



Art as Identity: 21c Museum Hotels

by Kate Bonansinga

Two doormen flanking the huge glass entrance to a 10-story, circa-1912 building renovated in 2011–12 as the 21c Museum Hotel Cincinnati literally open the door to art. This hotel is one of several 21c Museum Hotels, an entity founded by Kentuckians Laura Lee Brown and Steve Wilson in 2006. Each location aims to change the downtown dynamic of a regional city by making progressive, contemporary art available free of charge, 24/7. But this is not the only reason that 21c Museum Hotels is worth attention. Most muse-

ums decontextualize historical objects by presenting them outside of the milieu in and for which they were created. 21c Museum Hotels focuses on collecting contemporary works and is often their first home, so the hotel site contextualizes rather than decontextualizes, shaping the purpose and meaning of the art.

This is a departure from traditional museology, but then this is not a traditional museum. For example, at 21c Museum Hotel Cincinnati, behind the hostess station of the restaurant hangs

what at first looks like a 1950s roadside motel sign. But instead of lettering or a logo, this sign features a pair of bright red lips—the pulsing lights are teeth. *Cheshire (Object)* (2008), by Sanford Biggers, was exhibited in a 2012 solo exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, where it hung in the same room as *Blossom* (2007), a piano pierced by a fruit tree that simultaneously references Buddha's enlightenment under the Bodhi and a 2006 incident in Jena, Louisiana, when a racist group dangled nooses from a tree.

Façade of 21c Museum Hotel Bentonville designed by Deborah Berke.

In Brooklyn, *Blossom* was crucial to the understanding of *Cheshire*. Biggers says that “in Germany, in London, [*Cheshire* is] just a smiley face, or an Alice in Wonderland reference. In the U.S., it’s blackface minstrelsy...depending on where it is, it can flip.”¹ Without *Blossom*, *Cheshire* loses its position on racism, yet it remains visually arresting, even when hanging in a restaurant bar. It is one of more than 2,000 works in the 21c collection, which successfully performs and communicates in a multi-functional envi-



Above: Installation view of "Wild Card: The Art of Michael Combs, A Fifteen-Year Survey," 21c Museum Hotel Cincinnati, 2014. Left: Sanford Biggers, *Cheshire (Object)*, 2008. Plexiglas, aluminum, and LEDs, 67 x 33 x 10 in.



ronment meant for activities other than the presentation and interpretation of art, proving the ability of art to speak over and above daily commotion.

Brown and Wilson, the founders and owners of 21c Museum Hotels, are contemporary art collectors. Brown is an artist in her early 70s who photographs and paints and whose ancestor founded the multi-billion-dollar liquor conglomerate Brown-Forman, which began distilling bourbon in 1870 and now owns Jack Daniels. South-

ern Comfort, Finlandia vodka, and Fetzer wines, among other brands. Wilson, who married Brown in 1996, was an art student and then became the publicist for three former Kentucky governors. Their original motivation was to reignite interest in the historic downtown area of Louisville through the establishment of a contemporary art institution, and so they renovated five historic buildings (several of them former bourbon barrel and tobacco warehouses) to be 21c Museum Hotel Louis-

ville, which opened in 2006. Since then, they have opened three others: Cincinnati (2012), Bentonville, Arkansas (2013), and Durham, North Carolina (2015). Brown and Wilson are members of a 10-member executive team that leads the hotel franchise. 21c Museum director, curator Alice Gray Stites, is another, testament to the company's commitment to art as an important asset and a driving business concept. Stites oversees a museum manager and other staff at each 21c location.

There are other examples of art hotels in regional American cities, and of hotels collaborating with art dealers to populate their walls with contemporary art available for purchase. Le Méridien Chambers Minneapolis displays pieces from the collection of owner Ralph Burnet, which focuses on the YBAs

(Young British Artists); the nearby Walker Art Center offers hotel guests free admission. In a major difference from 21c, which is actively building a collection rather than attempting to create a secondary market for it, the works on display at Le Méridien are for sale.

Ace Hotel, another comparable institution, has locations in both major and regional cities: Los Angeles, New York, London, Seattle, Portland, and Palm Springs. It has purchased work by contemporary artists such as KAWS and Shepherd Fairey. Unlike 21c, however, it has no resident curator; Ace partners with organizations such as Rhizome, 99U, the Museum of Art and Design, Tomorrow Lab, and Printed Matter for curatorial expertise.

The Surrey in New York owns and displays blue chip works



Left: Alice Pixley Young, *Will You Miss Me When I Burn*, 2014. Ash, charcoal, kiln-cast glass, video, and wood, 96 x 24 x 15 in. Above: Do Ho Suh, *Floor Module Table*, c. 2004. PVC figures and glass, view of installation in the lobby of 21c Museum Hotel Cincinnati.

by the likes of Jenny Holzer, Chuck Close, and William Kentridge. And many other hotels in major cities do this as well, including Ritz Carleton Millenia Singapore and Dolder Grand in Zurich, but 21c is again doing something a bit different. It has multiple locations, and each one is situated in the downtown area of a regional city where it creates the opportunity for local audiences to experience contemporary art in their hometown.

Though the lobby of 21c Museum Hotel Cincinnati performs double duty as a gallery for temporary exhibitions, two works are on permanent view. One is a three-foot-high, yellow plastic penguin (a numbered edition by Cracking Art) that has become the hotel's trademark. The other is the reception desk. Beneath its glass surface stands a crowd of tiny, multicolored plastic men, hands raised over their heads, pushing toward the sky. In 2014, the Indianapolis Museum of Art exhibited a similar version of Do Ho Suh's *Floor* alone in its own gallery, creating a different experience of the work. But Suh's message

comes through in both venues—collective action is impactful, and personal space is scarce.

21c also hosts solo exhibitions, such as a 2014 show for sculptor Michael Combs in Cincinnati, but more often it presents theme-based group shows, with varying levels of success. "Blue: Matter, Mood and Melancholy," for instance, fell flat because the concept was overly simplistic.

Stites used a more compelling idea to anchor "Hybridity: The New Frontier," a group exhibition (on view in Cincinnati during 2014 and then in Louisville in 2015) exploring how our understanding of nature has changed with technology. For "Hybridity," Stites chose works from the 21c Museum Hotels' collection and borrowed works from artists residing in Cincinnati, including Alice Pixley Young and *Future Retrieval* (Guy Michael Davis and Katie Parker). I asked these artists how their experience working with the hotel compared to working with museums and galleries. Young explained, "They installed my work exactly like I wanted," something that



Above: Future Retrieval, *Gangster Paradise Redux: One and Two*, 2014. Ceramic, paper, and wood, 48 x 24 x 6 in. each. Right: Future Retrieval, *White Light*, 2015. Porcelain, paper, and neon, view of installation in 21c Museum Hotel Durham.

doesn't necessarily happen at other galleries. "They were specific, careful, and good stewards of the work in a tough environment...I see their collecting practice as being about gender, sexuality, and race, genuine 21st-century concerns...I am excited about their concept. It brings a type of work that I didn't think we would see in Cincinnati."²

Guy Michael Davis and Katie Parker described how their relationship with 21c Museum Hotels began with a studio visit by Eli Meiners, museum manager at 21c Museum Hotel Cincinnati. Meiners then encouraged Stites to visit the Davis/Parker studio, which she did in March 2014. *Gangster Paradise Redux*, a white cast porcelain sculpture of a topiary sitting on a wall shelf, backdropped by a framed oval of bright orange, pink, blue, and yellow floral wallpaper hand-cut by Parker, was in their studio at the time.

(The title refers to Coolio's 1995 song "Gangsta's Paradise.") Stites felt that 21c's space needed a larger work, and that the artists had more to say. She recommended that they create a companion: *Gangster's Paradise Redux: One and Two* is now a diptych, which was included in "Hybridity." "Alice just knows," Parker says, "what the space needs."³

Stites then commissioned Davis/Parker to create 18 paper and ceramic light fixtures for the entry area of 21c Museum Hotel Durham, which they did based on sketches of the space. Their first visit to the site was to install the completed chandeliers, an indication of the high level of trust between the artists, Stites, and Meiners. "I think I could e-mail Alice or Eli at anytime with a crazy idea and they would listen to it," Parker explains. "Alice makes me feel like I am part of something bigger...there is no snob-



bery or fear...only a deliberateness and respect for art and how it makes a difference."

By not only acquiring existing works, but also commissioning new work and organizing theme-based exhibitions, 21c Museum Hotels creates a community of artists, which is ideally what a commercial gallery does with its stable. 21c simultaneously

serves the functions of museum, collector, and gallery. The art is front and center. It is contextualized by, and often gains purpose from, the museum hotel setting. The artists earn exposure and an opportunity to do what they do best: convince new audiences of how troubled, complicated, and yet beautiful, our world is.

Notes

¹ Sanford Biggers, "In the Studio, Sanford Biggers with Stephanie Cash," *Art in America*, March 2011, p. 96.

² Alice Pexley Young, conversation with the author, June 29, 2015.

³ Katie Parker, conversation with author, June 8, 2015.