

# Two American Art Icons Discuss the Old Days and Their New Shows

Mary Heilmann and Larry Bell meet up ahead of simultaneous, decades-spanning exhibitions in Los Angeles.



The artists Mary Heilmann and Larry Bell. Credit Sean Donnola

By **Alexandria Symonds**

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The artists Mary Heilmann and Larry Bell, both 78, have a lot in common besides their age — sort of. Both were educated in California, though on different ends: Heilmann studied ceramics at Berkeley under Peter Voulkos, while Bell moved to Venice Beach out of Chouinard, where he showed, alongside friends like Ed Ruscha and Ed Moses, at the influential Ferus Gallery, co-founded by the curator Walter Hopps and run by Irving Blum. Both have been called Minimalists, though it plays out in their work in very different ways: Heilmann is best known for her vividly colored abstract paintings, Bell

for his large glass cube installations. Both have a studio in the city and one in the country, though on opposite coasts: Heilmann works in New York and Bridgehampton, while Bell splits his time between Venice Beach and Taos, N.M. Both think a lot about Donald Judd, though only Bell ever met him.

And they both get a lot of phone calls — maybe now more than ever — which punctuated an hourlong conversation (and a couple of smoothies) at Heilmann’s cheerful, spacious TriBeCa studio on a recent sunny morning. Later this month, Heilmann and Bell will each open a decades-spanning summer solo show at [Hauser & Wirth](#)’s enormous Los Angeles gallery; and while he was in town, Bell stopped by for a chat.

*Do you remember how you first met?*

**Mary Heilmann:** I saw Larry’s work in Los Angeles in the ’60s, when —

**Larry Bell:** You’re not that old.

**Heilmann:** I’m the same age as you!

**Bell:** Nobody’s that old.

**Heilmann:** We’re survivors. I used to go down from Berkeley to Ferus Gallery, and it was really a cool scene. And he already, as a kid, was doing brilliant work.

*What was the relationship like between the scene in Berkeley and in Venice Beach? Did you have ideas about the other, or was it pretty separate at that time?*

**Bell:** Well, it wasn’t a challenge. The relationship, in my memory, had nothing to do with competition. There was an enormous amount of respect between artists like Peter Voulkos and Ken Price and Billy Bengston and Robert Irwin, and that went for Jim Melchert and also some of the other characters that were up in the Bay Area that I don’t know whether they’re still around or not.

**Heilmann:** One was Robert Hudson. Richard Shaw was another one.

**Bell:** Did you know Melchert?

**Heilmann:** Jim Melchert? Yes. He just was here the other day.

**Bell:** He was? How is he?

**Heilmann:** Very good. He is 10 years older than us, and he’s fine. He’s 88. He was my teacher, and he took us on field trips down to Los Angeles to see the scene down there.

*What was your impression of it?*

**Heilmann:** Well, I thought it was so cool, and radical and different from the scene in Northern California. And we weren't very connected to New York.

**Bell:** Yeah. There was, again, the same kind of respect for the efforts of guys like Frank Stella and Donald Judd. Actually, Judd was a newcomer. When I first met Donald, I was very surprised to know that he had really not been in the studio that long. He came from another world. And just about the time that I was going into the studio, he was a good 12 years older than me. And whatever changed him into an artist really made him not very generous with the studio. For me, the studio is always a soft place, not a hard place.

**Heilmann:** Good way to say it.

**Bell:** And Don liked it real hard: "You want to sit in my studio, you sit on a hard wooden chair." Everything about his sensibility was tough.

**Heilmann:** Yeah, and luckily for me — I was a huge fan. I came to New York, so excited about being able to meet him. Never met him. And that's lucky. He was tough.

*What made you decide to come out here?*

**Heilmann:** Well, that's a good story. I wanted to move to Los Angeles, but it was such an intense scene. All guys, pretty much. And then L.A. is so big that you'd have to drive all around to have any kind of social connection. And I was a big party animal, so wisely, I decided to come here, which also had a great scene and you can just hop on the subway or even walk to these places.

*You alluded to the idea that it was a pretty masculine space and time, in L.A. Did that factor heavily into your decision?*

**Heilmann:** That was part of it.

**Bell:** Really?

**Heilmann:** Uh-huh. Because remember around Ferus, there weren't too many girls. There were lots of, like, glamorous movie stars, and I was afraid that — I was a kind of a tough nut — that I wouldn't fit in.

*Was that something you were aware of, Larry?*

**Bell:** No, but I could see how easily I could have not noticed that. I just never thought about stuff like that very much. I only went where I was welcome — I never went anywhere where I knew nobody wanted me. And so the kind of prejudice that is suggested by what you're talking about, it's just something that escaped me completely.

*Both of you have spent time in each other's disciplines. You're primarily known as a painter, Mary, but have a background in sculpture, and Larry, you painted before sculpting.*

**Heilmann:** For my work, even when they're paintings hanging on the wall, the walls surrounding the work in the room, the architecture of the room, is significant. And lately I've been doing a lot of furniture, pottery, and including that work in the shows I do.

**Bell:** These are your chairs? Great.

**Heilmann:** And quite inspired by Donald Judd, actually, it turns out. Which I didn't know: Just the basic way of making a chair is how he made a chair.

**Bell:** He never would make a chair that had a seat that went at an angle, and a back that went at an angle. Everything had to be 90 degrees. [*laughs*]

**Heilmann:** I'm so looking forward to the show in Los Angeles.

**Bell:** Graham [Steele, senior director at Hauser & Wirth Los Angeles] decided to put together a show on his own. This had nothing to do with me, really, other than I was responsible for the work, but not for organizing an exhibition of the work. And he went out and found all of every size cube that I made over 30-something years, you know. And to harvest them together, the nightmare of handling the big ones that are real old now — it just scares the crap out of me! Some of those pieces, just to move it from here to here could spell the end. [*laughs*] I have no idea how good that glue was that I used 40 years ago! The glue may not hold 150 pounds anymore.

**Heilmann:** Hauser & Wirth can handle that, I'm pretty sure.

**Bell:** Your mouth to God's ears. [*both laugh*] Can we see your studio work?

**Heilmann:** Yes. This is me doing pottery, which is current. These pieces are cast from originals, and I'm really focusing on this now. I started out in ceramics way back.

**Bell:** You're not going to show these wonderful tables, when you do your show?

**Heilmann:** No, I don't think this is part of it.

**Bell:** Oh, do it, show the chairs and the tables!

**Heilmann:** Okay, I'm hearing you. I always listen to other people. Especially you, you're smart.

**Bell:** I think seeing the ceramics in an environment like this — that shows where this is all coming from.

**Heilmann:** I'm getting goose bumps, actually. Yes, I'm doing what I'm calling the "home arts" to mix it all up — partly for cultural reasons, because the art world has evolved so that it's very, very grand and expensive and royal, almost. And I like to think of my heritage of being middle-class people who liked pictures on the wall and nice pottery. They were all into fine china. So that's an inspiration for my thinking.

*One thing that I've seen you both mention before is a resistance to assembly-line art making. You've said before, Mary, that you never want to feel like "Oh, if I make four or five more of that, I could really make some money." And Larry, you've said that people told you that if you kept on with the cubes you'd be rich.*

**Bell:** I think everybody has a right to make a living from their work. That said, making a living and making art are two completely different things. And how shy you are about financial things, just by nature, might have a big bearing on how aggressive you are trying to be in the bigger art world.

**Heilmann:** The whole thing has changed so radically. I came into it to be poor and famous. That was the style. And back then, you could afford to be poor. Or, you know, you'd have a little day job teaching art. I always made a living as a teacher: kids, university, visiting artists.

**Bell:** I never did that. I suspect that if somebody were to say, "Why were you an artist in the first place?" I would probably say, "So I can tell you now that I am celebrating my 60th year of unemployment, and that's the way I want to keep it."

**Heilmann:** That's really cool, that a young, brilliant artist could have such a showing life in Los Angeles from the beginning. And I didn't ever focus on it very much, but that was really a long shot. Some women did manage that.

**Bell:** Oh yes. [Judy Chicago](#) being one of them.

**Heilmann:** Brilliant!

**Bell:** Brilliant. She just took the things she hated the most and made it into her art.

**Heilmann:** [*laughs*] That's quotable.

**Bell:** We're doing a show together in Miami in December.

**Heilmann:** Uh-oh, now I'm jealous.

**Bell:** [*laughs*] She's pissed off because the floor they gave me is on top of her floor. I told her she could have my floor. I didn't want any hostility: "Take my floor." She wouldn't do it. She wants —

**Heilmann:** To be mad! [*both laugh*]

**Bell:** She's one of my favorite people.

*Is there anything you've wondered about each other's work that you want to ask? I'm putting you on the spot a little bit.*

*"Larry Bell: Complete Cubes" and "Mary Heilmann: Memory Remix" will both run from June 23 to Sept. 23 at Hauser & Wirth, 901 East Third Street, Los Angeles, [hauserwirth.com](http://hauserwirth.com).*