

San Francisco Chronicle

Best Galleries in the Bay Area

By Charles Desmarais

December 9, 2016



Jeffrey Fraenkel runs a space that has helped to establish the role of photography in modern art, and create a world market for the works. The gallery is an essential destination for San Franciscans and visitors alike.

Fraenkel Gallery

"Choose the best galleries of all time," the editor instructed. But legendary art spaces like Dilexi or Batman no longer exist – if you weren't there at the time, you missed them forever. And we might never have made it past the door into the earliest "galleries" in the Bay Area: They were private clubs or associations.

Some of the greats that are still around don't quite hold the sway they once did. "Best" is a paper snapshot, not a bronze monument.

At this instant in time, the top art gallery in the region is Fraenkel Gallery. Indeed, it may be the best shop of its kind in the world.

In 1979, when Jeffrey Fraenkel created his eponymous business, photographs were only beginning to emerge from their 140-year art world irrelevance to take their place in top collections, whether private or public. Fraenkel brought passion, panache and an unerring eye for quality to the task. He also had a keen instinct for the trade and the good sense to hire the equally urbane and personable Frish Brandt, now co-owner. Along the way, Fraenkel shows became essential monthly experiences for San Franciscans interested in art, as well as a key stop for visitors.

All contemporary art is either a photograph or a reaction to photography. All art museums and collectors,

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likewise, must take the medium into account.

At the same time that Fraenkel Gallery was establishing its presence in San Francisco, it also played a major role in developing the world market for photographs. Publishing lavish books to accompany major exhibitions, cultivating relationships with curators and collectors internationally, it has become central to fine art photography, even as photography has become central to art.

Runners-up

Jessica Silverman Gallery: What one wants from a contemporary art gallery is dependable instability — a safe place to feel off balance, run by someone you can trust to throw you curves meant to keep you on your game.

Jessica Silverman's Tenderloin storefront is such a place. One month might bring a group exhibition from one of Mexico City's top cutting-edge spaces, the next a show of abstract paintings from the 1960s that got missed the first time around, by an artist in her eighth decade. Photographs that celebrate male sensuality and the gay male gaze? Somehow that fits, too. Perfectly.

Silverman's comfortable but bare-bones space belies an international profile that places her among the four or five most influential contemporary dealers in the Bay Area, with sales to major museums across the globe. It doesn't hurt that her grandparents were pioneer collectors of conceptual art, which she has said enhanced her understanding of both art and collecting. Presumably, it also set her up with some invaluable contacts.

Most important, of course, is what one does with such advantages. What matters most is that the Bay Area is the beneficiary of Silverman's deep connections and adventuresome approach.

John Berggruen Gallery: Since 1970, the gallery founded by John Berggruen has been a major presence in the Bay Area, presenting the best examples of blue-chip works of art in an elegant setting. All the while, Berggruen and his wife, Gretchen, have cultivated an informed clientele that, not incidentally, has come to run San Francisco's major museums and form the base of its art ecology.

Nothing alive can stay the same forever, and in recent years the lively Berggruen Gallery program had begun to show its age. Rather than quietly fade into the background, the gallery is in the midst of remaking itself, adding new artists and a dynamic young president, Sarah Wendell, and moving to a newly renovated building across the street from the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

How brash is the gallery's new incarnation? The space opens Friday, Jan. 13.

Honorable mention

Anglim Gilbert Gallery

Catharine Clark Gallery