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Executive Profile: Jessica Silverman doubled her gallery size in new Chinatown space

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Anyone who's been vaguely paying attention to the San Francisco art scene has heard of Jessica Silverman. An internationally recognized curator and art dealer, she opened her first gallery 10 years ago shortly after graduating from California College of the Arts' Curatorial Practice program. Since then, she's represented the likes of Matthew Angelo Harrison, Isaac Julien, Woody De Othello and pioneering feminist artist Judy Chicago, to name a few. She recently moved her gallery from the Tenderloin to historic Chinatown to not only double her square footage, but also to be nestled among culture and more foot traffic. I sat down with Jessica at her new space to discuss the move, her process for representing artists and her journey to becoming a household name among art aficionados.



STAN OLSZEWSKI FOR SFBT

Jessica Silverman poses for a portrait at Jessica Silverman in Chinatown, San Francisco, California, on June 3, 2021.



Your grandparents were prominent collectors of Fluxus art, and I was wondering if growing up surrounded by art trained your eye from an early age? It's definitely a question I ask myself. I think it made me aware of contemporary art. I used to go to museums with my grandparents, and I remember trips to New York and D.C., museums in Detroit, and my grandfather talking me through the works on view.

But the most prominent feeling I have is going through their house when I was a kid. I think I could draw a map of where all the art was displayed. One of the aftereffects was my deep awareness and

sensitivity to collectors and the feeling that they can't live without something. And it's a big part of the equation of what I love to do — supporting the artists and helping the collector or curator find the work that makes sense for them.

I think that personal history created a lot of empathy with how I transact because the business side of the business is real. I love my artists and their friends, and I want to support them emotionally. But I also want to ensure that they can continue to create work and that they find good homes.

What was it like opening your gallery in 2008 amid the Great Recession? I was quite young and had a project space for a year and a half prior to that and was working at the Jewish Community Center and was a student eating trail mix for dinner. I wasn't making enough money through the gallery to be aware that it wasn't a good time to open a business. But I opened an 800-square-foot space on Sutter Street and Jones. I think I had one intern at the time, I installed all the shows, I picked things up, my girlfriend helped me. It was pretty scrappy. I feel fortunate in a way that I got out of that moment, even though I didn't know I was in it.

How has the past year, with art fairs going virtual or not happening at all, impacted your gallery? When everything came to a screeching halt and art fairs went digital, I think we were excited. Art Basel Hong Kong did a good job of organizing Zoom talks. Sales were complicated, but still robust. We sold more to people we already knew than those we didn't because we weren't having that face-to-face encounter. And this is a high-touch business. Some of the things we show were new from artists and people hadn't seen that type of work before. From a numbers perspective, it was quite fascinating because we weren't traveling or shipping artwork to be seen before it sold.

At a time when galleries are closing (Gagosian closed its local space in January), you've expanded. How did you pull that off? Two things. One is we signed the lease in January 2020. I already hired a contractor and knew the costs. It worked out because we're reopening as the world reopens. With regard to Gagosian closing, I think San Francisco is a special place. There's a deep history of philanthropy, incredible young collectors and immense wealth. To run a gallery here, you have to have a sensitivity to the Bay Area and to its collectors and the artists you choose. Before I bring on artists there's a few key collectors I consult. I don't see other galleries closing as an indicator of what people can or can't do in San Francisco, but we take a lot of care in how we deal with our program and relationships locally to ensure that we can continue to operate here. It was sad to see them go because I want San Francisco to grow. We signed a 12-year lease with this building and we're invested in Chinatown, and that's really important to the community.

How is the space integrated into the cultural fabric of Chinatown? I live in a marginalized world as a gay woman in the art world, and in the world period. If you position yourself in relationships to other things, you're more likely to get people to come. Here in Chinatown, there are incredible cultural institutions. I thought that if we situated ourselves here, we can also call attention to these

places that need more visibility — like the Chinese Cultural Center is one that we look forward to being engaged with as much as possible. My goal is to bring what I do best and make connections to this neighborhood with deep sensitivity, of course, because Chinatown has maintained a lot of its history — it doesn't have a Starbucks around the corner.

Any advice for young LGBTQ folk who want to curate or open their own gallery? I grew up in the Midwest, and it wasn't the easiest place to be gay or come out in, but I was fortunate to have a nurturing family. So find your support system, whether that's your family, or the family you create for yourself. I think knowing that you can do it, and that it's possible is like tricking yourself in a good way. Even in moments where I didn't think it was possible, I wasn't sure I was gonna make it, I just kept going and ignored the rejections — and I got a lot of them — and not take things personally because when you see yourself reflected, you're like, all the guys who are white men are getting into the art fairs, why am I not? And if you don't take it personally, and keep going forward and stay committed to your vision, that's my trick. It sounds pretty simple but it's not because you have to ignore a lot of noise around you.

Also, ask for advice. I try to respond to as many things as I can. And if a young person, LGBTQ or otherwise, wants to talk, I'm happy to talk, because if they're interested in art, I want to see more people like me, or people that are not like me, but not like everyone else represented.

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