

Galerie Gmurzynska's Old-School Slow Art Model Is Newly Radical

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As art dealers globally rethink scale, speed and the endless schedule of fairs, this gallery's multi-decade focus on scholarship, placement and connoisseurship offers a striking counterpoint to what can feel like a race to nowhere.

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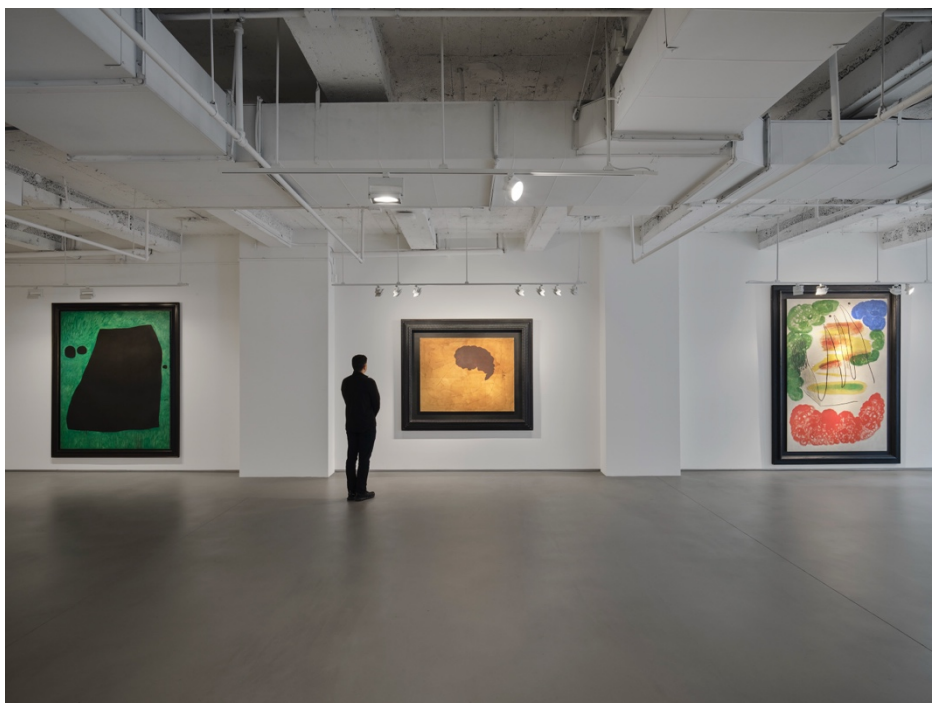
Galerie Gmurzynska has a 60-year history of scholarship, notable placements and museum-grade shows. Courtesy Galerie Gmurzynska

There is a lot of discussion in the art world about whether the traditional gallery model has been able to adapt to rapidly shifting buyer behavior and to an ecosystem where production, circulation and forms of engagement have changed dramatically in volume, politics and priorities. Yet the greater pressure likely comes less from the model itself than from the acceleration and global expansion that pushed galleries to mimic the imperial mega-gallery template: be present in every city, show at every fair and scale visibility as if scale itself were value. That template, across levels, is now showing its limits. According to the latest Art Basel & UBS Art Market Report, sales are becoming more localized and concentrated—among the smallest dealers, domestic buyers rose 9 percent to account for 71 percent of transactions with private collectors, while even dealers with turnover above \$10 million saw local sales rise to 29 percent, up 6 percent year-over-year.

At the same time, the average number of buyers per dealer fell to 57, the lowest figure since 2021, as transactions increasingly require time, trust and sustained personal engagement. This all suggests that the real structural reset may actually be a return to focus: galleries rediscovering the value of relationships, quality, community grounding and the slower work of supporting artists and creating lasting value. Galerie Gmurzynska has long prioritized exactly that, betting on what the overheated gallery race once made seem unfashionable: deep research, slower looking, trusted collector relationships and museum-grade exhibitions that treat art history not as inventory but as an unfinished conversation.

Founded in Cologne in 1965 by Polish-born Antonina Gmurzynska, the gallery quickly distinguished itself through historically researched, documentary-style exhibitions supported by ambitious publications. Over time, it became one of the major international dealers in classic modern art and the Russian avant-garde, while representing major estates of both pre- and postwar artists and building a reputation for museum-quality exhibitions, scholarship and collaborations with leading museums, curators and scholars.

Now operating primarily from Zurich and New York, the gallery is a family-led business carried forward by Krystyna Gmurzynska and now by her daughter Isabelle Bscher, extending a rare three-generation model of female leadership. The gallery celebrated its 60th anniversary by moving its New York operations to the Fuller Building at 595 Madison Avenue and inaugurating the space with “Miró/Matta,” an exhibition pairing works by Joan Miró and Roberto Matta. Described in Observer in 1999 as “the uncontested center of the art world,” the building itself carries long historical resonance, having housed legendary dealers including Pierre Matisse Gallery—once on this exact floor and in this space—along with Zabriskie, David Findlay Jr., David McKee, Robert Miller, Andre Emmerich and Charles Egan Gallery. The spirit of a location may be intangible, but it contributes to the energy a gallery creates and the model it chooses to maintain.



Installation view: “Miró/Matta” in the gallery’s new Fuller Building. Courtesy Galerie Gmurzynska

Since its inception, Galerie Gmurzynska has published about 300 books. The most recent is a 400-page volume on the relationship between Wifredo Lam and Pablo Picasso, tied to the current show at the gallery, which stages an unprecedented, reasoned dialogue between the two masters, highlighting their friendship, mutual admiration and fertile artistic exchange. “It started as a 20-page brochure, but ended up as this huge volume,” Mathias Rastorfer, the gallery’s CEO and co-owner, tells Observer as we walk through the space.

The gallery’s core project has always been to return attention to artists, movements and bodies of work that have lasting value but may have been overlooked, underrepresented or misrepresented, he explains. “The idea behind this gallery is that not everything needs to be discovered. Sometimes things from the past have been forgotten for good reason, because they did not really stand the test of time, but there are other works, other artists and other movements that absolutely require another look,” Rastorfer reflects, noting how, for various reasons, they may not have been considered important or relevant simply because shifts in taste, poor representation or changing historical priorities pushed them out of view. “The core DNA of the gallery is asking what happened primarily in the first half of the 20th Century, how relevant it is today and why maybe not enough attention is being paid to it. Then we really do a lot of homework,” he adds. “We do a lot of research, and then we approach estates and think they could be managed better, or they could get our help.”

That work is built around three recurring principles: research, promotion and placement. “Those three elements have really been the core of the gallery, and the red thread throughout is the publications we have done,” Rastorfer emphasizes. Research comes first, followed by publications and collaborations with scholars. Placement, too, is not simply a sale but a long-term strategy for protecting and advancing an artist’s legacy. “Where you place works—in museum collections, private collections, connoisseurship collections that have an impact on other collectors, that they respect and look at—this is very important,” Rastorfer notes.

The gallery also helps museums organize retrospective exhibitions by identifying where key works are located, facilitating loan requests and, in some cases, actively supporting the research and networking behind major institutional projects—as it did with MoMA’s recent Wifredo Lam survey, working with Christophe Cherix and the curatorial team over several years.

Having worked previously for Annina Nosei and Pace, Rastorfer deliberately contrasts this approach with the contemporary gallery model. “Differently from a contemporary gallery, where you project toward the future, toward work that is less defined yet, and you are anticipating how it is going to develop, this gallery does the opposite,” he says. “We look at everything an artist has done: the entire work, catalog raisonnés, exhibitions. You have a broad spectrum of research that you can conduct based on the entirety of an artist’s career. Based on that, you have a more qualified judgment.”

At the few art fairs it participates in, Galerie Gmurzynska has historically treated its booths as curated exhibitions rather than commercial displays, as when Zaha Hadid designed their booth for a Russian avant-garde presentation and Karl Lagerfeld curated one around his interest in Lyonel Feininger. The goal has always been to create a point of curiosity that draws people into a deeper encounter with art history, Rastorfer explains. “There is always something that draws you in, something unexpected, something surprising or curious, and then brings you from that sensation to actually looking and wanting to learn more... This is really the sense of what a gallerist is, rather than an art dealer: you put together shows, you put together catalogs, you actually contribute something to art history.”



Installation view: “Miró/Matta” in the gallery’s new Fuller Building. Courtesy Galerie Gmurzynska

Yet in the current market, that model feels newly relevant. When the art world is “burning hot” and prices rise automatically, a gallery like Gmurzynska may seem less necessary. “You basically just buy, and it goes up anyway,” Rastorfer notes. Yet when the market becomes more complicated and buyers look more critically, expertise, time and knowledge regain value. “I think art requires time, and art can be valued over time. This is what we do. We really look at what has substantial value.”

Rastorfer sees the current moment as one in which the art world is searching for identity after a period in which many galleries became art dealers with galleries, chasing the latest trends and losing their own sense of purpose. “I think what happened a lot of times is that people became art dealers with a gallery. They were going after what the market wanted, and I think that is a really dangerous path to take. In the end, it is a trap.” Gmurzynska, by contrast, “stuck to its guns,” maintaining a slower, research-driven model centered on museums, estates and connoisseurship collectors.

This is also why the gallery has reduced its participation in art fairs, despite Rastorfer's long involvement with the Art Basel committee in Switzerland. "We are doing much less of the fairs, and we are doing much more work at the gallery again, and focusing on that." While fairs remain useful places to exchange ideas, meet collectors and encounter new audiences, Rastorfer adds that they have lost some urgency, particularly with the rise of PDF pre-sales, which he believes undermine the intellectual and experiential purpose of visiting an art fair in person. He made this point during Art Basel committee meetings, and in June, the fair has announced "Basel Exclusive," a program that aims to restore the value of in-person discovery by having participating exhibitors reserve a selection of major works to be unveiled publicly for the first time at the fair's VIP opening.

To Rastorfer, art should always be encountered in a stimulating environment where collectors receive the best information, make choices and engage with the work directly. When the process is dominated by pressure, speed, competition and backroom transactions, it no longer serves the careful placement that estates and historically important works require.



Following a major survey dedicated to Lam at the MoMA, the gallery is showing 50 works by the artist, spanning from 1918 to 1978. Courtesy Galerie Gmurzynska

The gallery's space in the Fuller Building, a location he describes as "a low-key magic building in New York," is part of this return to a more personal, bespoke model. Galerie Gmurzynska has never been particularly invested in online sales or other digital channels, partly because its model depends on time, trust and direct engagement. "If revenue is not your only concern, and your concern is placement, then these things take time," he reflects.

That slowness and intentionality are especially important when dealing with rarity. Because the gallery works largely with pieces by artists who worked from 1900 to 1950, the supply of strong material is naturally limited: once a major work is sold, it cannot simply be replaced. The gallery therefore considers not only who can buy a work but also where it should live, whether it might later be lent to a museum exhibition and how its placement will reflect on the artist or estate over time. “That is our DNA,” Rastorfer says, noting how the mentality changes completely when representing an estate. “You think not only about what you are selling it for and what you are getting as revenue, but also what it means for the estate, for the artist and how that sale can reflect on them in the future.” At the same time, museums are engaging more and more with the gallery’s program as they reassess the first half of the 20th Century, a period that, in terms of importance, Rastorfer describes as comparable in its uniqueness and density of genius to the Renaissance.

Institutions are looking again at what art from that period has proved most timeless, while also correcting exclusions. He cites female artists of the Russian avant-garde, who were historically on the same level as their male counterparts, and artists such as Marjorie Strider, one of the first female Pop artists alongside Marisol, who are now receiving renewed attention. Museums are also drawn to artists like Wifredo Lam, who resist stylistic categorization and cannot be easily placed into Surrealism, abstraction or Expressionism alone. For today’s institutions, such artists feel more universal, multicultural and relevant to a broader understanding of the human imagination across cultures.

If one of the biggest problems for auction houses and the secondary market has been finding good material, Galerie Gmurzynska’s modus operandi has enabled the gallery to know where works are and, most importantly, to earn the trust of owners and estates in deciding their fate. “Very often, these are friendships. These are people you have known for 20 or 30 years, you have been to their homes, you know their children. If they come to you for advice, and you want to stay in business longer than the next three months, you think long-term for them—for the gallery’s credibility and for the work.”

When a gallery has been around long enough to see collections pass from one generation to the next, two paths tend to emerge, according to Rastorfer. Some families turn to auction houses, often because of inheritance taxes, internal disagreement or the need for a quick valuation and sale. Or, when there is more unity within the family and a long-standing relationship with the gallery from which the works were acquired, they can return to that gallery for a slower, more strategic process.

For Gmurzynska, that second path has been central; the gallery often takes months to place works carefully rather than chasing an immediate auction result. The goal is not necessarily a record price but the right outcome for the work, the estate and the family. “If it is about placement, if it is about a trusted relationship with a family, we openly tell them this might take half a year, this might take three months, but we will do what is right for the works, and we will do the right thing for you so that you get the best possible price. Maybe not an auction record, but a very solid result,” he says.

He is quick to point out that not every work belongs in the same sales context. Some pieces, he acknowledges, will always perform better at auction, where two determined bidders can create a record-setting evening. Others require more knowledge, research and discretion, making them better suited to private sale. This is where the advisory role of a gallery becomes decisive; dealers help families understand which strategy best serves the work, the estate and the long-term reputation of the artist.



*From the start, the gallery aimed to organize exhibitions that had a documentary character.
Courtesy Galerie Gmurzynska*

When it comes to attracting younger audiences, the gallery is less focused on persuading them to buy than on creating meaningful experiences. Rastorfer believes we are now entering a phase in which even younger generations are once again seeking stories. “They want to know why something is relevant and what the story behind it is,” he says, adding that in a culture dominated by social media, short attention spans, reels and TikTok, acts such as reading a book, looking carefully at an exhibition, listening to music or going to the theater have become almost sanctuary-like. A gallery can offer that kind of experience when it treats exhibitions as spaces of discovery rather than salesrooms. “I think a gallery, at its best, is a place where you come in because you know they always have interesting shows. There is always something going on that you find interesting. Sometimes it clicks, sometimes it does not.”

The current Picasso and Lam exhibition, on view through June 30, is a clear example. Visitors likely already know Picasso, while Lam is too often described through his influence alone. Yet the pairing invites them to understand why Lam matters now and how his biography—which includes a Chinese father, African and Indigenous Cuban mother, Cuban upbringing, Spain in the 1930s, the Spanish Civil War and his encounter with Picasso in 1938—opens onto a much larger historical and cultural conversation that expands on many of the questions initiated by the artist’s exhibition at MoMA. “This show in particular is absolutely magical for young and old because, number one, nobody thought about that juxtaposition between Picasso and Lam, but everybody knows Picasso. You are going there to think: why did they put those two together, and how does that reflect on our time?” Rastorfer says. “I have younger and older people coming in, and they spend 20 minutes. That is very rare.”

Interestingly, the cocktail reception for the show featured opening remarks from Esquil Lam, Wifredo's son, and Rachel Scott, creative director of Diotima and Proenza Schouler. It also highlighted a fashion presentation of Scott's most recent Lam-inspired collection, Dialogues with Fashion, an area in which the gallery has long been an early pioneer. "When we started the first show with Karl Lagerfeld and Feininger, people criticized us like crazy," Rastorfer says, recalling how the gallery staged a major first-year event with Art Basel and the designer. "It was a big symposium about art and fashion, and that was frowned upon, almost taboo."

He sees that gallery is a content creator: "Galleries facilitate content creation and communication. When you do that well, sometimes with something like Karl Lagerfeld or Zaha Hadid that draws you in as a temptation or out of curiosity, and then you deliver something else that is actually interesting, then you have a future. If you just want to force a younger generation to buy because it is a good investment, that does not work."



The Picasso and Lam exhibition is accompanied by a 350-page scholarly volume with previously unpublished archival materials and new research, marking the first publication to take on the subject of the artists's relationship. Courtesy Galerie Gmurzynska

The move to a larger space and the investments in such museum-grade shows in New York confirm the belief that the U.S., and New York in particular, remains the key art market hub. While Gmurzynska works globally, including with Hong Kong and Singapore, Rastorfer sees New York as unmatched for its concentration of museums, collectors, money and daily cultural engagement with art. Other markets rise and fall: Japan, Russia, South America, China and now the Middle East have all been perceived at different moments as the next major center of wealth. New York, however, remains the stabilizing factor, with sophisticated collectors and museums that both buy and sell—something much rarer in Europe.

At the same time, in the fragile political, sociological and ecological conjuncture to which accelerated modernity has led us, people are beginning to think again about what art is most timeless, Rastorfer agrees. In discussing why artists like Lam still matter, the conversation broadens into a reflection on the first half of the 20th Century as a form of enlightenment, not only in art but also in science, medicine, mathematics and political imagination. He sees his own postwar generation as having enjoyed the “unbelievable luxury” of peace, global development and free speech—conditions now being challenged again.

In a world shaped by A.I., overwhelming information and constant online distraction, Rastorfer believes people now need to become more selective, critical and analytical about where they spend their time. Closing our conversation, he returns to the reason the gallery is doing fewer art fairs and bringing its program back to its roots: “I think this is where the younger generation will have the hardest time: how to manage your time, and how to make it count, make it valuable.”