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Art Dealer Irving Blum on Andy Warhol and the 1960s L.A. Art Scene (Q&A)

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Dennis Hopper
Irving Blum, Jasper Johns 1964

Blum's Ferus Gallery was first to show Warhol's soup cans and the nexus between L.A artists like Ed Ruscha and Hollywood collectors, including Dennis Hopper.

Irving Blum was one of L.A.'s first successful contemporary art dealers. In 1962, Blum's Ferus Gallery was the first commercial gallery to show Andy Warhol and went on to promote Ed Ruscha, Robert Irwin, Craig Kauffman, Larry Bell and Ed Moses -- all from L.A. -- as well as New York artists Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, Frank Stella, Ellsworth Kelly, Dan Flavin and Donald Judd. No gallery or art dealer was more influential in bridging the work of East and West Coast pop artists.

In this exclusive interview with *The Hollywood Reporter*, Blum talks about the vibrant art scene in 1960s L.A. and how Ferus became the nexus for characters as diverse as **Russ Meyer**, **Dennis Hopper** and **Hedy Lamarr**.

PHOTOS: Hollywood's Top Art Collectors Pose With L.A.'s Hottest Artists ^[7]

You came to L.A. from New York in 1957. What was the attraction?

After I got out of the Air Force, I worked for Knoll and Associates on the corner of 57th and Madison. At that time, most of the important galleries, Kootz, **Sidney Janis**, **Betty Parsons**, were within a one-block radius. I would give up my lunch and visit these galleries. I had bought paintings from Sidney Janis for Knoll, commissioned by Mrs. Knoll, and wanted to do a gallery on my own. I had very little money and couldn't do it there. Having grown up in Arizona, I missed the weather and thought I would give L.A. a chance. I thought I could do it more simply there.

So you didn't come to Hollywood to work in film, but wound up making a film, *The Immoral Mr. Teas*?

A friend of mine that I was in the Air Force with had got a job in film production. We bumped into each other in a bar on Sunset and he said, "You like to play poker." I said, "Yes, I do." He said, "Why don't you come play with us?" It turned out to be the house of Russ Meyer. Russ was always pissing and moaning because he wasn't able to make a movie. I said, "What do you need?" He said, "A good script." So I wrote *The Immoral Mr. Teas*, copying virtually all of it from *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*. He finished the movie; I narrated it, if you can imagine. He took me to Musso and Frank and said, "It's done. I want to give you a piece or a buyout." I said, "What is the buyout?" He said, "\$1,500." That's all I got, plus lots of dinners at Musso's. He made a million and we remained friendly until he died. He came into the gallery a couple times and could never understand what I was doing. I couldn't get him to buy anything.

How did you get involved with Ferus Gallery?

I walked into Ferus, started by **Ed Kienholz** and **Walter Hopps**, about three months before I got to L.A. in 1957. I went to Barney's with Hopps, had a drink and told Walter, "I really am thinking about doing a gallery in L.A." He said, "You've come at

a good time, Kienholz is sick of sitting in the gallery, he is going back into his studio, maybe you can persuade him." I did the same thing with Ed and he was desperate to get out of the gallery. I said, "What sort of money are you talking about?" He said, "\$500." I said fine. Then I told a friend of mine and he said, "You overpaid," which, at the time, I probably did.

LIST: The Hollywood Reporter Reveals the Industry's Top 25 Art Collectors [2]

What was your plan for the gallery?

I knew we had to smarten up, eliminate [artists] -- and most of all we needed money. I went to see **Vincent Price**, nothing. Then **Sadye Moss**, whose late husband had a big accounting firm. Her analyst said to her, "Get an interest" and all of sudden there I was on her door step. She became the angel, giving us small sums of money. By the end of each year, we were \$5,000 to \$6,000 in debt and she made it up and enabled the gallery to survive. She did not take any paintings but insisted I have lunch or dinner every few months, to make sure I was on course. She was a lovely lady.

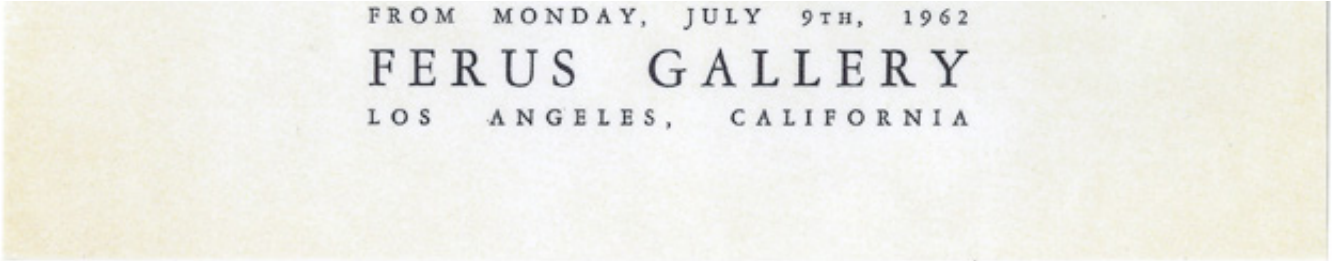
At the time, Ferus was primarily a showcase for L.A. artists. What made you decide to exhibit Andy Warhol, a New Yorker?

We reduced the Ferus artists down to a dozen, [among them] **Ed Moses, Craig Kauffman, Larry Bell, Robert Irwin, John Altoon**, but having lived in New York and visited galleries there, I didn't want the gallery to have a provincial cast and thought I would bring young artists in from New York. I couldn't go more than once a year -- there were always money problems, and I stayed at the Y when I went. I appointed three ambassadors I knew were in artists' studios all the time and would ask for a list of half dozen of the most interesting new artists: **Henry Geldzahler**, later a curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art; **Bill Seitz**, a Museum of Modern Art curator, and **Dick Bellamy**, who then had the Green Gallery that I adored. Any name that appeared on more than one list I made it my business to visit. I came to New York in 1961 and Andy's name appeared on two lists. He was doing unfinished cartoon paintings. The prevalent style was Abstract Expressionism and they seemed to me to be not so interesting. However I really enjoyed the talk with Andy. He was incredibly curious about what was going on in L.A.

Six months later, I thought I'd visit Andy again and I went to his little house on Lexington Avenue. I walked by a torn-out photograph from a movie magazine of **Marilyn Monroe** pinned to a wall and leaning on the wall were three paintings of Campbell's soup cans. I asked, "How come three?" He said, "I'm going to do 32, all the varieties of soup." A light bulb went off, happily. He had no representation in New York. I said, "What about my showing these soup can paintings in L.A.?" He hesitated. I said, "Andy, movie stars come into the gallery." A total lie because movie stars never came into the gallery. July 1962 was his first gallery show of the 32 Campbell's Soup paintings. I sold four or five but they were still in the gallery, not delivered. I had the idea of keeping them all together. He said, "I'd love that, they were conceived as a series." I called collectors, I was able to keep them together. I said, "Andy, how much do you want for the 32 paintings?" He said, "\$1,000." I said, "How much time do I have to pay you?" He said, "a year." I sent him \$100 a month for 10 months. [In 1996, the soup can paintings were acquired by the Museum of Modern Art for \$15 million in a partial sale, partial gift arrangement.]



ANDY WARHOL



FROM MONDAY, JULY 9TH, 1962
FERUS GALLERY
LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

Dennis Hopper was an early collector of some of Ferus' artists. Weren't you close to him and Brooke Hayward?

My closest friends during the '60s were Brooke and Dennis. I would see them every week. Nobody else from Hollywoodland ever came into the gallery, but Dennis did. He had an eye and appreciated what I did. They were always doing parties in their house on Crescent Heights. I remember coming back from New York. **Ivan Karp** (of Leo Castelli Gallery) had showed me transparencies of cartoon paintings by **Roy Lichtenstein**. I showed them to Dennis. He picked me up and said, "We are going to the billboard company Foster and Kleiser." He bought some of the billboards, went back home and hung a giant cheeseburger in his living room. He caught the pop sensibility before there was a pop sensibility.

STORY: Hollywood's A-List Collectors on L.A.'s Must-See Fall Art Shows ^[6]

Did you ever do any buying together?

Dennis and I had occasion to go back to New York a few times, once to see **Leland Hayward**, Brooke's father, the producer, in about 1964. I called him about going to Lichtenstein's studio. Roy had finished with the cartoons of women and he was working on landscapes. There were two, both good, a reductive one called *White Cloud*, which I bought, and Dennis bought the other, *Sunset*, a great masterpiece. We left feeling like champions. We paid like \$1,500.

You were close friends with photographer William Claxton and his wife, the Rudi Gernreich model Peggy Moffitt. Claxton staged the famous photograph of you with Peggy and models in bathing suits on a cabin cruiser with "Ferus Gallery" on the stern.

Peggy was really interested in painting. She was the primary model for Gernreich, who had a studio around the corner from the gallery. I saw them all through the '60s, [they were] among my closest friends, and they introduced me to aspects of their world. I talked to Bill Claxton and said, "I have to do an important ad [for *Artforum*] and I'm not sure which way to go." He said, "Now that you mention it, my brother bought a boat. He lives in Newport. It hasn't been named and we can put the letters 'Ferus' on the back and pose Peggy with some of her friends." We got an amazing response, people wrote from all over the world asking what's the blonde worth? It got a lot of people to sit up and take notice of this little gallery in the no man's land of Los Angeles.

What's in your personal collection?

Andy, Roy, Stella, Kelly, Flavin, Judd and Andre were mainly the people I bought. I never had that much spare cash, but I did what damage I could.

After Hopps left Ferus to become a curator you married his ex-wife, art historian Shirley Hopps and had a son, Jason Ferus Blum, famous now for producing *Paranormal Activity* and *Insidious*. He also collects. Do you advise him?

I advise him. He doesn't always listen, but I advise him. I love that he has been able to carve out a place for himself in an unforgiving profession.

Do you have similar taste?

Very much, but he also likes younger people. He's independent.

We heard you had a pretty memorable experience with Hedy Lamarr, of all people.

In the middle 1960s I was in a bar with a number of people and one guy said, "I am a great friend of **Philip Guston**." I said "I love his work, can you get me an introduction?" He called Phil, who said, "Where are you?" He said, "Max's Kansas City." Phil said, "Come over to the studio." We got into a cab, I couldn't believe my luck, and went downtown to visit Guston. The guy was incredibly charming and available. We walked into the back room and there were two framed watercolors. I asked, "Why did you frame these?" He said, "I love them and wanted to see how they look framed." I said, "They are terrific, would you think about selling them?" He gave me a price and I bought them.

I was thrilled. They came in a crate from New York and were sitting on the floor of my gallery when a limo pulls up, a lady gets out and walks in. She looks familiar and I realize it is Hedy Lamarr. She asks, "What is it you are doing here?" I had a group show of L.A. artists. She looks around and walks into my office, says, "What are those?" I tell her the whole story, she says "How much are they?" I tell her. She says, "I'll take them both." I carry them out to the car, she hands me a card with her name and says, "Send me a bill." And for 10 years I tried to bill her with no luck. I couldn't collect. She absolutely stole those watercolors from me.

*Irving Blum and model **Peggy Moffat**, below.*



Dennis Hopper/Courtesy of The Dennis Hopper Art Trust

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