

At 90, Rhona Hoffman Is Closing Her Chicago Gallery—but She Isn't Retiring Yet

BY MAXWELL RABB

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Portrait of Rhona Hoffman, 2025. Photo by Laura Hoffman. Courtesy of Rhona Hoffman Gallery.

The Chicago gallerist Rhona Hoffman is known for many things, but being an honorary member of the feminist collective the Guerrilla Girls isn't one of them.

After receiving a letter from the collective criticizing her for a show of German Expressionists that featured mostly men, she mailed back her eponymous Chicago gallery's exhibition programming with all the women's names circled in black magic marker. A card soon arrived: "Thanks for the documentation on your record of showing women artists, which has qualified you to become an honorary Guerrilla Girl...See you on the streets." Speaking by phone from her home in Chicago, Hoffman, laughing, told Artsy that the letter is "one of my most prized possessions."



Barbara Kruger, installation view of an eponymous solo exhibition at Rhona Hoffman Gallery, 1990. Courtesy of Rhona Hoffman Gallery.

The interaction embodies Hoffman's indefatigable spirit as a gallerist and artistic ambassador. A force in the art world since her gallery opened in 1976, Hoffman gave early platforms to now-household names throughout her career—Sol LeWitt showed with her in 1979, and the likes of Mickalene Thomas and Carrie Mae Weems have also been featured. But more than anything, Hoffman has built her storied reputation by platforming women artists like Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, and Jenny Holzer. "What these women were doing was of great interest to me," she said. "And I do not like being bored. I want to go to work every day and like what I'm doing. And the women, they were amazing."

Hoffman's gallery has been a cornerstone in Chicago's art world for just under five decades, having moved six times before landing in West Town in 2018. Now 90, she has made the decision to close her brick-and-mortar gallery at the end of May, following the gallery's final group show, "Not Just A Pretty Picture," which ends on April 26th.

Hoffman is frank about her decision, "Well, I'm fucking old," she told Artsy. "On June 1st, I don't know where my butt's going to be. Where am I going to be sitting?" One thing is certain: she has no plans to leave the city.



Sol LeWitt, *Wavy Brushstrokes*, 1995

Instead, she intends to pursue anything that sparks her interest, from curating shows to working closely with artists. Just don't call it a pop-up model: "I've never used that word 'pop-up' in my life," she said. "I really don't like it. It's like a Jack-in-the-box— here today and gone tomorrow. I don't believe in that kind of timeline." What's for sure is that Hoffman is not leaving her home city: "I'm saying yes to everything that's being offered to me. Someone asks, 'Will you curate a show for me?' I go, 'Yeah, sure. Why not?'"

Some 45 years ago, Hoffman was part of the first group of gallerists to participate in the art fair that would become EXPO Chicago, a staple event in the Midwest art calendar. As the fair prepares to open this week, she will present work by several of her artists, including Amanda Williams and Nancy Spero, in her last booth before her brick-and-mortar space closes.

How Rhona Hoffman became a force in the Chicago art scenery.



Portrait of Rhona Hoffman. Courtesy of Rhona Hoffman Gallery.

Born and raised in New York City, Hoffman grew up around the arts. “I really was sure I was going to be a famous artist when I grew up,” she told Artsy. “I painted. I played the piano. I took lessons. I had dance classes with Martha Graham.” She went on to study at Vassar, Yale, and Harvard before moving to Chicago in 1958 after marrying a man from the city. When asked what her plan was when she arrived, Hoffman didn’t hesitate: “Cry.”

At the time, Hoffman found the city lacking in cultural life—a situation that was on the cusp of developing. “What I didn’t like about it changed,” she said. “There wasn’t a good movie theater. There weren’t good plays. There weren’t good cultural things—except the Art Institute [of Chicago].”



Allan McCollum, installation view of “Perfect Vehicles” at Rhona Hoffman Gallery, 1986. Courtesy of Rhona Hoffman Gallery.

Hoffman quickly became involved in the city’s nascent art scene. She moved to Highland Park and joined the Associates of the Art Institute of Chicago, a program designed to connect suburban communities to the city’s cultural life. At the time, the Institute was the only major center for the arts, so it became the center of her attention.

“That was to make people aware of the city and to make the Art Institute the goal to get to,” she said. Around the same time, she played a key role in the early days of the contemporary art center MCA Chicago, helping to found the MCA Store in 1967 as part of its women’s board.

“Chicago was awakening to the fact that they were a 20th-century city,” she recalled. By 1974, Hoffman had divorced from her husband and partnered with art dealer Donald Young, who had a reputation for selling “French stuff,” in her words, such as works by Henri Matisse. In 1976, they opened the Young Hoffman Gallery, with a mission to champion contemporary artists in Chicago.



Donald Judd, installation view of “New Work” at Rhona Hoffman Gallery, 1978. Photo by Donald Young. Courtesy of Rhona Hoffman Gallery.

“There was art here,” she said. “But not what they called in France and New York, l’art du moment — art of the moment. We were interested in the more highly contemporary and what was going on.” Some of the first artists they showed included Donald Judd, Vito Acconci, and Sylvia and Robert Mangold.

Rhona Hoffman’s eye for artistic talent

Hoffman and Young broke up, and the gallery split with them. In 1981, she struck out on her own, rebranding as Rhona Hoffman Gallery. She was part of a generation of gallerists who had launched spaces in Chicago during the 1960s and ’70s, including Young, Jan Cicero, and Richard Gray. Cicero closed in 2003; Young closed in 2012 after his passing. Gray died in 2018, but his son, Paul Gray, took the helm of the gallery. Hoffman, by contrast, has remained a constant presence.

From the start, her program stood apart. Hoffman showed Sherman in 1981, following an introduction by the legendary New York dealer Janelle Reiring, as well as solo shows of Kruger in 1984 and Holzer in 1987. “If I gave you the prices we were selling things for, you’d faint,” Hoffman said. “Cindy Sherman—I was selling film stills for 100 bucks.”



Portrait of Amanda Williams and Rhona Hoffman. Courtesy of Rhona Hoffman.

Hoffman quickly developed a reputation for showcasing artists at the cutting edge. “I’m very good at finding younger artists,” she said. The list of figures shown by her gallery backs this up: Key names include Weems in 1993; Adam Pendleton in one of his first solo exhibitions in 2005; and Derrick Adams in 2014. In 2015, she mounted a solo show for Chicago-born painter Nathaniel Mary Quinn, “Back and Forth,” after a friend urged her to visit his studio. “I don’t show anything that I don’t want,” she said simply. In recent years, Hoffman hasn’t slowed down. In 2024, the gallery presented six shows, featuring artists such as Jacob Hashimoto and Judy Ledgerwood.

The strength of Chicago’s art scene

Few gallerists are better positioned to understand the changes in the Chicago art scene than Hoffman. Since she opened her space, the city’s arts ecosystem has evolved immeasurably. Over the years, Chicago’s contemporary art scene has become a rich, diverse landscape, notably without the presence of any blue-chip gallery conglomerates. Instead, independent galleries and cultural institutions have propelled and kept the city thriving.

RHONA HOFFMAN GALLERY



Portrait of Gary Metzner, Scott Johnson, Rhona Hoffman, and Tony Karman at the opening of “Not Just A Pretty Picture” at Rhona Hoffman Gallery, 2025. Courtesy of Rhona Hoffman Gallery.

According to Hoffman, a primary reason for the richness of the Chicago community is because of its art schools. “If you look at the list of graduates from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, you’re amazed—simply amazed—by the number of famous artists who graduated from here,” she said. “So if they graduated from here, they must have also lived here.” This wealth of talent is paired with a younger generation of gallerists who are giving Hoffman hope for the future. Local stalwart Monique Meloche, for example, once worked as a director at Hoffman’s gallery.

“I spent 1997 to 1999 as the director of Rhona Hoffman Gallery, and I always say I earned my PhD in art dealing over those two years,” said Meloche. “Notoriously snarky, Rhona always revealed her warm and maternal side to me, and we’ve built a now 30-plus years of friendships and collaborations.”

Indeed, a parallel can be drawn between Chicago’s art scene and its food industry, which is known to nurture budding chefs and exciting new restaurants. “We’re a restaurant city because people can open a restaurant for less money than they can in New York, so we have all the young ‘chefs’ come to Chicago to open their new galleries,” Hoffman explained. The community, she adds, is generous: “Here, in Chicago, the gallerists are really nice people, and they welcome the visitors.”

This welcoming spirit is bolstered by EXPO Chicago. The beloved art fair, known for bringing collectors and curators to the American Midwest, will mount its 12th edition this week. Hoffman credits the fair, especially under the leadership of director Tony Karman, with helping to cultivate a sense of openness that mirrors its city. “EXPO is enormously responsible for that,” she said.

Even now, as political and economic volatility envelops the world—and the art world by extension—Hoffman is resolute. “The art world is really holding its breath, but...we are still doing our lives because it would be a catastrophe if we stopped doing that.” In her eyes, the community, which she sees as extremely close, has come a long way since the days when the thought of living in Chicago brought her to tears.

Hoffman's next chapter



Derrick Adams, installation view of “... and friends” at Rhona Hoffman Gallery, 2023. Courtesy of Rhona Hoffman Gallery.

Hoffman is clear about what has driven her all these years. “My entire career was based on showing art to the public and welcoming the public and educating as many people as I could, or helping as many people as I could,” she asserted.

She admits that she’ll miss her connection to artists and art lovers alike that comes from a brick-and-mortar space. “I’m a public person,” she said. “I’m a social person. I would talk to a tree if it would.” But while she might be closing her gallery, Hoffman is certainly not closing the door to the art world. “If it looks interesting and I have enough freedom (and I like the person offering), it’s a go!” she said.