

SPRÜTH MAGERS

Expanding to stay small

Gallerists | As Philomene Magers and Monika Sprüth

open their Los Angeles space, they talk to

Jonathan Griffin about working in today's art world

This was the first building I ever set foot in when I came to Los Angeles," says German gallerist Philomene Magers. It was 1991, and the building in question was then a café across Wilshire Boulevard from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), designed by William Pereira; she had no idea that it would one day bear her name on its façade, in polished brass letters, along with that of her business partner Monika Sprüth.

Sprüth and Magers merged their former galleries — Sprüth's in Cologne, Magers' in Munich — in 1998. Now they have galleries in Berlin and London, and offices in Cologne and Hong Kong. The press first reported Sprüth Magers' impending expansion to Los Angeles in 2013, fuelling more excited chatter about the city's art renaissance. In the three years of delays that followed, various New York and European galleries opened spaces in LA. Some thrived, others faltered. Meanwhile, Sprüth Magers' unhurried pace of advancement seems measured, sanguine and shrewd.

Several new galleries have opened in the warehouse district around the LA River, to the east of Downtown. Others have joined the cluster of galleries around Hillhurst Avenue, in East Hollywood. By contrast, Sprüth Magers Los Angeles is positioned on the Miracle Mile, surrounded by attractions including the relaunched Petersen Automotive Museum, the La Brea Tar Pits Museum, LACMA and the forthcoming Academy Museum of Motion Pictures.

It was the building that attracted them: a two-storey, 14,000 sq ft white concrete box built in 1966, its walls broken up by double-height windows on three sides and surrounded by a moat-like reflection pool, with fountains and palm trees. Complementing Pereira's original design for LACMA across the street, it exudes the cool mid-century modernism for which the city is known. Sprüth emphasises that they "wanted to find somewhere that has to do with the culture of the place".

They enlisted the help of London-based German architect Andreas Lechtaler, who collaborated with Berlin-based architects Botho von Senger and Etterlin. In the large gallery, removable walls have been installed against the tall windows, stopping short of the ceiling and corners so that its exterior form remains visible from within. Offices upstairs will accommodate six staff

members, at the outset. As a reflection of the gallery's bias towards women artists, furnishings will include vintage pieces by female designers: Dorothy Schindeler's desks and chairs, Greta Magnusson-Grossman's lamps and Edith Heath's ceramics.

Sprüth and Magers deny that they are opening in LA because of commercial opportunities in the city. The local collector base, though growing, remains small compared with that of New York or London, and there are question marks over the viability of the art fair scene (see Georgina Adam's art market column, below). Their decision, they say, is much more to do with supporting their artists who live in LA, whose work they mainly sell in Europe.

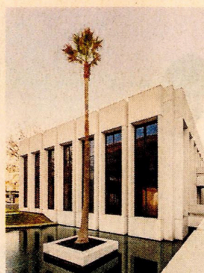
Thus on February 24 the gallery will open with an exhibition of new paintings by LA artist John Baldessari, the revered conceptualist, now 84. Sprüth Magers has been exhibiting his work for almost three decades, and he is one of the main reasons the gallery is opening its new space.

When veteran Los Angeles dealer Margo Leavin announced in 2012 that she was closing her gallery, Baldessari was left without representation on the west coast. A year later, L&M Arts Los Angeles closed as well, leaving Sprüth Magers' artists Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer in the same position.

'Our gallery is a very traditional one,' says Sprüth. 'We think our job is to serve the artists.'

Kruger introduced her German dealers to L&M's former director, Sarah Watson, and between them they hatched a plan to open new premises. Watson is now co-director of Sprüth Magers Los Angeles, together with the Swiss art historian Anna Helwing, who ran a gallery in the city between 2003 and 2008 before moving to Europe.

A number of Sprüth Magers' other artists also live in the area, most notably Ed Ruscha who, along with Baldessari, is perhaps the figure most widely associated with the development of pop and conceptual art in the city. The sought-after sculptor Sterling Ruby is also an LA resident, as is young multimedia artist Ryan Trecartin. The German artist Thomas Demand now spends most



Philomene Magers and Monika Sprüth in their new gallery in LA (centre)

Below: 'It's Possible, Although...' (2015) by John Baldessari

Claudio Lucia, Joshua White



IT'S POSSIBLE, ALTHOUGH HE WOULD LIKELY INITIATE CONVERSATION.

of his time there too. All these are represented by other galleries in LA, but Sprüth and Magers still feel that it is important to stay close to their artists.

"Our gallery is a very traditional one," says Sprüth. "We think our job is to serve the artists." Magers acknowledges that the public perception of an art gallery is usually that it is a fancied shop. "Our gallery is much less a shop than it is other things." A large amount of time is taken up by managing studios, producing and fabricating work, and forging relationships with museums. Of the 60 staff members employed around the world by Sprüth Magers, about 20 work as artist liaisons, and only eight are dedicated to sales.

With this business model, Sprüth says, "We do sometimes disturb one or other of our male colleagues. They don't understand how it can work the way we

are. They are irritated. Which is nice, to irritate them a little bit."

To build such a successful art-world business as a woman, says Magers, "is hard. It's really, really hard." The socialising and the travel required to maintain an international profile can be grueling; in the early days, when she had young children, Sprüth would fly in and out of cities in a day so she could be home for dinner. Now she admits she is sometimes at home no more than 10 days in a month. Running her gallery alone in the 1980s, she realised that she needed support. The younger Magers, who had opened her gallery in Munich in 1991, was able to travel when Sprüth could not, and years later, when Magers had children, Sprüth was able to travel instead. "Thank God we found each other," says Sprüth. "Without that we would never have been able to grow to the level we're at now."

After Baldessari's show, the next will be by New York painter George Condo — not an artist whose work is often seen in LA. Sprüth insists that the gallery will not adapt its programme for a local audience; it will be consistent, whether in Berlin or London or on the US west coast. Following Condo, an exhibition by female artists, *Eau de Cologne*, travels from Sprüth Magers Berlin.

Do they have ambitions to continue growing? "We have ambitions to be as small as possible," Sprüth answers, wryly. In their eyes, this is just necessary growth.

John Baldessari, Sprüth Magers Los Angeles, in association with Marion Goodman, runs February 24–April 2 spruethmagers.com