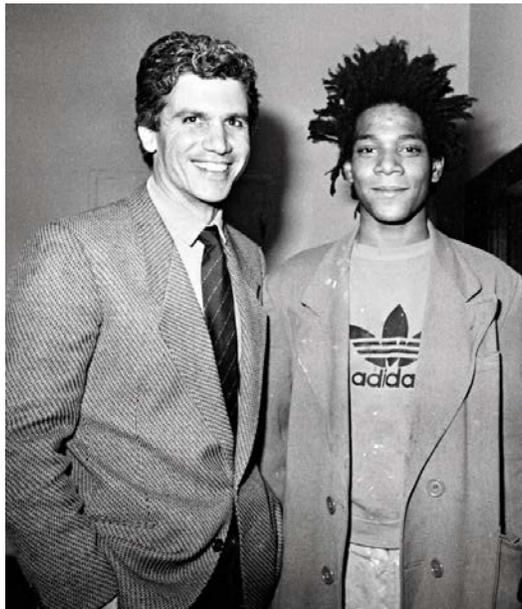


GAGOSIAN

NEW YORK

Larry Gagosian on the painting that got him a loft that got him a gallery.

Amy Larocca



Larry Gagosian and Jean-Michel Basquiat, 1983. Photo: Courtesy of Larry Gagosian

“I started my business in L.A. around 1977. It wasn’t even a gallery; it was more of a poster shop. I started traveling to New York fairly regularly because it was clear that New York was the center of the art world and I would have to spend time there if I wanted to grow my business. But also I fell in love with the city. I was enchanted and stimulated by the energy. I met Leo Castelli because I had done a small show with a photographer named Ralph Gibson who had a studio on West Broadway. He was represented by Castelli, which I didn’t even know when I’d first reached out to him. I just liked his work.

I wasn’t really ready to do major business, but I guess you could say I was aggressive and I started doing deals. Gagosian also represented Robert Rauschenberg, who once had as his assistant Dorothea Rockburne, who once had as her assistant Carroll Dunham, who is the father of Lena Dunham, who has an Odeon tattoo. I would come stay at the Stanhope Hotel because I knew a manager — he happened to be an Armenian guy, and I’m Armenian, so he gave me a really special rate for a broom closet of a room — \$40 a night! — but I was spending most of my time in Soho, which was just emerging. One day, one of the guys who I was working with who owned an art-shipping company said, “We’re developing this loft building on West Broadway, and there’s one left.” I’d never considered buying a loft here, but there I was with this guy, and he pointed to the fifth floor of this six-floor building right across from Leo Castelli and he said,

“If you want to buy it, tell us right now.” I said, “I’ll take it.” It was \$40,000, which I didn’t even have in my bank account. And then I said, “Jesus, I’ve got to pay for this thing now.” I said, “I’ve got this Brice MardenMarden studied with Alex Katz. painting. Would you be interested in trading for the loft?” It was called For Otis, about Otis Redding, and they said, “Okay, we’ll do the deal.” So I gave them the painting and I got the loft.

Peter Marino, who recently did my home on the Upper East Side with Annabelle Selldorf but who I didn’t know from Adam at that time, was doing another loft in the building for a very important, successful diamond dealer named Ara Arslanian, who is another Armenian friend of mine. I said to Peter, “I don’t have much money, but would you help me with my loft?” Peter looked like a different person back then, Brooks Brothers suit, very bookish-looking. I think I traded him a Twombly drawing for his services.

So I built this loft, and I started doing shows there, and the building freaked out. They said too many people are coming up and down the elevator. They were right. I’d have an opening with 300 people, and we’d go till four in the morning, and if I lived there, I wouldn’t have been happy either. A few years later I was standing on West Broadway in front of my loft with Peder Bonnier, who’s a friend of mine, and he said, “Larry, I’m going to rent an office for my art dealing. Want to go take a look at it with me?” So I got in the car, drove over to West 23rd Street between Tenth and Eleventh, and he went up there to seal the deal with Sandro Chia, who owned the building and was a very successful artist at the time.

I’d never been to Chelsea before that. There were no galleries, and there were crack vials all over the sidewalk. It was a rough neighborhood with a lot of prostitutes: At night, they’d chase you down the block if you had a nice car. But in Sandro’s building I noticed there was a truck dock on the ground floor. I said to him, “What are you doing with the truck dock?” He said, “I want to rent it.” I said, “What are you asking?” He said, “I want \$3K a month,” and I said, “I’ll take it.”

Now, until that moment, it hadn’t crossed my mind to actually have a proper gallery in New York. I had my gallery in L.A., I’d had my loft thing in New York. I was doing well in L.A. And this became the beginning of my career as an art dealer.