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ART : Still Making Things Happen : After a quarter-century selling contemporary art in L.A., Margo Leavin hesitates to look back, since there's so much yet to fight for.

September 17, 1995 | Hunter Drohojowska-Philp | *Hunter Drohojowska-Philp is an occasional contributor to Calendar. and*

The assistant behind the desk at the Margo Leavin Gallery apologetically confesses that his boss will be late. Midday sun filters through the skylights of the large salon where Albert Oehlen's large expressionistic canvases generate a somber ruckus. After five minutes, Margo Leavin floats into the room, her large brown eyes welling slightly with tears. "You see? This has brought up a lot of emotions for me," she says.

"This" is her 25th anniversary as a dealer of contemporary art in Los Angeles. A retrospective exhibition and catalogue are planned for Saturday's opening. Looking back hasn't been easy--galleries, artists, even a museum, have come and gone with the feckless transience that often characterizes cultural life in L.A. But Leavin is in business in the same location, 812 N. Robertson Blvd., with some of the same artists and collectors, that she opened with in 1970.

She leads her interviewer to the gallery's library, stacked floor to ceiling with thick catalogues on artists she has exhibited through the years, an impressive roster that reads like a survey of contemporary art: Jasper Johns, Claes Oldenburg, Donald Judd, John Chamberlain, Lynda Benglis, David Smith, Willem de Kooning, John Baldessari, Dan Graham, Joseph Kosuth, Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, Alexis Smith, Allen Ruppersberg and Sherrie Levine, among others.

Leavin's dachshund Sophie stands guard at the French doors, which open to a little garden. Wearing a loose-fitting white cotton dress, heavy gold jewelry and enormous tortoise-shell glasses, Leavin sits down at the black glass table, armed with a pack of cigarettes, lighter and ashtray. Before a question is asked, she throws her hands up and cries, "Who wants to look back?"

But she proceeds to do so, beginning with her feelings about the present anniversary exhibition. "I've been thinking about all that goes into it, what it means," she says. "It's such a precarious time, and there are not enough people looking at art. Sometimes I think the gallery exists for us and for the artists--and that's it.

"We've been talking about Hilldale," she adds, referring to the vast space of the former post office next door, which she owns and expanded into in the heady economic climate of 1984 to exhibit large-scale sculpture and other bigger works. She will be using it for her anniversary show.

"In a way, it's an indulgence. Not quite commercial, it's between a gallery and a *Kunsthalle* [a museum-like exhibition space]. But, God, to be doing that now?" She pauses, sighs, and her voice drops to a dramatic urgent whisper, as if imparting crucial information.

"Do we make a difference in the way we show, in who we represent; does it establish certain standards that are important to others? Or is it just important to us? This is what has been on my mind."

Leavin isn't always so immersed in the philosophical rationale behind the art gallery. She is recognized as a shrewd and assertive businesswoman who has bested competitors who underestimate her abilities. And as she moves forward, she not only faces a continuing recession in the art world, but with the impending opening in Beverly Hills of branches of the PaceWildenstein and Gagosian galleries, she is also seeing New York galleries with whom she has worked--and, in the case of PaceWildenstein, shared many important artists--move onto her turf.

Although it might seem self-evident that art galleries are commercial businesses with profit margins and bottom lines, that fact is overlooked regularly by many in the field. Galleries often have backers, so that with their overhead covered, the incentive to sell is lessened. Some dealers run vanity operations. Not Leavin, who at 59 takes pride in her status as a self-made businesswoman.

"Fear is a great motivation," she says with a big laugh. "The fact is that I've always had to earn a living, and you do what you have to do. I couldn't just wait for things to happen. I've always felt it was important to make them happen."

Leavin's sales technique is pretty much as it was when she opened 25 years ago. From her small house in West Hollywood, she began by selling prints by contemporary American artists like Johns and Oldenburg.

Remembering those days, she says, "I would spend one and two hours with people. I pretty much had to be buying the prints that I was showing because the publishers [including Universal Limited Art Editions, Petersburg Press, Gemini and Tamarind] would not consign. So I had to be constantly generating sales." Then someone turned her in for doing business from her home.

Leavin had 30 days to open in a commercial space. "I suddenly needed \$15,000 to create the gallery," she recalls, chuckling at the modesty of the sum by today's standards. "I worked twice as hard. I sold so many Johns prints. Because, really, there was no choice."

Novelist and screenwriter Michael Crichton remembers buying Lichtenstein posters from Leavin when she was first starting, and he has been buying from her ever since, most recently two works by L.A. artist Alexis Smith. In the early days, he says, "she kept the prints under her bed and would pull them out and show them to you!

"I think of Margo as from the old school in the sense of someone whose primary attraction is the work," he continues. "Margo is really interested in art. To me, what's important in a dealer is when you have someone who cares more about the work than the sale. It's been a struggle for her. For a long time, L.A. was a very difficult contemporary art town. Now that [Creative Artists Agency founder] Mike Ovitz has a contemporary collection, everybody has forgotten that it used to be that there were no decent restaurants and no contemporary art collectors. All that has changed, and Margo is a part of why it's changed."

Although Leavin opened in the same space she occupies today, it was initially much smaller, just a single room and a corridor. She came in at 7 a.m. and left at midnight because she couldn't afford a secretary. "I have always felt that I work on a different energy," she says.

Leavin has been interested in art since her parents first took her to the museums of her native New York. Her father's cosmetics business was undermined by the shortage of materials available during the war, and when Margo was 14, the family was forced to move to Los Angeles, where her father went into the real estate business.

After high school, she did a stint at UC Berkeley, where she took art history classes. She transferred to UCLA, where she received a bachelor's degree in

psychology in 1958. Her parents paid for her first trip to Europe and she returned with presents--Picasso ceramics. "It wasn't that expensive. You could buy a piece of pottery for \$12. Later, I saw auction records like \$44,000!" she says with a big laugh. "I gave it all away. I have one Picasso ashtray, and I use it."

She started her career doing social work but after several years left and went into advertising. "I worked for the Democratic Party at the 1960 convention and thought advertising was great," Leavin says. "I worked my way up. But I wasn't an artist or writer, and I needed a creative outlet. So I started dealing art privately in 1967."

While her college chums were marrying and having children, Leavin managed to thrive as a professional woman. She says now that dealing art took "unbroken commitment." After she opened her gallery, "it was so engrossing, it was not a 9-to-5 job."

Leavin's first exhibition was "Pace in Los Angeles," prints by Louise Nevelson, Jack Youngerman and other artists from the New York gallery. She grimaces at the irony of this coincidence, because Pace, which merged with Wildenstein Gallery in 1993, will now be a competitor. Leavin continued to sell prints but quickly expanded into other markets with a show of drawings by sculptors. She happened to meet Oldenburg, who invited her to his studio in New York to select work for the show.

"That was an invaluable experience," she recalls. "I went to New York and spent a lot of time with him and went through everything he had done. Before I knew it, I was writing a *catalogue raisonne*, which I had never done, covering his prints and multiples from '60 to '71."

Leavin reaches behind her where a stack of small books are stored on a shelf and produces a yellowed pocket-size volume: "Claes Oldenburg: Works in Edition," an index accompanied by black-and-white photos of the artist and many of his works. Not only was it her first catalogue, it was also her first show to travel, to John Berggruen Gallery in San Francisco. The success of the project fostered a long-term professional relationship with Oldenburg that would continue until 1992, when the artist signed with Pace.

Oldenburg recalls the catalogue as very ambitious for its time. "Irving Blum [of Ferus Gallery, and later Blum/Helman] had closed, and there was no one else in L.A. until Margo came on the scene," he says.

Leavin's show of drawings by sculptors in 1972 turned out to be a surprising success. Boston collectors Stephen and Susan Paine flew out to see it. "They bought a tremendous amount out of the show, 19 works, because it was his area of interest," Leavin recalls.

After that, she began concentrating on drawings, paintings and sculptures by major artists who were based mostly in New York and were represented by galleries there--among them, Ellsworth Kelly, Arakawa, Hannah Wilke, William Wiley, Roy Lichtenstein, Lucas Samaras, Agnes Martin, Willem de Kooning, Jonathan Borofsky, Dan Flavin, Jennifer Bartlett, Gary Stephan, Louise Nevelson and Bryan Hunt--until, by the early '80s, she was rarely exhibiting prints.

Oldenburg recalls: "I have happy memories of the early days. She showed the 'Alphabet Good Humor' at the gallery in 1975 and arranged a commission [from that series] for Michael Crichton's old place on Mulholland Drive. She was interested in sculpture, and few dealers are, because paintings are easier to sell. She became my L.A. gallery because I was with Leo [Castelli] in New York. She became a secondary gallery for Leo and worked closely with him, showing his artists in L.A."

By 1980, Leavin's reputation was well established for blue-chip contemporary art, her gallery serving as an L.A. annex for some of New York's most prestigious

dealers: Castelli, Paula Cooper and the late Xavier Fourcade. At the same time, international respect was building for L.A.'s art community, and Leavin began representing a few L.A.-based artists like Alexis Smith, John Baldessari, David Lloyd and Marc Lere. Leavin says that she had tried representing L.A.-based artists before but that the relationships had "never worked."

During the art boom of the 1980s, the base of collectors was expanding so rapidly that New York dealers were often content to have galleries in other cities take on their artists for exhibitions. By 1990, however, the voracious collecting appetite had been sated. Out-of-town galleries that had opened in L.A. to take advantage of the '80s market folded like a house of cards. Blum/Helman, Daniel Weinberg, Linda Cathcart, Lühring/Augustine, all reputable dealers with successful track records, were forced to close for lack of sales. Loan shows also disappeared; as one dealer said, "In this market, if there is a salable work of art available, you're going to sell it yourself."

The worldwide recession has lasted longer than most dealers thought possible, Leavin says. "The difficult thing in the '90s is, after all the time you've put in, to start all over again. Just when you'd rather work on a museum show, you have to start all over again worrying about selling because of the recession. It was a shock to everyone.

"Things are better, but the fallout is not just in terms of dollars but in people who are just not looking. That was even more difficult. I don't think collectors are aware of how important their presence is. It's not whether they purchase, it's their presence. You need the whole system.

"L.A. seems to come together for 90 minutes every five years, and then it disappears again," Leavin concludes with a sigh.

For Leavin, there was an additional complication. Artists like Oldenburg, as well as John Chamberlain and the late Donald Judd, defected to Pace Gallery in the late '80s and early '90s.

Leavin sighs once more and says, "I think it's economics." Pace had deeper pockets. Artists like '80s *Wunderkind* Julian Schnabel, who had left '80s *Wunderkind* dealer Mary Boone, were rumored to be on million-dollar-a-year stipends at Pace. The downside for Leavin was that Pace was not interested in sharing these artists.

The collecting community in Los Angeles is small, and Pace founder Arne Glimcher had already developed intimate relationships with heavyweight collectors in the entertainment industry--significantly, superagent and incoming Disney President Ovitz. Also, Glimcher has established a second career as producer and director of movies such as "The Mambo Kings" and "Just Cause" and wants to spend more time in L.A. Opening a branch of PaceWildenstein on Wilshire Boulevard in Beverly Hills, minutes from the offices of Creative Artists Agency and William Morris, seems the perfect solution.

Glimcher thinks fears by local dealers are misplaced: "We are very cooperative working with other dealers," he says. "There is no reason why we wouldn't work with them in L.A.

"Any kind of activity that creates more of an art center, more of a focus and a reason to buy art in L.A., is healthy for the community. If we are successful in developing collectors, isn't that a very positive thing for the community? No collector buys from just one gallery."

PaceWildenstein's arrival has, however, forced Leavin to recognize the vulnerability of her position. While she had exhibited an extraordinary range of high-quality New York-based artists, only in primary representation can a dealer have control. The primary dealer is responsible for showing the artist in good times

and bad, for maintaining archives and correspondence.

Throughout the late '80s and early '90s, Leavin took on locally based artists like Larry Johnson, Stephen Prina, Christopher Williams, Scott Grieger, Roy Dowell, Maria Nordman and, most recently, L.A. artist-turned-New Yorker Allen Ruppberg.

"The good thing about Pace," says painter Roy Dowell, who joined Leavin's gallery in March after 15 years with the Rosamund Felsen Gallery, "is that it forces Margo, and other dealers, to look for new artists or to rise to the occasion to do something extra to keep the artists they've got."

Says Leavin: "The ideal is to be representing artists in your own city. Showing young artists takes a lot of energy, but it's wonderful to have so many who live here because they participate. She adds that Wendy Brandow, who became her business partner in 1990, has had a rapport with the younger, more conceptually oriented artists who have joined the gallery and probably broadened the spectrum of what the gallery offers.

"The artists I'm working with now I feel good about. I think in part I've matured. I think it's important to show two or three generations of artists to create a context for the younger ones. It gives them credibility, and people can see how the work of the younger artists holds up to that of the established artists."

Richard Koshalek, director of L.A.'s Museum of Contemporary Art, has worked closely with both Leavin and Glimcher.

"There is a great need in this city for galleries to encourage new collectors and young collectors," he says. "Additional energy from Pace Gallery and from Margo in that direction will be beneficial to the city and to MOCA. It all somehow works together as one ecosystem. The more depth that system has, the more participants, the more successful we are all going to be."

Leavin is so identified with her art gallery that questions about her personal life meet with genuine bewilderment, even by those who are close to her. Artist John Baldessari mulls for a few minutes and notes how troubling it is not to know any gossip about her.

Alexis Smith, who considers Leavin a friend, has a deeper perspective: "Margo has a nice and rich life as a single person," she says. "She has a beautiful home and garden, and a dog. She grows her own vegetables and cooks most of the artists' dinners given after opening receptions. She's not one of those people who only have a gallery. She is a sweet person. But she's careful with people. You have to know her well. But that is my experience with many professional women. Maybe she's so guarded because she is fragile in a way."

Leavin lives in a 1940s mansion built for Major Henry Hancock, developer of Hancock Park. The double-height entrance hall is paneled in matched teak veneer. Curvy, streamlined details highlight the modern architecture. There is, of course, art on every wall. The dining room's wall of glass looks out over an acre of terraced grounds and a pool.

This day, she has prepared a delicious but simple luncheon of salmon salad and fresh greens from her garden. A large lilac painting by Arakawa and a neon cartoon by Joseph Kosuth chatter at one another across the room. Leavin explains that she bought the house three years ago and is still in the process of restoring it.

After lunch, touring the garden, she talks enthusiastically about moving wild palms, pruning trees that were unkempt for years and clearing brush. Naturally, her gardener happens to be the head gardener at the J. Paul Getty Museum. With unconditional pride, she shows off her crops of corn, tomatoes, herbs: "

[Artist] Lynda Benglis gave me the seeds for those pumpkins. This is a Meyer lemon tree; they are the best for cooking. Last summer, I took those yellow tomatoes there, sliced them, added a little balsamic vinegar. Then I dipped a sliced garlic in olive oil and spread it on bread and toasted it. It was so delicious, we didn't eat anything else for days!"

This is Leavin's personal life. As she sips mineral water on the patio, enjoying a cool summer breeze, one wonders if she has any regrets.

"I wish I were freer," she says. "I wish there weren't the economic restraints, though I'm sure that will change. I wish it were easier to take time to travel for personal pleasure. But I have no other regrets. And I don't call those regrets."

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"25 Years: An Exhibition of Selected Works," Margo Leavin Gallery, 812 N. Robertson Blvd., West Hollywood. The exhibition, including more than 100 artists, opens Saturday and continues through Oct. 28. (310) 273-0603.