

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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Galleries

Matthew Marks, Blue Chip NY Gallery, Opens New WeHo Space Next to a Mortuary and a Pot Dispensary

By Carol Cheh Thu., Jan. 19 2012 at 2:54 PM

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I first got wind of the news that Matthew Marks was opening a new gallery in Los Angeles about a year ago. When a big, well-known, blue chip New York gallery decides to set up shop in our funky left-coast city, it's a big deal. You expect a huge splash and something a cut above the usual art gallery fare.

I was able to preview the new space this past week and I have to say, I was pleasantly surprised and intrigued by the creative decisions Marks made in crafting his L.A. outpost, which unexpectedly leans toward the low-key. First, there's the location. It's not in Beverly Hills, like the über-entity known as Gagosian. It's not even located near the tony cluster of top galleries in West Hollywood. Rather, it's on a quiet, tree-lined residential street, just south of a wildly mixed-use block of Santa Monica Boulevard. The gallery's next-door neighbor is an Orthodox Jewish mortuary. Next to that is a marijuana dispensary. And directly across the street is CT Nails #9. Talk about off the beaten path.

It would be easy to miss the building if you happen to be walking in the neighborhood. It's an extremely simple square monument painted all white, with a single black band overlaid across the top of its front end. Its simplicity, however, belies a lot of careful planning and thought.

The building was designed by popular L.A.-based architect Peter Zellner, who is known as the "go-to architect" for up-and-coming art galleries (he's responsible for the Susanne Vielmetter, Walter Maciel, and LAXART spaces in Culver City, among others). And the black band is actually an artwork by Ellsworth Kelly, who is the featured artist in the gallery's inaugural show.

Inside, the gallery is a perfectly clean and pristine white box, as we've come to expect from high-end contemporary art spaces. But it's also an intimate space, which is a welcome departure from what you'd expect. Rather than an enormous cavern that tends to engulf whatever art is installed inside it (the Blum and Poe space is often guilty of this), Marks intended this gallery to be more of a cozy showroom for his artists, who already tend to exhibit in huge arenas anyway. The gallery's relatively low ceilings are festooned with a network of glass skylights, which provide the space with lovely all-natural lighting.

The gallery has its much anticipated grand opening tonight. Following is a brief interview I conducted with Marks and Kelly by email regarding this new West Coast venture.

Why did you decide to open a gallery in Los Angeles? Why now?

Matthew Marks: I actually decided to open in L.A. five years ago. It took some time to find the right location. It was instinct to open here. Many of the artists I represent have either not shown here in many years or have never shown here at all. For instance, Brice Marden has never had a one-person show in Los Angeles and Ellsworth Kelly has not shown here in fifteen years.

How will your L.A. gallery differ from your New York spaces?

MM: The L.A. gallery is a new building that was designed in collaboration with Ellsworth Kelly. He has never collaborated to such an extent on a building, so in that respect it is completely unique. The program at first will feel familiar to anyone who follows my gallery. Over time, I am sure new artists will join the program, but I want it to happen in its own way -- not forced.

Do you anticipate more of a focus on L.A. artists?

MM: I represent Charles Ray, Ken Price and Paul Sietsema -- all of whom are L.A. artists -- so I already feel like the program has great L.A. artists. We also represent Vincent Fecteau and Robert Adams, both of whom are West Coast artists. I am not making any rules for myself and want to be relaxed about how things happen in L.A. It has to feel right.

Tell us about the process you went through in coming up with the design for the facade of this new building.

Ellsworth Kelly: When I saw the model of the white building, it just came to me in a flash. It had to have a black bar. Since then I have discovered that my design for the building has a relationship to an early series of black and white works from the 1960s, a few of which are included in this show alongside my recent works. When I started thinking about the building, I did not actually have those works in mind. Now, I see a through-line.

The building is bold and subtle and somehow, it looks like it's always been here, so I guess that is how it relates back to the early pictures. Since I do pictures about things that have always been here, like a shadow or a horizon, this translates to the building, and the proportions are really successful. The building is a destination, but it's like the reverse of the Hollywood sign!

My feeling when I came up with the look for the building was that it was NEW, very modern, that it would hopefully have an impact, especially on younger people. I feel like younger people have to see buildings like this more than buildings that are hundreds of years old. Young people need modern structures that keep up with the speed at which things move now.

How would you sum up your relationship to L.A.?

EK: I've been coming to this city for 40 years to make prints at Gemini G.E.L. I have made over 300 prints here. More than half are hanging at LACMA now. The sun keeps me coming back.

In a nice feat of planning, Kelly's Matthew Marks show coincides with a big retrospective of his work organized by LACMA, which opens this Sunday.

Matthew Marks is located at 1062 North Orange Grove in West Hollywood. Opening reception for "Ellsworth Kelly: Los Angeles" takes place tonight from 6 to 8 p.m. Show runs through April 7.