

L.A.'s Expanding Gallery Scene Has No Center and No Rules — and That's a Good Thing

By Catherine Wagley

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On the last Saturday in March, a few visitors milled around inside Harmony Murphy Gallery on Santa Fe Avenue downtown, studying Joseph Huppert's meticulous, tapestrylike graphite abstractions and Jason Burgess' paintings, which vaguely resemble blurred photographs. But most gallery-goers were out back, behind the renovated warehouse, where bánh mì sandwiches, salad and noodles were spread out on a long table. Some people sat on a bench-height spiral of hay that San Diego artist Thomas DeMello had installed in the center of the back courtyard. At one point, a bearded father wheeled in a baby in a stroller made to look like a vintage car.

Robert Irwin, the 86-year-old artist who in the 1950s and '60s showed at Ferus, L.A.'s first famous gallery, and who once tried to convince a pretentious New York critic that a hot rod could be art, wore a baseball cap. The gallery's founder, Harmony Murphy, was dressed in yellow slacks and a sun hat, her French bulldog by her side. She could have slipped seamlessly into a Joan Didion story about L.A. — she'd struck the right balance between serious and sunny.

Next door, in the courtyard belonging to the gallery Ibid. Projects, wood shavings were still scattered on the concrete from the sculptures Berlin-based artist David Adamo had made on site; the rough, totemlike sculptures recently had been moved into the gallery for his first L.A. show. Sculptor Ry Rocklen, who's made flat tires out of bronze, passed out fliers for a concert his sweetheart's band, Bouquet, would play the next night in Eagle Rock.

The event had an endearingly local feel. An outsider might never have guessed that both galleries had been open for only a matter of months, or that Ibid. is run by London-based Magnus Edensvard, in town for the week to open Adamo's exhibition before returning to his gallery's U.K. headquarters. Earlier that evening, New York-based gallerist Michele Maccarone, also in town for only a few days, had stopped by to see Murphy's and Edensvard's new shows. She plans to open a 35,000-square-foot gallery in a green-trimmed industrial building on Mission, near Boyle Heights, in September. The building, more than twice the size of her West Village gallery, will have a sculpture garden out front and ramps leading up to two front doors. "This is

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For an obsolete idea, it's a staggeringly popular one in Los Angeles. More than 50 galleries opened or will open between late 2013 and 2015, twice as many as in the two previous years. They're operating at all levels: some well established in other major cities, others new but showing known artists, and several new and specializing in artists who are barely known.

In the past few years, the conversation about L.A.'s gallery scene has centered on what the next new art neighborhood might be. When Night Gallery, François Ghebaly Gallery and nonprofit the Mistake Room opened downtown south of the 10, it seemed that the Industrial District might be a new gallery center. When the once-gritty corner of Santa Monica and Highland was taken over by white-walled art spaces, focus turned to Hollywood. But this past year, in addition to the 20 or so new galleries downtown and in central Hollywood, noteworthy spaces have opened in West Adams, Venice, Hancock Park, Culver City, Leimert Park, Silver Lake and MacArthur Park. Talk of the next hot new art district is suddenly beside the point. The more relevant question is: Why is this citywide gallery boom happening — and why now?

Whenever L.A.'s art scene expands, cultural figureheads and East Coast publications inevitably wonder if the city has finally become a viable art-world "capital." The implicit message is "more like New York." Los Angeles is the "new New York," Michael Govan said in 2006, when he moved here from Manhattan to become the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's CEO and director. "L.A. is having a New York moment," the Wall Street Journal declared two months ago.

Of course, New York remains the most influential contemporary-art city in the United States, with about four times as many galleries and four times as many serious, high-grossing art fairs as L.A. Unlike in New York, L.A.'s art scene historically has suffered from the city's unwieldy geography, sporadic foot traffic and an unpredictable collector base.

These things haven't changed. But they seem to matter less. Regen Projects, which helped to define central Hollywood as an arts destination by building out a space with a rooftop deck and a 4,000-square-foot main gallery, has started staging shows again in its former West Hollywood location in addition to its new building. Gallerists opening downtown near other new spaces don't cite the neighbors as a motivating factor. Instead, they point to the space itself, the barely-still-affordable warehouse or cavernous storefront.

"Is L.A.'s decision not to cluster ultimately going to be a problem?" asks Elizabeth Currid-Halkett, an associate professor at USC's Sol Price School of Public Policy, who has written extensively about the geographical patterns of cultural industries. In SoHo or Chelsea, galleries grouped together so that they could be accessible to the big-deal collector, critic or curator dashing from one exhibit to another.

"Maybe the mistake is to compare [L.A.] to New York," Currid-Halkett says. "It's a very different place."

Many of L.A.'s new galleries are at dead ends, under bridges or off of alleyways. Robert Zin Stark, a 31-year-old former design dealer who just opened his gallery, Museum as Retail Space (MaRS), under the Sixth Street bridge, not far from a sweatshop, thinks the Internet has made the city's far-flung pockets more attractive as gallery locations. "The sprawl of Los Angeles seems less intimidating," he says. "I think that's changed what's physically feasible."

Stark's space is difficult to find, even with navigational tools; Google Maps does not yet understand that Sixth isn't a through street. "I kind of like that," he says. He wants his space, which he bought during a 2013 fire sale — before downtown gentrification reached its current heights — to be an destination in its own right.

"Geography doesn't matter anymore," says Simmy Swinder, who offers her elegant West Adams storefront at 4619 W. Washington Blvd. and its back garden to international or East Coast galleries that want to test the waters in L.A., or just spend a month here. The space has no consistent name; while Zurich-based gallery Karma International is in residence, it's going by Karma Los Angeles.

Swinder, who arranges case-by-case commissions based on the sale of artworks rather than subleasing to out-of-towners, set up shop in the area two years ago, before any other galleries were there. "When we opened, the people who would come through our doors wanted to be here," she says. It didn't matter to her if they were potential clients or artists or just curious about the work on display. "I don't think L.A. has the allure and appeal of a great collector base," she adds.

Certainly L.A. has collectors, but nowhere close to the number New York, Paris and London have. Still, Swinder's space is booked well into next year, by gallerists she has met at art fairs or who contacted her because they want to come to Los Angeles. Paradoxically, the global art world's increasingly digital transactions seem to have made the L.A. art world's idiosyncrasies more appealing to gallerists — or at least less of a deterrent.

Los Angeles has had some version of a fledgling gallery scene since the 1950s. But its identity didn't really take shape until the late 1990s, when MOCA, founded in 1979, entered its second decade as a major contemporary-art museum — and when Paul Schimmel, who was MOCA's chief curator, staged the iconic exhibition "Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in the 1990s," a kinky, colorful affair that convinced then-students including artist Mario Ybarra Jr. and curator Sylvia Chivaranond (wife of new MOCA director Philippe Vergne) to fully commit to art.

It was around that time that Regen Projects and Blum & Poe, L.A.'s only two indigenous blue-chip galleries, started to garner international attention. Soon after, the art scene's lawlessness and off-the-grid quality — as evidenced by abject performances by Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy or DIY living-room exhibitions — began to clash with the necessity for the scene to become marketable. Nowhere was that dynamic more evident than in Chinatown's early galleries, largely run by and filled with recent MFA grads.

Joel Mesler, who in 2000 had opened one of the first galleries off of Chung King Road, has been recounting his years in Chinatown in a series of short, take-no-prisoners essays for ARTnews. He can't resist parodying Roman Polanski's iconic film — "Forget it, Joel, it's Chinatown" — as he writes about how the scene went from scrappy to mainstream, and how L.A. gallerists began angling to get their artists into New York galleries.

One of his most revered subjects is Giovanni Intra, the dealer who opened China Art Objects on Chung King Road with Steve Hanson in 1998. Intra died of an accidental overdose in New York the very weekend one of his artists, Eric Wesley, was having his first (and last) solo show at Metro Pictures in Chelsea. The "entire L.A. art world was there" at Intra's MOCA memorial service, Mesler writes. "He was building something; I was just joking around."

But Mesler, who left Chinatown along with nearly every art dealer who started there in the 1990s and early 2000s (most galleries there now opened in the past seven years), stopped joking long enough to found New York's Untitled gallery. China Art Objects moved to Culver City, where Eastside galleries were migrating at the time in order to be closer to collectors, and changed its name to International Art Objects briefly before changing it back. That westward exodus continued until about 2½ years ago, around the time that online art-sales site Art.sy surpassed 100,000 users and art fair Paris Photo started planning an L.A. version. Internet art

That westward exodus continued until about 2½ years ago, around the time that online art-sales site Art.sy surpassed 100,000 users and art fair Paris Photo started planning an L.A. version. Internet art sales have hit their stride, and art fairs have become even more ubiquitous.

Edensvard of Ibid. Projects came to his first L.A. art fair, Art Los Angeles Contemporary, in 2013. The following year, he was one of the first international gallerists to stage a show in Swinder's West Adams storefront. He exhibited abstractions by Christian Rosa, the young, L.A.-based artist who has a loose, Kandinsky-meets-Basquiat-on-sedatives approach to painting. He also featured Rosa in Ibid. Projects Los Angeles' debut exhibition in September.

Edensvard, still primarily based in London, tries to time his L.A. gallery openings to coincide with U.S. fairs. He meets local clients during his visits here but also meets them in London. "It's not specific anymore to locality," he says of the art market, which is why opening in L.A. seemed to be a reasonable risk. "I didn't calculate how many sales I could make. It's not a business plan. It's a feeling."

The feeling has to do with real estate economics — a building such as the one he acquired on Santa Fe likely would be overvalued in other major art cities. It's also about artists wanting to be here, in part because they can do bigger, different kinds of shows in a Los Angeles warehouse than in a London townhouse.

Sprüth Magers, the gallery that opened in London in 1998 when dealer Monika Sprüth merged her historical program with Philomene Magers' more youthful one, has 12 Los Angeles artists on its roster. The partners have been traveling to the city frequently for years. Now they're opening on Wilshire, across from LACMA, in a building designed by one of the architects who worked on the museum's expansive campus.

Taylor Trabulus, the director of New York-based Martos Gallery, which just opened a small storefront gallery in West Adams, sees an L.A. location as an opportunity to do different kinds of projects, with artists the gallery already represents. So does New York-based Maccarone. The shows in her Mission Street space will be up for a matter of months, not the six weeks typically allotted a gallery exhibition. Artist Rodney McMillian, a UCLA professor on her roster, already used the under-construction gallery to make the trippy paintings of pooled color that currently line an arched hallway as part of the Sharjah Biennial in the United Arab Emirates. "I see this as a counterpoint to New York," Maccarone says.

Her building includes a studio in the back for Oscar Tuazon, an artist on her roster who is preoccupied with the disconnect between structure and nature; and another studio in front for painter and video artist Alex Hubbard, who will have the debut exhibition at Maccarone Los Angeles. Above Hubbard's studio, a wood-floored hallway opens into rooms that look like film noir detectives' offices. Maccarone wants eventually to convert these into a project space and apartment for visiting artists. She doesn't know if certain Westside clients will ever set foot in her downtown space, but coming to L.A. gives her a chance to visit them.

Other galleries with established clientele and East Coast or international locations, such as New York-based Team Gallery, which recently opened a bungalow in Venice (a "starter gallery," founder José Freire called it in Art in America), concur. Being here has more to do with the opportunity for art and artists than sales; those happen elsewhere.

For galleries such as Sprüth Magers, Martos, Ibid., Maccarone, Team or the Zurich-founded Hauser & Wirth, which is set to launch a mammoth Arts District location, opening in L.A. is not a make-or-break move. But for new galleries, such as MaRS or the year-old Wilding Cran, an L.A. space is the singular focus. The market's changing nature, the relatively affordable real estate and the growing prominence of online art sales may make L.A. viable for them, but concerns loom about long-term sustainability.

When Adarsha Benjamin and Eli Consilvio, both former art advisers, initially decided to work together, they weren't sure they even needed a physical space. "We threw around the idea for months of being a gallery that existed without the white walls," Benjamin says. They could have a slick website and stage pop-up shows. "We actually created a whole business model on this, because we knew that the world we will live in is very based in the digital context."

But they loved the idea of a physical space for their artists and viewers too much, and when they began scouting downtown warehouses, they sensed that the neighborhood was about to change and realized they should act quickly if they wanted a space they could afford.

The two had barely opened MAMA Gallery in its bunkerlike building on Palmetto Street when the lot surrounding it became a construction site. Crews work there daily, and loudly, on what eventually will be a 125,000-square-foot open-air market. The cranes that tower over the gallery's white façade might make MAMA look small, but inside it's labyrinthine. During its debut show, "Erection," which opened in December, visitors who wandered out of the pristine main room and down a dark, brick hallway found themselves in a cavernous concrete garage, where artist James Georgopoulos had installed the cab of a wrecked truck, its interior glowing with blue neon.

MAMA's first solo exhibition, of Georgopoulos' work, included a pool of 62,000 pennies under a clear acrylic coating; if each penny were a gold bar, their value would equal Mark Zuckerberg's wealth. The opening overflowed with people, including a surprising number of men in cowboy hats.

"People say the brick-and-mortar space is dead," says Adam Moskowitz, who recently opened the Moskowitz Bayse gallery with his partner, Meredith Bayse.

"But if you think about it that way," Bayse adds, "it's really disheartening."

They have two leased spaces, a small one on La Cienega in Culver City and a larger one just south of the intersection of La Brea and Melrose, which Moskowitz opened alone before starting his partnership with Bayse. The La Brea space will be their main location once the exhibitions Moskowitz already had on his calendar close and they complete some renovations.

"We want to go back to an old-school model," Moskowitz says. They plan to cater to people in their own age group, young entrepreneurs in their early 30s who have disposable income for the first time — or, in Bayse's words, "the people who go to Soho House because they don't know where else to go."

"If you're asking people to spend their disposable income, it's about giving them something stable," Moskowitz says. "They want to buy into the community aspect." Moskowitz imagines a program in which the artists he and Bayse exhibit, mostly young painters at this point, forge long-standing, deep relationships with one another and with their buyers.

Robert Zin Stark at MaRS has a similar strategy and a name for it: "consumer constructivism." Exclusive blue-chip galleries often act as mercurial gatekeepers, deciding which collector gets to buy which work. In fact, a collector sued dealer Christian Hays a few years ago for refusing to let him purchase one of Julie Mehretu's mazelike abstractions. Stark's target audience is people left out of or uninterested in such games, who want to feel key to the survival of an artist.

"It's really an exchange of responsibility," he says of selling and buying art. "When you buy something, it's important to the entire system." Stark, who compares working with artists to marriage, has yet to finalize his artist roster; he intends to move slowly.

"We can't be a flash in the pan," says Harmony Murphy, who did not enter lightly into her decision to open her gallery on Santa Fe. Murphy moved to Los Angeles to work on Robert Irwin's archive three years ago. She was the curatorial director at L&M Arts in Venice until it closed; then she needed a next step. Opening a space had never been a dream of hers, but it started to look like a decent option if she wanted to stay in L.A. and work with artists she respected. Irwin helped her with initial financing and construction.

"Part of me rejects some of this 'L.A. now' stuff," she says of the gallery boom. "I'm worried about getting lumped [together]. We don't have the strength of programming we need yet in Los Angeles."

According to Murphy, too many galleries show recent CalArts or UCLA grads, and she believes the art-viewing audience here isn't as discerning as it needs to be. But she hopes the exponential growth in galleries will change that. As more spaces compete for attention, art enthusiasts will have to pick their favorites.

"I respect that excitement and naivete that L.A. has always had, but ultimately the audience comes first," she says. "The audience raises the bar, then the artists meet it."

In other words, the unwieldy sprawl of the new gallery scene will generate a more diverse, judicious network of art consumers, and those consumers will improve the quality of the art and then support it. This sounds prohibitively idealistic. It's just that so many gallerists seem bent on achieving it.