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The Los Angeles Art Scene Has Its Moment in the Sun



Hauser & Wirth's downtown Los Angeles gallery, one of a growing number of top-tier art spaces in the city. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth, photo by Zak Kelley

Artists have lived and worked in the sun-filled expanse in and around Los Angeles for decades, drawing collectors from across the U.S. and overseas, working with dozens of local galleries, and spurring the growth of a number of contemporary arts institutions. But the city's identity as a global arts center has eluded it.

Until now.

Since the end of last year, top-tier galleries beginning with New York's Sean Kelly, followed by Lisson (founded in London) and David Zwirner, announced they would open spaces in the city. Global heavyweight Pace partnered with Kayne Griffin to open its L.A. gallery in April (its third attempt since the 1960s), while New York galleries Sargent's Daughters and Shrine, along with Carpenters Workshop, a fine-art design dealer with spaces in London, Paris, and New York, announced they, too, would soon open in L.A.

The European powerhouse Hauser & Wirth announced in June 2021 that it would open a second L.A. location in West Hollywood by fall 2022. Six years earlier, it opened a downtown Arts District destination in a former turn-of-the-20th-century flour mill and a restaurant with shows featuring commissioned works by local artists such as Mark Bradford and Richard Pettibone.

The second space reflects Hauser & Wirth's strategy of integrating in the cities it does business in, and the reality L.A. isn't a singular place, but a metropolis of different

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neighborhoods, says Stacen Berg, a Hauser & Wirth partner who runs the L.A. program. The West Hollywood location is also closer to a lot of the gallery's clients, which is no small thing in a city with such famously snarled traffic.



Joanne Heyler, Founding Director of The Broad. Courtesy The Broad

This isn't the only time that New York and international blue-chip dealers have set up shop in L.A. In the 1990s, several galleries, including Luhring Augustine (which briefly partnered with Galerie Max Hetzler) populated Santa Monica and other parts of the city. "They didn't last long," recalls Peter Goulds, the founding director of L.A. Louver, which has been in Venice, Calif., since 1975.

The reason Pace Wildenstein shuttered its 4-year-old L.A. gallery in 1999 was it hadn't succeeded "as a cultural and educational venue," Arne Glimcher, Pace's founder, wrote in a letter to the Los Angeles Times in response to an article that had blamed economic conditions. Glimcher countered its experience in the city contrasted with New York, where "going to galleries is an integral part of the cultural life."

Today's flurry of top-tier commercial galleries announcing new spaces in L.A. demonstrates that the city's cultural life has changed. Art schools and artists have long defined L.A.'s art scene, but there are now several major contemporary arts institutions in the city, a global art fair in Frieze L.A., and a growing crop of independent art spaces.

"This is the first time we've had enough of the smaller galleries and curators and art spaces that are doing terribly interesting work, and at the same you can go and see the highest end of shows at Gagosian or Hauser & Wirth or places like that," says Bennett Roberts, co-owner of Roberts Projects. "The infrastructure has become very strong to build upon, it can't just go away now."

Joanne Heyler, founding director at The Broad, the contemporary art museum created in downtown L.A. by the philanthropists and collectors Eli and Edythe Broad, notes the

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museum has recently acquired several works from galleries based in the city, including paintings by local artist Sayre Gomez from François Ghebaly gallery that fuses observations from driving around the city's commercial zones. "They are very much about this fascination and mystery of the city," Heyler says.



Catherine Opie. monument/monumental, 2020. Courtesy the artist and The Broad Art Foundation, photo by Joshua White

Heyler, an L.A. native who worked alongside Eli Broad for more than 35 years initially as director and chief curator of the Broad Art Foundation, says the philanthropist, who died in 2021, pursued a vision of the city as an international arts capital. Heyler can't say for certain whether that day has arrived, but, "if you're interested in contemporary art and you're a collector or an observer or a writer or scholar, you have to come to L.A.—you can't avoid it."

That's why the world's best and biggest galleries want to be in the city. Sean Kelly will open on North Highland Avenue this fall with a show by the British artist Idris Khan, who has family in Los Angeles. Khan is creating a new body of work for the 10,000- square-foot gallery designed by architect Toshiko Mori that includes paintings, watercolors, photography, and sculpture responding to "ideas that he has about L.A.," Kelly says.

The gallery will be headed by Sean's son Thomas Kelly, who moved to the city, and Courtney Treut, senior director, who had previously worked at Hauser & Wirth in L.A. The leadership is intended to show the gallery's commitment to being an L.A.-first institution, not merely a New York outpost.

"Every exhibition in L.A. will be custom-made for L.A. and it'll be custom-made for the L.A. collector base," Sean Kelly says.

The energy of Los Angeles' homegrown artistic community has always been the driving force, says Berg at Hauser & Wirth. "Our relationship with the city didn't start six years ago, it started 30 years ago with relationships with artists," Berg says. "Paul McCarthy, Richard Jackson, Jason Rhoades —these are artists who set the tone of our program because they were super influential in the early days of our gallery."

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Artists from outside L.A. are also drawn to the city for its light, space, and weather, but also because it's a welcoming and relaxed place. "There's a pressure in New York they don't feel out here," Berg says. Exhibitions in L.A. "can be a little more experimental, relaxed. It's more fun."



Sean Kelly and his son, Tom Kelly. Courtesy Sean Kelly

The pandemic may still be limiting travel, but the burst of new gallery announcements demonstrates dealers have confidence visitors will return and L.A. will again be a destination. For the sun and the beaches, yes, but also for the museums and galleries, and because of the artists and their accessibility.

Local artists show up at museum exhibitions and gallery openings for other artists, and they often open their light-filled spacious studios to collectors, an experience not typical in other arts destinations. "There's an intimacy here with the artists that is unique," says Treut of Sean Kelly.

The immediacy of that connection, and the caliber of artists who live and work in L.A. and grew strong international "footprints"—thanks, in part, to the ubiquity of the internet—is foundational to the city's cultural fabric today.

"That's a really intriguing way to grow an arts community, through artists rather than through commerce or even frankly through collectors," Heyler says. "It's very much artist-led and that's key."

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