

# Regen Projects, at 25, has grown into a fixture in L.A. art world



Shaun Caley Regen founded Regen Projects. (Cheryl A. Guerrero / Los Angeles Times)



By **Carolina A. Miranda**

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Founder Shaun Caley Regen looks back on Regen Project's 25-year history

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**E**arly Thursday morning in Hollywood, Regen Projects gallery feels like a theater in the hours before the launch of a new production.

Works of art sit patiently in corners and hallways, waiting to be called to their places. Here, a visceral sculpture by conceptual wunderkind Matthew Barney; there, a meticulously assembled geometric canvas by Sergej Jensen.

A photograph by German artist Wolfgang Tillmans of some imperceptible body part rests on the polished concrete floor. Sounds of drilling and audio tests for a video installation by British artist Gillian Wearing echo throughout.

Shaun Caley Regen, the gallery's founder slips gracefully through the din, accompanied by the charming Lulu, a sociable gray shephard mix who trots about the space blissfully unaware of a sign by the office that reads: "Please Do Not Let Lulu in the Gallery."

"We're a bit busy," says Caley Regen demurely, as she heads up a flight of stairs to her office.

That is an understatement. Not only is she overseeing installation of two new exhibitions — one by the Turner Prize-winning Wearing, the other by the Danish-born minimalist Jensen — this month she also happens to be celebrating her gallery's 25th anniversary.

"I knew about the gallery before I ever moved to the United States," says Philippe Vergne, director of the Museum of Contemporary Art who first landed in the U.S. in 1990s. "If you look at the Los Angeles art scene, Regen Projects, together with a handful of galleries, was really the organization that promoted artists working here from my generation. They represent a group that has been extremely important: Liz Larner, Raymond Pettibon and Cathy Opie, who has been a very important to [MOCA](#) not only as an artist but as a member of the board."

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This is the gallery that gave the California-born Barney his first solo gallery show in 1991, when the artist was all of 24. And it was the first to represent L.A. artist Opie, whose elegant portraits of drag kings and S&M fetishists from the 1990s sent a gender-ambiguous lightning bolt through the world of contemporary photography. In 2004, the gallery served as the site of Glenn Ligon's first solo gallery show in Los Angeles, an exhibition of his gritty text paintings, which borrow passages from a vast array of cultural figures, from Ralph Ellison to Richard Pryor.

The story began in the late 1980s, when Shaun Caley met Stuart Regen at an opening at the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery. Regen was part of an art dynasty, the son of prominent New York dealer Barbara Gladstone. He had worked at the experimental PS1 art space in New York (now part of the [Museum of Modern Art](#)) and later served as the director of the Fred Hoffman Gallery in Santa Monica. Caley, an art critic, had just landed in L.A. after a stint in Milan, where she'd served as managing editor of the magazine *Flash Art*. The two met for lunch. Regen offered Caley a job directing his soon-to-be-opened gallery.

"Stuart had always wanted to have an art gallery," says Caley Regen, and the '80s provided just the right confluence of happenings in Los Angeles. "There had been the opening of MOCA and the Broad Foundation. And there was a cluster of interesting galleries: Margo Leavin, Fred Hoffman and Daniel Weinberg."

On Dec. 8, 1989, Stuart Regen Gallery opened at 619 N. Almont Drive in West Hollywood, just off Santa Monica Boulevard. The first show started with a bang: an exhibition of work by the established New York conceptualist Lawrence Weiner, who at that time was already renowned for his tidy text-based installations. (In that first show, he painted, "Some objects taking the place in the sun of some other objects" into a corner of the space with one of his signature block fonts.)

The show was an achievement for a pair of untested gallerists. The pair had visited Weiner in New York to coax him into not only doing a show, but joining their permanent stable of artists.

"We came to the idea that it would be an exciting venture and it was that simple," recalls Weiner, who says the couple's seriousness persuaded him that it would be the right thing to do. "It will sound pretentious, but they talked about the work and how it set a tone for the people they were trying to attract. I'd been showing in Los Angeles since the '60s. I have very dear friends who I made projects with, from DeWain Valentine to Ed Ruscha. They saw me as an integral part of Los Angeles culture."

Caley Regen remembers that meeting with a hint of humility: "It was a huge honor that he took a chance on a couple of green kids."

It was also an auspicious start. "The show was very well-received," says Caley Regen. "We sold it out."

A string of important shows followed: a light exhibition by James Turrell, prints by the innovative German painter [Gerhard Richter](#) and participation in a three-gallery tribute to Nicholas Wilder, an L.A. dealer who had helped foster the careers of painter David Hockney and minimalist sculptor John McLaughlin.

In between, Caley and Regen started dating and wed — at the Little White Chapel in Las Vegas in 1991. (An event that is recorded, along with all of their history-making shows, in a special anniversary catalog, "Regen Projects 25," released this week.)

The gallery's biggest coup, however, came in May 1991, with the first solo gallery exhibition by Barney, who would become one of the definitive artists of the decade. The show was a fusion of performance, sculpture, installation and photography. There were objects related to sports (a football jersey) and sex (bondage belts), as well as a metal cooling chamber that harbored an exercise bench sculpted out of petroleum jelly. The exhibition was a surreal examination by the former athlete of the cult of the body in relation to athletics.

"Stuart had seen his work in New York and was blown away," remembers Caley Regen. "It was indescribable, so protean. He was using materials people hadn't used: medical things, sports things, the body. I thought it was amazing."

The show received a glowing write-up in industry bible Artforum. Kristine McKenna, who reviewed the show for this paper, described it as "rivetingly weird," an installation that drew vital attention "to the complex and fragile interplay between spirit and flesh."

And that's when the tough times began: "The bottom fell out," says Regen, quite matter-of-factly.

The financial crisis of the early 1990s forced the Regens to move to smaller quarters up the block to 629 Almont, in 1992.

They changed the gallery's name to Regen Projects and focused on doing experimental and site-specific work in their space and around the city. They organized Richard Prince's project "First House," an old tear-down bungalow where the artist showed a series of joke paintings, among other works. In 1995, they sponsored the installation of Weiner's wall texts at Grand Central Market.

The operation was slim. "There was only two people: Stuart and myself," says Caley Regen. "We answered phones, hung the art, labeled slides. We did everything."

During this time, they also increasingly turned their attention to L.A. artists: sculptor Liz Larner, painter Lari Pittman, and, of course, Opie.

In fact, Opie was fresh out of grad school from the California Institute of the Arts when she received a call from Caley Regen about a studio visit.

"I didn't even have a studio," Opie recalls. "I was living in Koreatown in an apartment. I shot all of the portraits and did all of the work in the living room."

Even now that she's an internationally known artist, Opie says that her relationship with the gallery remains strong: "I feel like Shaun and I have grown up in this together. Besides having a good eye and being adventurous, she really stands behind her artists. She's never said anything like, 'I know that body of work sells, do that.' Never."

The gallery has also never settled on one type of artist. "Not any of us make the same kind of work," says Opie. "And I don't think that's true about a lot of other galleries."

Regen says she approaches artists not by the type of objects they make, but by the thinking that goes into the work.

"You have to trust their intelligence," she says. "You have to trust that what they have to say is their own."

While the smart programming helped cement the gallery's reputation in the 1990s, the period was not without tragedy. In 1998, Stuart Regen passed away from non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, a disease he had battled for roughly a decade. An appreciation by Times critic Christopher Knight described Regen as one of the most

"gifted" dealers in L.A., and the space as "the first major L.A. gallery to come of age in concert with the city's newly conversant ease as a cosmopolitan art scene."

In the wake of her husband's death, Caley Regen took the reins on her own and pushed the gallery forward.

"People were, like, what is Shaun going to do?" she recalls. "What was I going to be? A trophy wife? I don't know if a job finds you or you find it. But this is what I do."

In more recent years, she's supported the work of L.A. multimedia artist Doug Aitken, who explores the ways in which humans inhabit and alter the landscape. She took on the team of Lizzie Fitch and Ryan Trecartin, known for their manic Internet-era video installations. And, of course, there's the penetrating Wearing, whose exhibition opens this week. Her gut-wrenching videos explore the toxic nature of secrets and lies.

Caley Regen has also overseen a period of unprecedented growth (Regen Projects now has 17 employees). And two years ago, she oversaw a move to much bigger digs, a 20,000-square-foot Michael Maltzan-designed space, on a raffish block in Hollywood. The location initially caused some art world tittering. The gallery faces a marijuana dispensary, a doughnut shop popular with transvestites and a pawn shop.

Caley Regen says the move was inspired by the economics of the space but also because it puts her in better proximity to artists.

"I think what's going on in downtown L.A. is really interesting," she says. "The young artists, the dancers, the writers, that's who I'm looking to attract."

Other galleries, such as Michael Kohn and Gavlak have since landed in the immediate neighborhood.

For MOCA's Vergne, the gallery's trailblazing is one of its enduring appeals.

"Regen Projects was the point of rendezvous," he says. "You would go, you would have a drink, you would talk. It's a gallery made by the artists. There is a whole network of relationships around it, a real communality."

Plus, Vergne adds, Caley Regen is simply a good presence to be around: "She smokes, which is great," he chuckles. "Every time I see Shaun, I'm like god, I want a cigarette. She kind of brings the sexy back."

Caley Regen, however, is modest about her accomplishments, shrugging off the feat of maintaining and growing an art space over 25 years.

"You put these things out in the world," she says. "If you show great art, people will come to you."

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