in opening this space was to show that I wanted to go back to this much more collegial vision of galleries. I wanted this kind of community type of feeling. I don't want to pretend there was an overarching theme, like, I don't know, "identity," or something that people come up with. It's really everyone just saying, "Hey, we're going to do this together."

How do you choose who's invited into this community?

For me, I have to walk into a studio and say, "This looks like nothing I've ever seen before." Then I can like it or not, or whatever. But anything that meets that criteria. And that's maybe also because I want to surprise myself. Otherwise, I would shoot myself because, it's a very tough job.

When you pick an artist—for me it's a very old-fashioned thing—it's a life decision, like getting married. Because I'm going to be here. Now, okay, we fell in love. We met, that's great. There's a honeymoon period. But then there's obviously going to be some difficult conversations. There's going to be money conversations; there's going to be disagreements. And I'm hoping that we're going to be together through that.

For example, John Rashmi was one of my first artists, and I've worked with him ever since. We were friends before we even had any gallery partnerships. And it's these kinds of shared memories when you're growing together. But today, it's true that this system has broken down. There are a few people that you can still have that with.



'Discipline Study,' Sarah Slaphey, 2023. Courtesy Bernheim Gallery

Or the artist, if they're successful, outgrows the gallerist and dumps them—but they can't outgrow you because you're so big. That brings me to the building you've chosen for the gallery. It's massive, and it's got a lot of architectural character.

It was a tricky thing for some people to imagine because, for a contemporary art space, people would think it's not ideal. But I really wanted to have something that looked like London. When you go on the website of all these galleries and you look at installation images, you don't know if it's in L.A., it could be anywhere. And I'm not interested in that, because I also want to offer challenges for my artists. I think the show you do here will not be the same one you do in my white cube gallery in Zurich. And I think that's challenging and more interesting for the artist.

I also think it lends itself to painting in a way that a huge open space doesn't always.

How do you feel as a viewer because you're forced into a more intimate relationship with the works?

It's great. This is the proximity that I want to have. I want a more meditative encounter.

It's strange sometimes—there are spaces where you walk in and you see the whole show, right? You open the door, and you've seen it.



An installation view of "The Big Chill." Courtesy Bernheim Gallery

How was opening night?

The response to the show was really amazing because we had people from all over the world. Like Asian collectors, and Americans had come by. There's a lot of talk about Brexit. Everyone's like, "Oh, why are you opening in London? Because Brexit..." But I am based in Switzerland, so actually, it doesn't matter for me to export to France or to export to the U.K.—same shit.

You're also a collector, right?

When I was working at a gallery in Zurich, I realized I was spending all the money I was making on contemporary art, because I was doing all the fairs and I would go to the other sections and start buying. I'm a terrible gallerist because I spend all the money I make on more art.

That's getting high on your own supply.

It's a terrible business model. My accountant's like, "What are you doing?"

Do you think this gives you a different understanding of your buyers?

It's interesting to be a collector yourself. It's a bug you can't get rid of. I've seen people at the gallery who can tell you, for example, "At the moment, it's a bit tight," but if you present them with the work that they wanted forever, they will tell you, "Okay, I can pay over a year" or "Can I get a discount? Can I do this?"

They will make it work because they cannot live without that work. And most importantly, they can't live with knowing that someone else owns it. I think the real thing about being a collector is that not only do you need it, but nobody else can have it.

I've also noticed a lot of people who want to introduce me to other people saying, "Hey, he has a lot of money." And I'm like, "That does not matter. If you don't want to collect art, it doesn't matter the money." I'm going to tell you right away. My best collectors are not my richest collectors.

Does a passion for art run in your family?

I was born in Romania, and my parents were part of an artists group there. When the revolution happened and everything, and we went to Paris when I was four or five. And so I grew up with nothing, but my father was an artist and later on, sort of a dealer but he was a terrible businessman.

He was a painter, but you know, very traditional. And my mother, she got there and she found a job as a seamstress in haute couture. I always say art was the only thing that ever put food on the table. I grew up doing all these things, going to the flea market.

And how did you figure out that you weren't going to be the one making the art?

I have no talent. And honestly, now, having done this for almost fifteen years, I feel that the life of an artist is the hardest life. There's always someone who's rejecting you at some point by not liking you or by not wanting. And I think that once you have a gallery, it's actually the opposite. You stand by a vision, and you say, "Okay, this is what I believe in. This is what I like, and if you don't like it, I don't really care." But there's also this generosity of saying "My door is open—but I don't need you to approve of what I do."

The above interview was edited and condensed for clarity.