

The Hotel as Patron of the Arts? In Hong Kong, The Peninsula Takes the Trend to the Next Level

By Lilah Ramzi | April 9, 2019



Timothy Paul Myers's work entitled *Alizarin*, located in the lobby.

Technically speaking, the hotel lobby is a privately owned public space, much like a shopping mall, plaza, or museum. And it's been a growing trend for hoteliers to operate as such, offering something to those not spending the night. For most, it's a buzzy restaurant that's a draw in and of itself (like at The NoMad, or Positano's Il Pellicano). Others go beyond the epicurean, with experiences like the McKittrick Hotel's Sleep No More, the Bellagio's Fountain show...and just about every hotel in Las Vegas, for that matter. Then there's the hotel lobby slash art gallery; Damian Hirst's gold-gilded mammoth at the Faena Miami comes to mind, as does the collection of Calder and Picasso (and more) at La Colombe d'Or. But as of this month, the Peninsula hotel's flagship location in Hong Kong is taking the concept of the hotel as patron of the arts to the next level.

Timed to the city's most recent Basel art fair, the hotel unveiled four works scattered across its sprawling grounds by artists Janet Echelman, Iván Navarro, Timothy Paul Myers, and Chinese architecture collective Minax—the quartet of work inaugurated the hotel's "Art in Resonance" exhibition series. During opening weekend, there was certainly no shortage of art to be seen. One could spend unlimited hours perusing all the city had to offer; blue-chip galleries flew in pieces that read like a who's who of contemporary art history, and there was a glitzy gala or two (including the one the Peninsula hosted in honor of "Art in Resonance"). But the hotel was perhaps one of the few places during Basel where, delightfully, commerce came second to art.

"The artists participating in 'Art in Resonance' still have complete ownership of their work and are being paid these robust artist fees," explained co-curator Bettina Prentice. "This just speaks to the level of commitment from the hotel; I've never heard of anything like this before. I've been approached by hotel groups many times and have never said yes, but this just felt like something groundbreaking to me."

New Yorkers may know the titian-haired Prentice from her reign as the art world's leading event producer. She founded and helmed Prentice Cultural Communications for over 10 years, hosting It-galas and those museum fundraisers you *actually* wanted to attend. These days, she's curating and has teamed up with Isolde Brielmaier, who likewise is no stranger to curating art for public consumption—she's responsible for the programming in Westfield's futuristic Oculus in New York, and Los Angeles's Century City shopping center. "We complement each other really well," Prentice said.



The exterior of the Peninsula Hong Kong featuring Janet Echelman's work *Earthtime 1.26*, photo by Simon J Nicol; Bettina Prentice and Isolde Brielmaier, photo by Weston Wells.

Both on board for "Art in Resonance," the duo set out to secure the first round of artists, which proved simpler than you'd think: "every single artist we asked said yes!" Prentice revealed. The criteria? Artists must be emerging, their work must deal with "the senses," and their pieces must not require an art historical background or very specific cultural references in order to be understood. It was very important to the hotel that everyone be able to experience the installations and find meaning in them.

The result is an experience that begins outside. The exterior of the hotel, which has retained its prim 1928 façade and earned the nickname of Grande Dame of the Far East, is U-shaped, providing something of a stage for the work it now hosts: American artist Janet Echelman's multi-colored net. Echelman's piece undulates in the wind with the same rhythmic synchronicity as a flock of birds. (The hotel was so committed to the project, they gave up two of their coveted bridal suites to house anchors which secure Echelman's work in the event of gale force winds.) And though her work appears quite liberated and free-flowing, it's more precise than meets the eye. "This form is inspired by a dataset of the Pacific Ocean; its wave heights on a specific day," she explained. The work is colored with a light pink center that morphs, via color-blocking, into a cool blue. It's an artistic intervention that serves as a welcome sign, greeting guests into the hotel where more works await.

In the lobby, where soaring columns of gilt plasterwork are enough to please the eyes, guests will find a work by Timothy Paul Myers. The Australian-born artist created an alfresco dining scene (there's a bar cart, a pair of Louis chairs, a candelabra) beneath leafless trees. The whole scene

evokes Miss Havisham vibes, but it's not nostalgic. Everything is coated in a layer of crimson felt that makes the whole scene look as though it was dipped in paint rather than upholstered. He is fastidiously archiving the objects themselves as well as the DNA of their previous owners.

Continuing on to the second floor of the hotel, Chilean-born Iván Navarro has created an infinity box with neon tubes molded into the letters of the word HOME. “He grew up during Pinochet's regime in Chile; he’s known as the neon artist, but his work is also subtly political,” Prentice explains. The work is meant to reimagine the concept, location, and permanence of the idea of home.



Iván Navarro and his installation *HOME* at The Peninsula Hong Kong; gong master inside Minax's *The Wonder Room*, photos by Simon J. Nicol

Finish the tour off in a closed meditation space by Shanghai art collective Minax. Swathed in bamboo with icicle-like appendages dripping from the ceilings, the cozy room was engineered with audio in mind. Local gong meditation master Malbert Lee will wash your thoughts away. This piece, perhaps more than others, creates the most sensory of experiences.

The show is up until June 23; some works will travel to the Peninsula's location in Paris, and then onwards to Istanbul and London (England will get its first Peninsula next year). Some will be returned to the artists, who can do what they like with their own works. It was always about the art, as the Peninsula's Carson Glover put it. “In today's world, it's not enough to simply display artwork for the sake of decorating walls and lobbies,” he said. “Our desire is to present art that has the ability to impact the lives.”