

Visionary - Leisa Austin

Owner, Imago Galleries

Leisa Austin, owner, Imago Galleries in Palm Desert.

PHOTO BY ETHAN KAMINSKY



Celebrating its 25th year, Imago Galleries in Palm Desert has set a high bar for the exhibition of contemporary art in Southern California and beyond. The gallery's roster of blue-chip and established artists and its architecturally impressive building draw collectors from near and far.

"What we offer is something along the lines of a museum experience," says owner Leisa Austin. "With an 18,000-square-foot building, I can do anything any artist wants, and also pull off charity functions and pop-up events. Internationally renowned artist Dale Chihuly has performed visual miracles in this gallery.

"I recently turned the 6,000-square-foot exhibition space devoted solely to the monumental works of the artist, complete with a reflecting pool," she adds. "It's the only Chihuly sculpture garden in an art gallery as opposed to a museum today."

Another distinguishing quality is the fact that collectors from around the world frequent Greater Palm Springs — especially during the winter months when art hubs like New York and London are in deep freeze. "So many of my art dealer friends do art fairs, picking up and going week upon week upon week to visit different cities to sell art," she says. "I have the audience coming to me. More importantly, they have time when they're here to stop and view the art."

This year, Austin plans to invite a selection of dealers

from other parts of the country to exhibit pop-up shows at Imago.

"I always pay attention to how the world changes around me," she says. "Last year, we introduced a gift shop with art books from Taschen, Assouline, and Phaidon, as well as fantastic gifts at a different price point. It's been really successful."

Austin also meets clients through philanthropic events she hosts in the gallery. "I've worked closely with a number of charities here," she says. "I sit on the board for the Barbara Sinatra Center for Abused Children, and I'm active with the Palm Springs Art Museum."

One of the best benefits of being in the desert — aside from the great weather, golf, spas, and events that draw the audience — is the ease of doing business. "If you're in New York City, there's nowhere to store your art crates and pedestals," Austin says. "And there's no parking to load and unload. This is a much friendlier environment."