

CLAUDIA ALTMAN-SIEGEL

After 10 years at New York's Luhring Augustine Gallery, Barnard grad Claudia Altman-Siegel felt ready to strike out on her own, so she relocated to San Francisco and opened Altman Siegel Gallery in 2009. She currently represents 11 artists, two of whom, Shannon Ebner and Emily Wardill, were included in the 2011 Venice Biennale. Recently, *A.i.A.* spoke with Altman-Siegel about the gallery scene in the Bay Area and her long-term plans for the gallery.

Your first paid gig in the art world was as a security guard—actually a fairly common phenomenon among art professionals. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

I worked as a security guard at Luhring Augustine. They had a show called "8 Painters" curated by Steve Wolfe, and they had a small Jackson Pollock in it, so Michele MacCarone, who was the director at the time, hired me to sit in the gallery and watch the painting for the month. I read 16 books, including *War and Peace*, and was a terrible guard. But after the month was over they hired me as the registrar, and then I was co-director in two years.

What were your favorite shows and projects at Luhring Augustine?

One of the most meaningful projects I worked on was Rachel Whiteread's Holocaust Memorial in Vienna. It took years and years to be realized, and at the unveiling they had a big ceremony that was very dry except at the end a cantor read the mourners' Kaddish, and I cried my eyes out. It was really moving. At the time we were all worried about graffiti and neo-Nazi backlash, and I was quite nervous to see it again when I went back a year later, but it was beautifully covered in candles and flowers; all our fears were groundless and it's a loved and revered monument.

The reason I was back in Vienna a year later was for Christopher Wool's show at Secession. It opened on September 12, 2001. The day before, on September 11th, Josh Smith, who was Wool's assistant at the time, and I had just seen this fabulous Kazimir Malevich show and were skipping through the streets of Vienna having a great time. When we got back to the museum the installers said "The World Trade Center is burning," and we thought that was a groovy way of saying "New York is in the house!" or something. But then we realized that wasn't the case and what they were saying was literal. That night we were walking around and ran into Donald Baechler, who was having a gallery show opening. The gallery was full of people and he was sitting outside on the sidewalk by himself and holding a half-empty bottle of wine. He seemed really psyched to see some Americans. We were all stuck in Vienna for several sad days after that, but Wool's show remains one of the best painting shows I have ever seen.

When you left Luhring Augustine to open your own gallery, you didn't just set out on your own—you launched on the opposite side of the country. What prompted you to make such a radical change, and what were the benefits and challenges of doing so?

I started to be curious about life outside of New York. I left in 2007, pre-recession, at the height of the art market. All anyone talked about in Chelsea was auction prices, and it wasn't creative. My sister got transferred to San Francisco for work, and I thought that sounded like a good idea, so I followed her a couple months later. When I got here I was shocked by how amazing the California lifestyle is, and surprised I never knew how easy and good life could be.

There are a lot of artists, institutions and collectors here, but only a few galleries. So I started to look around to see if opening a

gallery could be a possibility and found that almost no one was doing what I knew how to do, which is to bring in young, international artists and have a dialogue with the wider art world. San Francisco is a smaller market, so local sales are fewer and foot traffic is slower than in New York, but there is a lot of creative freedom; I have no peer pressure, and there's not much competition.

How do you strike a balance between local and international artists, established and emerging figures, and contemporary and historical exhibitions?

I want the programming to be shows that are internationally and art historically relevant. Most of the exhibitions are with young artists, and then every once in a while I like to do a historical show that puts the younger artists into context. For example right now I am showing Fran Herndon, who is 84 and lives in San Francisco. She was making collages in the early '60s and showing with Jess and hanging out with Jack Spicer and other poets of the time who are now fairly well known. Her collages are so well crafted and fresh-looking that you can't tell when they were made, or if she is an older artist or a young artist. I think work like this informs the dialogue that the younger artists of my program are working with.

How did you seek out the artists Altman Siegel Gallery represents and establish those relationships?

I had been watching most of the artists' work evolve over many years, but was unable to do anything with them since I worked for someone else. When I opened my own gallery I was excited to finally have that chance. I was friends with some of the artists before, like Matt Keegan, whom I have known since college, but some of them I only knew through their work, so I just approached them and asked them if they wanted to do something. Shannon Ebner took a big gamble with me since I didn't even have a space yet when she agreed to do a show, but we got along very well right from the beginning. Also, my timing was really good. Most of the artists I work with have really blown up since I started the gallery, but when we started together there was less pressure.

What's next for you and your gallery?

One of the things that is inspiring about the art scene in San Francisco is the longevity of some of the galleries here. There are two gallerists in particular, Paule Anglim and Ruth Braunstein, who have had their galleries for over 50 years, and they are both in their 80s. Even if the galleries aren't trendy right now, I really respect them as businesswomen and I hope I can establish a business that can last for 50 years. That's really rare in the art world.

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