

Installation view of "Retral Images" featuring Balthasar Burkhard, Seth Price and Rico Weber, curated by Samuel Gross and Balthazar Lovay, at Galerie Maria Bernheim, Zürich, 2017. Photo by Annik Wetter. Courtesy Galerie Maria Bernheim.



**INSIDE BURGER COLLECTION**

**B L O O M I N G**  
**M A V E R I C K S**  
**IN A WORLD OF GIANTS**

**MARIA BERNHEIM ON THE FINE LINE YOUNG GALLERIES WALK**

By Andrea Wild Botero



Portrait of **MARIA BERNHEIM** in her gallery,  
in front of **MITCHELL ANDERSON's** *Obsession*,  
2014, embroidery on Indian cotton, 96 x 137 cm.  
Courtesy Galerie Maria Bernheim, Zürich.



Nothing sounds more gratifying than making a living from art, right? The mere thought of spending your days surrounded by works that nurture your soul and spark your creativity is thrilling. There is a certain romance in meeting like-minded individuals, traveling the world, getting caught up in mind-blowing conversations, discovering new artists and perhaps even playing a part in sculpting art history. While undertaking this journey can be an arduous task, the rewards include the possibility of living an exciting and passionate life.

Maria Bernheim would tell you just that. She is an art-world wonder woman of many talents: petite, ambitious, dynamic, knowledge-hungry and sassy. Born in Romania and raised in Paris, Bernheim grew up with art in her blood thanks to her father, an artist and art dealer. After Bernheim completed her undergraduate studies at Oxford University, and her master's degree at the Sorbonne in Paris, she spent some time in the department of Russian Art at Sotheby's Paris, before relocating to Zürich in 2009. It was in her stars. Galerie Gmurzynska was calling her name, so off she went to Switzerland—the land of milk and honey, Art Basel and Kägi—to be their researcher and head of publications. A few years later she would transition to Galerie Eva Presenhuber, where she remained

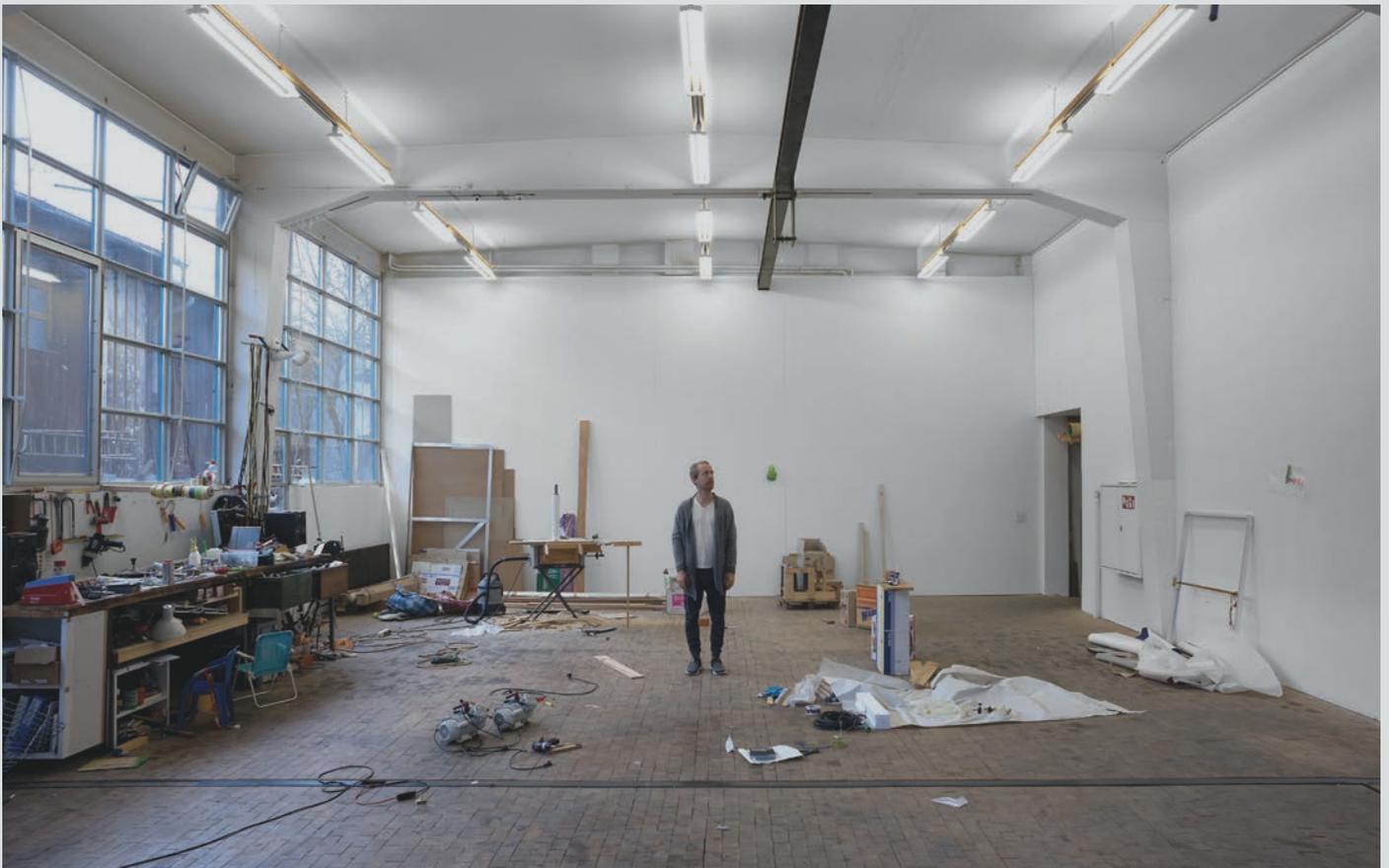
as sales director and artist liaison until 2015, when Galerie Maria Bernheim opened its doors in December in Zürich.

Let's not beat around the bush: art galleries, unlike nonprofits and other arts organizations, are strange creatures. Their businesses rely on many fixed monthly costs, the only source of income is sales and, generally speaking, art fairs (to call these “expensive” is an understatement) are essential to the survival of the gallery. The art world also depends on an army of well-educated, sometimes overqualified, patient, unpaid interns who are needed to do the research: essentially the most important job in the art world and yet, ironically, one with the least financial rewards. Young gallerists are the biggest risk-takers and they play an important and necessary role that is crucial in the art market ecosystem: they find the talent. They gamble and take very different risks to that of an established “mega-gallery.” Young gallerists are the art world's scouts whose mission is to validate artists that they consider worthy. The goal isn't purely about profits, though. Selling artworks of a distinct quality, instead of facilitating a high quantity of transactions, is the target. In turn, art galleries educate the collectors, who take risks alongside them when they decide to support a young artist. However, like any entrepreneur, Bernheim worries about the challenges that she

has shouldered: “I am scared to not be able to pay the bills. I am scared that my financial strategies don't pay off and that I won't be able to sustain my activity and I will let my artists down. As opposed to what people might think, we are all saddened when a colleague and friend of ours closes their gallery; it reminds us of the fine line we walk on to sustain our businesses.”

And yet Bernheim, armed with her skill set and perseverance, has grabbed success by the horns and made it her own, cementing the gallery's reputation and securing the livelihoods of the artists and staff who rally under her banner. These skills come from never ceasing to learn, from being a collector herself, from having a clear understanding of how to price emerging artists being introduced to the market, and plunging headfirst into the madness that is a young art gallery when art is your passion, educating collectors is your talent, a gallery is your medium, and “Let's Make Art History” is the name of the game. “An art gallery is a business like any other, but if you treat it as such, you should sell cars or carpets,” Bernheim said. “Most people in art commerce don't come from an art historical background, which I often judge because they don't have a thorough thought process of what is involved in selling a piece, what it means for someone to buy it, and the kind

**MANUEL BURGNER** in his atelier in Zürich. Courtesy Galerie Maria Bernheim, Zürich.





of value the work is adding to their collection. These people hop from gallery to gallery, which means they could be selling anything.”

The decision to open a gallery in Zürich was a strategic one. Besides the fact that Bernheim had been living there for six years, the city and the country “has historically had a long-standing tradition of collecting, [of wanting] to support young artists and art being made. Institutions are very present and the artistic scene, which is essentially run by the artists themselves, is super strong. There is a lot of support from big entities on every level and the art schools are fantastic.” Bigger art nuclei such as New York or London are tough for artists as they need to contend with higher costs of living, and time is much more of a luxury. Zürich is a petri dish of possibilities and variety.

As she was founding her gallery, Bernheim called upon a few artists that she was close with. Seven—including Mitchell Anderson, Jon Rafman and Nick Oberthaler—joined her, and Galerie Maria Bernheim opened its doors across from the prodigious Löwenbräu building, a former brewery that now houses some of the city’s leading contemporary art galleries, including Hauser & Wirth and Eva Presenhuber. From day one, Bernheim’s focus has been her artists: “Everybody thinks it’s the collectors. But you can find collectors any day if you have fantastic artists. The main focus of any good gallery should be its program. Spending time with curators and collectors is great and it can help your artists, but what you have to care for is your artists.”

Armed with a small battalion of artists, Bernheim planned out the first year’s program for the gallery. “For me, that was important because I think you can make very poor choices in a rush, so I didn’t want to be in a position of ‘I don’t have a show in a month,’” she said. “You end up showing the most random thing that is available and it doesn’t work.” When asked whether she ever doubted her choices, and whether she worried about what viewers’ responses might be to the works she showed, she indicated that fear was a constant companion, but that she was able to weather it. “Something I learned from Eva [Presenhuber] is that she would take a little card with her list of about 40 major artists, and every day she would reconsider who is important, and who will make art history,” Bernheim said. “And it is precisely because I go to bed every night thinking ‘this is not good enough’ that I wake up and I try to fix it. I try to put on the best show that I can, and I appreciate people who have this kind of blind faith in my artists; however, even the best artists also need a little bit of guidance sometimes because when you work so hard on something, on anything, you can’t really step back and look at it. Sometimes you need someone to step in and say, ‘This might not be your best work, maybe you should stay in the studio a little longer, work on it and I’m happy to show other work that you have done.’”

Obstacles are a dime a dozen, and finding the right balance between business and art is crucial to the survival of commercial galleries. Ten years of experience under her belt in art commerce has allowed Bernheim



(Opposite page)  
Exhibition view of **DENIS SAVARY**'s "Lokis" series, 2016, fiberglass, screws, bolts and stainless steel, dimensions variable, at "Lokis," Galerie Maria Bernheim, Zürich, 2016. Photo by Annik Wetter. Courtesy Galerie Maria Bernheim.

(Bottom)  
Exhibition view of **THOMAS SAUTER**'s *Mademoiselle Butterfly*, 2016, oil on canvas, 200 x 300 cm, at "If You're Looking for a Straight Line Go to the Sea," Galerie Maria Bernheim, Zürich, 2017. Courtesy Galerie Maria Bernheim.

(This page, right)  
Exhibition view of **MIRIAM LAURA LEONARDI**'s *Light Idea (But If You Travel in Time Travel Light)*, 2017, HD video with stereo sound: 10 min 51 sec (front), and *Pairs of Shoes (Euro Size 35, 38, 41, 44)*, 2017, handmade shoes (wood, thread, leather), 22 x 8 x 8 cm each (back), at Artissima, Turin, 2017. Courtesy Galerie Maria Bernheim, Zürich.

to devise a strategy that works for the gallery and her artists. Although many fledgling galleries have been dropping out of the art fair circuit due to exorbitant costs, fairs are essential to the operation of Galerie Maria Bernheim, as occupying a booth provides unique exposure for her artists to new collectors and art lovers who may not travel to Zürich. "There are more and more art fairs everywhere, and what they are essentially looking for are either big galleries that attract big crowds or very young galleries showcasing the best, most avant-garde art today," she said. "What's difficult in that section is that a lot of these very young galleries that haven't done an art fair before don't always comprehend a level of quality that is needed in a presentation."

Art fairs are about bringing art to a wider audience, but it is of crucial importance to sell enough to cover the cost of the fair so that the gallery does not operate at a loss. When Galerie Maria Bernheim participated in the 2017 edition of Art Basel Miami Beach, the cost was around USD 22,000. Nearly half of it was destined to cover the fee for a small booth of USD 10,000 with the rest going toward shipping, travel, lodging and other expenses. The artworks that Bernheim presented at the fair carried price tags that ranged from USD 1,500 to USD 15,000—this is the price range of all her artists. Galerie Maria Bernheim participates in seven to eight fairs every year, including Art Basel Switzerland and Miami Beach. It is hard to find the balance with her finances as art fairs are her biggest annual costs and "often, a great presentation is rarely commercial." However, Bernheim treats art fairs as more than just a place to transact—they are a tool to harvest collectors that have seen the work in the flesh. Afterward, they can choose to buy via email or over the phone as "with young artists, it is crucial to have a real conversation about the work."

Today, when it comes to art, there is competition across all borders, especially given that once upon a time an established gallery would not even consider representing very young artists with absolutely no track record. This is now a possibility that Bernheim must always consider. However, she doesn't believe that there is real competition between young galleries as "we present artists that we believe in, and all I want is for other good galleries to also represent my artists. Our most precious thing is not collectors but artists, and good collectors come, regardless of the gallery, to have access to good artists."

Bernheim also sees her gallery as a crucial platform where she can cultivate awareness of the arts and educate would-be collectors as many do not realize that they can acquire artworks at any price range. She aims for her gallery to grow alongside young collectors in their late 20s and early 30s. Today, these collectors have a small buying power of around USD 10,000 a year, so, hypothetically, by the time they are 40 they might have tripled or even added a zero to that figure. Bernheim added: "If you have taught them to collect, they will follow you and support you. This is key in the long run." Bernheim will even introduce her clients to artists whom she does not represent. As she enriches the art historical knowledge of those around her, the collector base that Bernheim has managed to tap into has come to recognize her integrity as well as her eye for detail, and are now ardent followers.

Bigger galleries that represent more established artists don't have to educate collectors the way a young gallery does. The galleries have a safety net as the artists' names provide a certain security and assurance to collectors who are willing to pay the high prices demanded without





the need to see the work in the flesh. For these galleries, online platforms like Artsy are another medium that allows them to reach potential collectors who already know the work of their artists very well. But these galleries have sales pressure and quotas that must be met by their sales team as they have higher costs, a large staff, possibly multiple locations, contract stipulations they must abide by for their artists, and more. When these annual sales quotas exist, sales consultants don't pay attention to smaller works in the inventory as they bring in less money for the gallery while taking up as much time and effort to sell as anything else. Bigger galleries have hundreds of hidden jewels in their inventories, beautiful series of works on paper or small sculptures that even collectors are unaware of. These smaller works are not pushed the way larger works are. Moreover, sales consultants don't spend as much time trying to sell to institutions because museums are always short on funds. Their decision-making procedures take months, and you can always expect a request for a 20 to 30 percent discount on the work in addition to a payment plan. As a result, this means less money in the gallery and the sales consultant's

pockets. In contrast, no sale is too big or too small for a gallery like Maria Bernheim, where every effort counts. She recalls two sales very fondly that a large gallery might have overlooked but she took pride in because it required going the extra mile. One was the sale of a *Lokis* (2016) big bear sculpture by Denis Savary, which was sold to a collector who had visited Savary's solo exhibition at the gallery with his wife. He wanted to surprise her with the acquisition, so Bernheim orchestrated the secret installation of the almost two-meter-tall sculpture in their home at night while they were out having dinner. The second was the sale of a small Mitchell Anderson work titled *Chopstick Basket Piece* (2016), to Musée d'art Moderne et Contemporain (MAMCO) in Geneva. The sale, like all sales, was an arduous process for a work whose asking price was a mere fraction of her collectors' annual buying power. However, to see it on display at MAMCO as part of the "Nouvelle Images" exhibition is a mission well accomplished for both the gallery and the artist. As Galerie Maria Bernheim recently turned two years old, Bernheim's mission is not necessarily to become a bluechip gallery per se, but rather to

help her artists grow and have the gallery grow alongside them to provide for their needs and expectations. The growth she aims for, which includes one or two outposts in the future, will allow Bernheim to focus even more on her relationship with the artists so that she may provide them with the same level of attention that they receive now and the benefits of a larger, international operation.

As we all know (but secretly wish) there is no manual for operating a gallery, no *Art Gallery Business for Dummies*, but Bernheim believes that there are key tenets to follow. A good gallerist "should tailor their work to what the artist needs and expects. Some may need more institutional recognition, some may need more support from collectors." Expanding her artists' representation abroad is also an integral part of the job. As Rome was not built in a day, achievement comes with persistence, and Bernheim possesses an unquenchable thirst to educate not only her collectors but also herself—all the time. She will always "defend the work of artists that I believe in, help build great collections and bring to the attention of institutions working with interesting works and artists."