

Travel

The business of hotel art

Hotels' approach to art was once regarded as something of a joke — but now they are becoming serious exhibition spaces



Works by Robert Indiana in 45 Park Lane
Claire Wrathall MARCH 8, 2018

“To be honest with you, I don’t like the idea of putting art in hotels,” says Larry Gagosian, the art dealer.

This is a surprise, because in recent years, his gallery, which has 17 outposts worldwide and reportedly turns over \$1 billion a year, has mounted a succession of winter exhibitions by high-profile artists at Eden Rock, a hotel on the French Caribbean island of St Barths, playground of the plutocracy, thereby setting a trend among hotels of this calibre.

Back in 2011, Gagosian was having lunch at Eden Rock’s smart beach restaurant, when the hotel’s owner, David Matthews, approached him with the idea of putting on a show. “I said: OK, but the artists have to like the idea. And I was pleasantly surprised that they were receptive to

it.” He reels off a list of blue-chip names: Richard Prince, Jonas Wood, Urs Fischer, Piotr Uklanski, Harmony Korine, Kaws. “Some of them had never been to St Barths, and they fell in love with it. The art world can get very serious. Everything’s become very pressurised. This is a little break from that.”

But there’s clearly a commercial astuteness at work too. Gagosian has a house on St Barths, as do “many, many top collectors”, he adds, singling out Mitchell Rales, the billionaire co-founder of Danaher Corporation and owner of the Glenstone museum in Potomac, Maryland, as an example. “And they like the shows too. They’re fun.” Inevitably he won’t talk numbers — no legitimate business is as discreet as the art world — but one senses the work they’ve shown has sold. So what’s not to like? “I just wouldn’t say it was really a business strategy of mine.”

It is, however, clearly something the hotel proposes to build on. Once the damage wreaked last year by Hurricane Irma has been put right and the hotel reopens in December, its purpose-built gallery space will have been redoubled and relocated to a more prominent site.

“One tries to keep the commerciality and the aesthetic experience separate, but it’s never entirely altruistic,” says Martin Tonks, who oversees the art programme across the Oetker Collection of hotels, which manages Eden Rock. Indeed Gagosian is not the only gallery with which it collaborates on exhibitions. There have also been shows with Galerie Perrotin, another eminent dealer with branches in New York, Paris, Hong Kong, Seoul and Tokyo. And there is talk of a partnership with London- and Berlin-based Blain Southern, with plans under way for an exhibition in May of work by the venerable French sculptor Bernar Venet split between Oetker’s two south of France hotels, the Château Saint-Martin near Vence and the Hotel du Cap-Eden-Roc in Antibes.



Sculpture by Bernar Venet at Cliveden © Blain Southern



Laurence Jenkell's 'Giant candy wrappers' at Brenners hotel in Baden-Baden

Meanwhile, its Paris hotel, Le Bristol, has partnered with Opera Gallery to exhibit work by Manolo Valdés; and shown sculpture by Ugo Rondinone and a site-specific work by Daniel Buren, both in association with Paris art dealer Kamel Mennour. Brenners in Baden-Baden has lately been showing Laurence Jenkell's giant candy wrappers.

It is about more than simply filling the walls — Tonks admits the hotel group and the gallery split the commission on art sold. He declines to give percentages, “though obviously the split on a €20,000 work is going to be different from one costing €1.5m.”

But it's about "guest experience" as well as money, Tonks stresses. "Art is very important," he says, to the demographic that doesn't blink at a four-figure room rate. "It's something they buy, they treasure, they have at home. And infusing the things they love into our hotels is part of being a great hotelier." It's also a way of widening one's client network. "The galleries don't have our database, and we don't have theirs. But I know for certain they overlap, and that that overlap could be bigger".

Such exhibitions can indeed "be beneficial for all the parties," agrees Noura Al-Maashouq, an artist liaison at Blain Southern, which last year staged an exhibition of Venet's sculpture in the gardens at Cliveden, west of London. Though the estate belongs to the National Trust, the house, former home of William Waldorf Astor, is operated as a hotel by Iconic Luxury Hotels. "Blain Southern is a commercial gallery, and we look after the best interests of our artists. So, sure, the works were for sale." (And sold well too.) "But we also wanted to work productively with the hotel." To which end the gallery held a succession of receptions and lunches, "introducing our top clients and supporters to the hotel and its Michelin-star restaurant" This summer there will be an exhibition of sculpture by Lynn Chadwick.



Works by Damien Hirst in 45 Park Lane



Ugo Rondinone's 'Flower Moon' at Le Bristol, Paris

Rocco Forte Hotels has established ties with galleries local to its city properties. Check into Brown's in London's Mayfair, and in your room you will find a booklet urging you to look at the art on the walls of the hotel's English Tea Room, all of which is for sale at the John Martin Gallery, its near neighbour on Albemarle Street.

"I get huge pleasure just seeing exhibitions out of a white-cube gallery, somewhere discreet and intimate where they live as part of a social space, and the paintings become part of the conversation," says founder, John Martin. "Brown's Hotel has played a huge part in the life of the gallery, our artists and our collectors."

In this instance, the hotel receives no commission on sales. Rather, says its managing director, Marco Novella, "The aim is to provide a rotating exhibition for guests to enjoy, and also a platform from which the gallery and its artists can reach new audiences [because] the hotel is very keen on supporting the local art scene."

Brown's sister property, the Hotel de Rome in Berlin, another city with a vibrant art scene, has a similar arrangement with the Circle Culture Gallery, works from which are displayed in its La Banca restaurant (lately an exhibition of work by Julian Schnabel), and which will open a club

room-cum-library in this summer, where talks and other events will be held.

“**No other hotel** in Norway has art like we have,” says Siri Loining of The Thief in Oslo, another hotel keen to champion its art credentials and home to a display of museum-quality contemporary art work loaned by the Astrup-Fearnley Museum opposite, which is sponsored by the hotel’s owner, Petter Stordalen. (Indeed the hotel reciprocates with works from its own collection. The Richard Prince cowboy that is usually in the lobby has been temporarily swapped for a huge mixed-media work by Laura Owens.) So perhaps it was inevitable that it would start to deal in art too, hence the Thief Art Space on the third floor, which hosts year-round selling exhibitions of comparatively inexpensive work by emerging artists. Its curator, Sune Nordgren, believes those on show are poised “to make a proper mark on the current art scene”.



Sculpture by Niki de Saint Phalle in The Thief, Oslo



Works by Harmony Korine at Eden Rock

Like Brown's, the Thief says it takes no commission, but if these are relationships where no money changes hands, Severin's, the newest five-star in the alpine village of Lech, one of Austria's most glamorous ski resorts, actually pays the Vienna-based consultancy Contemporary Art Advisors a retainer to supply it with blue-chip art that is mostly available to buy.

"We made it clear from the beginning that we didn't think it would work as a sales space," says Valentin Kenndler, managing partner of CAA. "A hotel is not like an art fair. So our main focus has been to create a great luxury environment with really cutting-edge, high-quality art."

There are currently about 60 works, by artists including Roy Lichtenstein, Jim Dine, Julian Opie, Annette Kelm, Tobias Rehberger and Markus Huemer, that belong to private collectors, galleries, in some cases the artists themselves, hanging throughout the 10-bedroom chalet hotel. "If it sells, and some do, then that is the butter on the bread," he says. "But it's not the primary focus."

This is an attitude it shares with 45 Park Lane in London, part of the Dorchester Collection, though it does levy a commission on work sold. "I'm surprised by how much we do actually sell," says John Scanlon, its general manager, though with prices ranging from about £1,000 — less than a night in some of its rooms — to £20,000, the income it generates isn't the major consideration.

"We used to have temporary exhibitions in the lobby, and guests would ask to buy the pieces even though they weren't really for sale," says Scanlon. "So it evolved naturally," and there's now a year-round programme of exhibitions curated by the Brixton-based consultancy Ackerman

Studios. “It’s more about delighting and intriguing our guests,” he says. “I love it that people want to buy them and that when they get a work back to the US, or wherever, and they’ve hung it, they send us a picture. It makes for a sort of connection and a story they’ll tell about us.” And there’s no better publicity than word of mouth.

“Art dealers feel they have to obfuscate the mercantile part of their profession,” Gagosian told Jackie Wullschlager in these pages. “But let’s not kid ourselves. It’s a business.” And so are hotels.

Gallerists turned hoteliers

Just as hotels are diversifying into art dealing, so gallery owners are opening art-filled hotels of their own. **Casa Malca** (casamalca.com) may stand right on the sand in the boho Mexican resort of Tulum, but, yes, that is a Kaws in the lounge, a Keith Haring on the wall of the bar and a Vik Muniz above the bed in the Malca Suite because all of them belong to Lio Malca, as does the New York gallery that bears his name.

In Accra, Marwan Zakhem is the owner of Gallery 1957, Ghana’s foremost dealer in art from west Africa. He is also managing director of GCC Resorts, which in 2016 launched the **Kempinski Hotel Gold Coast City** (kempinski.com), the city’s newest five-star.

Later this year, Iwan and Manuela Wirth, the co-founders of Hauser & Wirth, which has galleries in Zurich, London, New York, Somerset, Los Angeles, Hong Kong and Gstaad, will make their first venture into hotel-keeping, when they open the 46-room **Fife Arms** (thefifearms.com) in Braemar, Scotland, which promises a “significant collection of Victorian painting and artefacts, among site-specific installations and works by international contemporary artists”. If it’s as handsome as Durslade Farmhouse (durslodefarmhouse.co.uk), the six-bedroom holiday home next door to their Somerset gallery in Bruton, it will be very fine indeed.

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