SPRÜTH MAGERS

Los Angeles Magazine, Online, 23 February 2016
By Marielle Wakim

This way to Sprüth-Magers Photograph by Marielle Wakim

Berlin's Sprüth-Magers Opens on Museum Row, but They're Not Just Following All of the Other International Galleries

Discussing the current state and possible future of L.A.'s art scene with Monika Sprüth and Philomene Magers, the pair behind formidable German gallery Sprüth-Magers, is a little like eating lunch with the popular girls: nerve-racking (they're effortlessly scholarly and cool) but delightful (they're endlessly welcoming despite their elevated station).
The pair is opening their first American outpost at 5900 Wilshire Boulevard, a sibling to two others in London and Berlin. Sprüth-Magers is yet another international gallery to hop the pond—London's Ibid. Projects has been here for several years, and Zurich's hotly anticipated transplant, Hauser Wirth & Schimmel, opens downtown next month—but its founders say they're not simply following the pack. Rather, they're following their artists, several of whom are L.A.-based (Barbara Kruger, Sterling Ruby, and John Baldessari, to name a few). Here they talk Los Angeles' artistic legacy, its bright future, and what we can expect from their inaugural exhibition.

This is your first gallery in the U.S. Why did you decide on Los Angeles for your American gallery, and why now?
Philomene Magers: We've been thinking about doing something in the U.S. for many, many years. And because some galleries here closed, like L&M Arts and Margo Leavin Gallery, a couple of our L.A.-based artists and American artists suddenly didn't have a gallery anymore.

And they more or less came up with this idea of us having a gallery here. It was not our idea. We started actively looking for a space three-and-a-half or four years ago. So it didn't really have anything to do with this whole L.A. vibe thing that seems to be happening now. It came out of the needs of our gallery artists.
A lot of people—particularly in the New York art world—say that our cultural history isn't long.
PM: I mean, the whole history of Los Angeles isn't so long. But I think L.A. started developing a vibrant scene with artists producing groundbreaking new work that was specific and different than the work that was made in New York, for example—or in Paris or Dusseldorf at the time. With regards to how young Los Angeles is, its cultural importance within the visual arts covers quite a big amount of time over L.A.'s existence as a big city. And I really think that, in terms of the discourse and the art being produced here, it's definitely one of the international art centers now, no?
Monika Sprüth: It also depends what you think is important. In a way, the film industry or film itself is one of the biggest cultural achievements of the 20th century. The biggest. It has roots here in Los Angeles, so if people say Los Angeles is not a very cultured city, you can see it from different angles. I'm sure New York is more concentrated, but if you see now how many interesting museums there are here, and important art schools, and these important teachers—when you analyze it, they have caught what American culture is in a more interesting way than American artists that have been mainly based in New York. Those artists have been extremely influenced by European culture; Here, if you think of Ed Ruscha's early photos, he really captured what an American aesthetic is in a more specific way.

PM: And also John Baldessari.

MS: If you look at all of them, it feels less European-influenced. And there have been great American artists in New York, of course, but if you really analyze it, a lot of the influence has been from a European culture. L.A. is farther away from Europe. These artists, in a way, wanted to stay in their own upbringing culture-wise.
Speaking of John Baldessari, the inaugural exhibition you're doing is one featuring his works. He lost a gallery space recently—was launching this branch with him a natural decision?
PM: Absolutely. It was a no-brainer.

What can we expect from the display?
PM: It's photographic and text work with painting which deals with a lot of almost surrealist juxtapositions. John is always kind of changing the meaning and starting to tell a different story by putting together different images. For example, in our series, he's doing that by putting together images with texts that, at the first glance, seem to not have anything to do with what you see. But it gives what you see a different meaning.
L.A. and its galleries have historically been confined to the West side or the La Cienega/Washington corridor. But now a lot of them are moving east into Hollywood or elsewhere. Why did you settle on Museum Row?
PM: It was because of the architecture of the building: we thought it looked like a prototypical Californian, L.A. building—like a building from an Ed Ruscha photograph. It's this very specific midcentury architecture that we were really interested in. We're always trying to have specific architecture that captures the spirit of the city or country where our galleries are based. In Berlin, we're in an old 19th century ballroom, and in London, we're in an old Victorian townhouse.

How do you feel you'll fit into the fold of the museums surrounding you? LACMA, CAFAM, the Page Museum?
MS: All the visitors to the contemporary part of LACMA, these are exactly the visitors who would visit our gallery as well. Sometimes it's a little more difficult to go into a gallery, but it's the same clientele, I think.

You have compared Los Angeles to Berlin in that they're both "artist's cities."
PM: Yes. Both are very contemporary places. There are cities in which there is a certain cultural clash: In Berlin you have the East and the West coming together; here you have the overlap with Mexico. That creates friction, of course, which is always interesting for artists. The other thing is, just technically, the two cities are both so vast that even if one part is becoming gentrified, there are always more places to move on to where you can again find a cheap apartments, cheap housing, cheap studio space. This is what you see now that's happening in downtown L.A.

What excites you about the next five, ten, 15 years in the Los Angeles art scene? What do you see that makes you glad you're planting a gallery here, now?
PM: Right now, it seems to be a place where a contemporary art discourse is being developed.

MS: Even artists who are a little older or mid-age are interested to live here—there are quite a few artists who are attracted to a certain kind of cultural discourse which is here. And, in the last 20 years, there have been really interesting younger artists who've come out of the art schools here. They're legendary, the art schools, and this will probably continue. When people talk about this hype or this new interest in Los Angeles, it's almost less that there are so many galleries moving here. It's about artists moving here.