



# BLUM & POE

MARKING 25 YEARS IN L.A., THE  
PIONEERING ART GALLERY FORGES AHEAD

*Text by Allison Berg / Photography by Steven Perilloux*

**J**eff Poe rubs his head and appears uncomfortable as we meet in Blum & Poe's secluded garden off an unassuming street in Culver City. Having already toured the Escher Gunewardena-designed gallery, he is anticipating a more personal deep dive. His posture relaxes, however, as he reflects on Blum & Poe's humble beginnings in 1994. "I had no job and didn't know what to do," Poe recalls with a laugh. "Then I remembered that Tim Blum was trying to open a gallery in L.A. So I called him and said, 'Look, I know of a gallery closing in Santa Monica. I have a number of artists from that gallery. I think we need, like, twenty-five thousand dollars, and I can get five from my mom.' That was it."

*Above, from left:  
Tim Blum,  
Sarvia Jasso  
and Jeff Poe.*



*Above and left:*  
Designed by Escher  
Gunewardena Architects,  
Blum & Poe has 21,000  
square feet of interior space  
and extensive outdoor  
space, making it one of the  
city's largest contemporary  
art galleries.

In their early crusades to earn respectable positioning in the global art arena, the business partners put on tough exteriors that could be misread as arrogance. But during this opportunity to take a beat, their lack of pretention becomes obvious. Both men confide that in a world that requires relentless art-fair participation and event-based “shit,” they prefer to just quietly work at the gallery. Bantering with the ease and choreography of a long-married couple, Blum and Poe’s narrative illustrates the old-fashioned rewards of hard work, authenticity and grit. In fact, as it

celebrates its twenty-fifth anniversary next September, Blum & Poe has become one of the premiere contemporary art galleries in Los Angeles and has thriving outposts in Tokyo and New York.

Blum and Poe launched their eponymous gallery into what at the time was a New York-centric universe. Poe had been working for Kim Light’s family-backed gallery when the money suddenly ran out in late 1993. He was shocked—and abruptly unemployed. Meanwhile Tim Blum,

*Right:*  
Light wells with clerestory windows flood the gallery with natural light. *Far right:* A pivoting wall leads to a storage area and a private viewing room.

*Opposite:*  
Blum & Poe has a strong foothold in Asia; a recent show featured works by Korean artist Chung Sang-hwa.



sort of the yang to Poe's yin, had been one of only two expats soaking up the postwar Japanese art movements in Tokyo for five years. "It was just me and Alexandra Monroe, who is now a senior curator at the Guggenheim," notes Blum. He had recently married his Angeleno wife, Maria, Poe's former colleague, and was plotting his return to L.A.

The two scraped together everything they had and began working their disparate rolodexes. There was no strategy. "We didn't have time to think about strategy," stresses Poe with a chuckle. "It was grizzly business for quite a long spell." He notes that not as many people were buying art back then. Regardless the young men, both of whom were raised in Southern California, were committed to digging in and rooting themselves here. They set on a course for organic growth locally while keeping their hands in what was transpiring globally.

On the home front, Blum handled collectors in the front of house and Poe ran the back of house and physical plant. Poe drew on longstanding relationships in places like Cologne and London, and Blum leveraged ties with Japanese friends like Takashi Murakami and Yoshitomo Nara. A few grueling months later, they opened an 800-square-foot Santa Monica gallery,

with British artist Anya Gallaccio's room made entirely of chalk as the inaugural exhibit. Managing each deal and relationship with discretion, expeditiousness and transparency, they played the game but changed all the rules.

"We had to really get up in the faces of some very famous old-school New York galleries and show them they couldn't treat this L.A. gallery in the way they may have become accustomed to with others," Blum relates. (He proudly notes that they are now friends with those galleries). While they were up against a myopic viewpoint about the West Coast, living here gave them an advantageous meta-perspective and a geographic proximity to Asia that would ultimately make them the gateway to the Far East. They took risks and fought their battles with what Poe calls an "L.A. ruthless laid-backness."

Blum emphasizes that their vast foothold in Asia does not define Blum & Poe's program. Instead, he proffers, it creates a central portal to the gallery's identity. "That's the thing—there isn't a defining aesthetic," he says. "It's been hard for people on some levels, because it's everything from Sam Durant to Murakami. More politically motivated activists and socially conscious Cal Arts graduates versus Superflat. We just try to show the greatest art." That said, there is no denying Blum & Poe



was inextricably involved with ushering in and even coining the term *Superflat* in the 1990s and being the first stateside gallery to take chances on lesser-known movements like Mono-ha, Dansaekhwa and CoBrA.

Blum befriended the now-iconic Superflat artist Murakami in 1991 and Nara shortly thereafter. Encompassing the notion of high-, middle- and lowbrow culture existing equally, Superflat marked a moment when a Japanese historical aesthetic merged with Pop. Murakami basically flattened everything out and gave it the same weight. Superflat defined 1990s Japan onward and seeped into pop culture on an epic scale. Westerners were initially resistant, but Blum & Poe's persistence paid off, with curators Paul Schimmel and Mika Yoshitake organizing a well-received Murakami show at MOCA in 1999. This exhibit, along with the Norton family's early support, kept Blum & Poe's doors open.

The gallery also gave Lee Ufan, a Korean Mono-ha artist who spent most of his life in Japan, his first American solo show. That exhibit's success led to them producing a museum-quality Mono-ha survey with Mika Yoshitake in 2012. Mono-ha—the reductive, nature-based 1968-1975 Japanese art movement—is ephemeral and rooted in things created from simple mate-

rials and then discarded at the end of a show. "That show changed what we do at the gallery," stresses Poe. It emboldened them to do a similarly scaled Dansaekhwa (the Korean monochrome movement) exhibition with curator Joan Kee in 2014 and a two-part CoBrA (the late-1940s to early-1950s European avant-garde movement) show with curator Alison Gingeras in 2015.

Blum & Poe's latest groundbreaking group presentation, *Parergon, Japanese Art of the 1980s and 1990s*, curated by Yoshitake, is currently on view at the L.A. gallery. Focusing on more than 25 post-Mono-ha Japanese artists who were investigating installation, performance and experimental multi-genre practices, it marks the first time many of these artists are exhibiting in the West under one roof.

As Blum & Poe pioneer new cultural perspectives, its artists continue to come into their own. "A lot of our artists have grown up with the gallery from the beginning," notes former L.A. gallery director and current New York-based partner Matt Bangser. "The parallel growth has created a familial culture that we never want to lose as we set the pace for galleries of our size and ambition." Directors and staff members contribute their own stories and interests to the program. And while scholarly group presentations

distinguish Blum & Poe from other galleries, its roster of local superstars is nothing short of mind-blowing. Mark Grotjahn, Sam Durant and Dave Muller have been with the gallery since its earliest days, and Henry Taylor, Friedrich Kunath and Shio Kusaka have joined along the way. "Some artists have been with us five years, others for twenty-five. It is deeply gratifying to be involved in their lives and see us all grow together," says Poe.

Sarvia Jasso, Blum & Poe's current L.A. director, values the gallery's open-mindedness and ongoing commitments to female artists, including Penny Slinger, Linder and Solange Pessoa. "We're always looking at the bigger picture and how we participate in it," she asserts.

Burgeoning programs demand commensurate space. In 2003 Blum & Poe expanded to a 5,000-square-foot gallery on La Cienega designed by architects Frank Escher and Ravi Gudewardena, and around 2008 they reconvened with them to gut a dark 1970s torpedo-trigger factory and Thornton Abell-designed offices across the street. The result, 22 months later, was their current space: 21,000 square feet of elegant museum-like interiors with 19,000 square feet of private outdoor area.

Poe worked closely with Escher and Gunewardena, scholars who had collaborated on Sharon Lockhart exhibitions, the Hammer Museum's John Lautner survey and the renovation of Lautner's Chemosphere house. Front and rear entrances flank an elongated lobby that leads to three central galleries. Light wells with clerestory windows flood the galleries and nearby staff offices with natural light. Bordering the main galleries, a massive hinged wall opens to reveal a bustling storage and preparation room the size of the entire former Blum & Poe gallery. This leads to a private viewing room and adjacent landscaped courtyards. Upstairs, an additional 2,400 square feet accommodate special projects and private offices (Blum works at the community staff table downstairs while Poe prefers being in his own office).

In 2012 Blum & Poe increased its worldwide footprint by opening a Tokyo gallery. And after prolonged deliberation, in 2014 Bangser headed to New York to convert an Upper East Side townhouse into a multistory viewing space with an outdoor garden. The Tokyo opening solidified Blum & Poe's standing as the premiere Western source for postwar Japanese art. The New York gallery opened with Mark





*Opposite below:*  
The upstairs houses private offices and space for special projects. At left, Japanese artist Tomoo Gokita's *Bemsha Swing*, 2018.

*Left:*  
A gallery installation, *dogs don't let people take them home no more*, by artist Darren Bader. *Below:* Structural elements of the upstairs gallery were left exposed.



Grotjahn's voluminous butterfly paintings and became a nucleus for promoting underrepresented programs on the East Coast.

When asked about being included in *Artnet News's* "Top 14 Mega Dealers" list, Blum laughs, saying the gallery is more of a "mega boutique." The dealers play on the same level as the Gagosians, Paces and Zwirners of the world but don't have that level of financial capacity. "We run a gallery second to none in terms of the mechanics, our academic scholarship and our global programming in three cities, with L.A. as our hub," says Poe. "We're the ones who always break down the door, and behind us is bum-rush city."

Taking chances is in Blum and Poe's DNA, and their efforts have helped make Los Angeles a true art world capital. Blum & Poe was one of 68 galleries that participated in the Frieze LA international art fair last month. "Fairs have started and stopped in L.A. for thirty years now,"

Blum notes. "My personal take is that not every city needs an art fair for it to be declared a major center of art, and L.A. is very unique in so many ways that maybe it just isn't the kind of place that can handle one the way we know it. Frieze is giving it a whirl, and it's good marketing and promotion for the city. I keep my expectations low, particularly with art fairs, but if it works, terrific—bring it on."

Blum and Poe hope more dealers dig down and evolve here—more successful newcomers means more opportunities to see, think and talk about art. They do, nonetheless, differentiate between home-grown and satellite shops, recalling Pace's and Luhring Augustine's brief 1990s L.A. stints. "It's damn hard to have a gallery and grow with all the ebbs and flows of the market for twenty-five years," Blum contends. "Because we ground it out with absolutely nothing for so long, we do have special sauces we have been marinating."

For now Tim Blum and Jeff Poe will continue telling their stories with exhibits, performance and music. "There are moments I walk through the gallery when there is no one around," Poe practically whispers, as though letting me in on a secret. "It feels like we have really produced something special in cahoots with the artists. It is very, very satisfying." ●

**Blum & Poe**  
2727 S. La Cienega Blvd., [blumandpoe.com](http://blumandpoe.com)