

NIGHT MOVES

DAVIDA NEMEROFF IS AT THE CENTER OF DOWNTOWN'S BURGEONING ART COMMUNITY

By Michael Slenske / Photography by Laura Hull



Davida Nemeroff (above) opened Night Gallery in a strip mall in 2010. It moved to a former truck-parts warehouse (top right) five years ago.



The slacker fabulous crowd is milling about a 6,200-square foot-warehouse on the southern border of downtown Los Angeles. The rafter-exposed space once served as a storage facility for big-rig trucking parts. Now it's home to L.A.'s ascendant Night Gallery. Outside there's a crackling fire pit, and a crowd of beanie-capped actors, heavily bearded painters and couture-clad models sip Tecates. Inside, they drift about to a pulsing hip-hop soundtrack, navigating a radiant sculptural detritus that was taken from the studio of the interdisciplinary L.A. artist J. Patrick Walsh, known professionally as JPW3.

Though Night is just seven years old it has become, depending on your perspective, L.A.'s most successful artist-run space or simply the coolest commercial venture in town, with a roster that includes everyone from installation wunderkind Samara Golden, one of the breakout stars of the 2017 Whitney Biennial, to 80-year-old British artist Derek Boshier, a 2017 Guggenheim Fellow whose painting show "On the Road," curated by Jamie Kenyon, opened at the gallery this month. But that's not to say there haven't been some growing pains. Mieke Marple, a partner at Night for the past five years, parted ways (rather unexpectedly) with the gallery's Canadian-born founder Davida Nemeroff this fall.



A recent show featured the work of multidisciplinary Los Angeles artist Patrick Walsh, known as JPW3.

Which left Nemeroff toying with the idea of shuttering the entire operation. “As you do this business more, you realize you have to produce these projects, and you can either get there or get out,” says Nemeroff. “Every step that Night Gallery has taken, we’ve always managed to keep going.”

The question is, Where will Night go as Nemeroff goes it alone? To fully comprehend this, you need to first understand that Davida Nemeroff never planned on starting a gallery in Los Angeles. In fact, she never planned on staying in the United States long after graduating from Columbia with her MFA in photography in 2009. “I graduated into the economic collapse. Even my professors were being let go, and I was like, ‘I got to get out of here,’” says Nemeroff. But before she returned home to Montreal, her hometown, she decided to “experience L.A.” by taking a gallery-sitting gig to help an art dealer friend from Toronto who was opening a space in Chinatown.

“I took a Super Shuttle from LAX,” recalls Nemeroff. Her wavy black hair is draped over her shoulders, and her short-sleeve blouse reveals a constellation of artistic tattoos—including

Night’s intersecting crescent moon logo, designed by Kenyan-born artist Harsh Patel. “I kid you not, when I got out of the bus, I saw a tumbleweed go by on the street. There was nobody in Chinatown at that moment.”

There was also nobody frequenting the gallery. The solitude, and the preponderance of empty storefronts in the area, got Nemeroff to thinking. “Why don’t we have a gallery at night?” she asked herself. “I didn’t know what that meant, but I knew it meant the opposite of what I was doing.” In January of 2010 she secured a tiny \$850-a-month space sandwiched between a taco shop and a laundromat inside a Lincoln Heights strip mall. Within a month she’d painted the walls black and opened her first show, “Private Life,” with three of her Columbia contemporaries—Mira Dancy, Anna Rosen and Paul Heyer.

“Artists don’t make work to be placed on a black wall, to be seen late at night in a hazy conversation of drugs and alcohol, but that allowed for accessing the work on different levels, and that’s something I was interested in,” says Nemeroff. She wasn’t the only one.

“It was like a clubhouse or a living room with art,” says Laura Owens, who asked Nemeroff to drive around the city and look at spots for her own artist-run exhibition space, 356 Mission, which is still a vibrant locus for art and activism to this day. Because of Night’s innovative installations and atypical hours—10pm to 2am, Tuesday through Thursday—the gallery had a “communal but cliquy vibe,” adds Owens. “You’d be working in your studio all day, and if you wanted to meet up with friends, you’d just go and see if anyone was hanging out.”

For Nemeroff, Night was sort of a photographic experiment. The black walls were a reference to a Photoshop command—FF Tab—that provides a black background to judge brightness and color values. She even employed studio lighting techniques that made the shows difficult to document. “You really had to be there to see the work,” she says. In many ways it was a continuation of the “analog conversation” she’d been having with other artists—including Dancy, Rosen, Heyer, Samara Golden, and Cara Benedetto, all of whom went to Columbia with her and all of whom are still on the Night roster—since she got her first camera for her sixteenth birthday.

Serendipity, or at least a willingness to go with a certain flow, helped Night attract early interest from near and afar—be it visits from top international curators like Beatrix Ruf, the director of the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, or invitations to curate shows in unusual spaces outside L.A., like the rooftop of Frankfurt’s Städelshule. “We brought all this work in suitcases, and the process of putting on that show really gave me this direction and drive in my work that is still an anchor,” says Dancy, whose feminist figurative paintings (and neon sculptures) have become critical and market sensations since her Night debut.

Another person who recognized Nemeroff’s talent early on was Marple. The Palo Alto-born gallerist was working as an assistant at 1301PE Gallery when she met Nemeroff at a dinner. Shortly thereafter she wrote an essay for a show of Nemeroff’s photography in Toronto. “I had curated some outside projects and found that experience really rewarding,” says Marple, who was contemplating opening her own gallery when she approached Nemeroff about partnering a year into Night’s life. The two stayed in the strip mall space two more years—orchestrating seminal shows with Golden, Adam Gordon, and Abigail Deville and Christine Wang, among many others—before moving into the downtown warehouse in October 2012.

“Mieke definitely threw herself down in a way that [the gallery] was everything to her, and there were times where Davida thought she could possibly leave and Mieke would run Night Gallery forever,” says Dancy. “Mieke just brought a different energy and ambition to the table. I don’t think Davida was just going to take the gallery to the next level totally on her own.” Which makes their separation so much more surprising. During the gallery’s August break last year Marple began writing *Love at Night*, a memoir that was meant to be a literary encapsulation of the gallery and Marple’s love life, with some art history thrown in for good measure. That said, it made no reference to any of the artists or employees of the gallery by name except Nemeroff.

“I’d been reading all these business books, thinking maybe I would write an art-world business book, and a friend was like, ‘You should start documenting your memories now, when they’re fresh,’” says Marple. “I started doing that, and it was like an exorcism.” To Marple, this exorcism, which Dancy likens to a “psychological bomb,” was more of a “therapeutic tool to communicate things to people I was unable to say in person.” To Nemeroff, it was a line in the sand.

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JPW3’s installation filled the 6,200-square-foot gallery space. Night’s current show features British artist Derek Boshier.

NIGHT IS NOW PARTICIPATING IN SEVEN ART SHOWS PER YEAR; TAKING ON RISING TALENTS LIKE SOJOURNER TRUTH PARSONS, CLAIRE TABOURET AND AWOL ERIZKU; AND CONSTANTLY MANAGING THE METASTATIC CAREERS OF ITS CORE ROSTER.



The Night Gallery staff, from left to right: Rachel LaBine, Nik Massey, Davida Nemeroff, William Hathaway and Alexis Rose.

"It was very complicated, because people put a lot of pressure on me: There were collectors, art advisors and artists involved, and people heard rumors and started to doubt the gallery," says Nemeroff. "Ultimately I had to say, 'You can't do this. You need to do one or the other.' And she chose the other. She chose the book."

While that decision might sound oddly Chappellian to an art world outsider, when you consider the sheer amount of hours required to grow a gallery as fast (and smartly) as Night did, it's no surprise there might be some casualties along the way. Night is now participating in seven art shows per year, from San Francisco to London; taking on rising talents like Sojourner Truth Parsons, Claire Tabouret and Awol Erizku; and constantly managing the metastatic careers of its core roster.

And while the business grew, Nemeroff's artistic identity shrank. Though Golden and Dancy consider their old friend "first and foremost an artist," she hasn't looked at herself that way in a long time. "I'm not an artist, and I don't practice," says Nemeroff. "I have hope one day I'll make work and have a studio, and that's a goal for me. But I never want to be a part of this exhibition circuit thing that I'm involved in with the gallery. I'm not interested in that."

Toward the end of the JPW3 opening, Nemeroff is holding court in the back of the gallery. A steady stream of friends and fans angle for congratulatory hugs, but there is one well-wisher whose gravitational pull seems to draw the attention of the Night founder. It's Marple, her platinum bob bouncing to the hip-hop beat as she trades laughs with her ex-partner. Though they'd gone through a recent professional divorce, an awkward and soon-to-be-public one at that, the baby they'd raised was clearly flourishing before their very eyes.

As Marple disclosed the week prior, "I always wanted Night Gallery to go from this cool artist-run space to a serious commercial threat that others had to bow down to, that couldn't be belittled as hip or cool but was a real force. And it's become that in a lot of ways."

Or, as Nemeroff now says, "It's all good." ■

Night Gallery
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nightgallery.ca