

## Hotel Art That Makes You Feel Richer: On 21c in Durham

by [Paddy Johnson](#) on November 6, 2015



Art centers haven't traditionally populated the American south in the same way they have the coasts. That's been a problem for artists in those regions, but there are now signs of growing resources in these areas. The Dallas Art Fair [has been picking up steam](#), and publications like [Glasstire](#) in Houston, [Burnaway](#) in Atlanta and [Pelican Bomb](#) in New Orleans are getting [more attention](#) and [funding](#). Probably the largest and most notable emerging force as of late, though, has been the establishment and growth [21c Museum boutique hotels](#). Since founding the hotel in 2006 to house their art collection, philanthropists and art collectors Laura Lee Brown and Steve Wilson have grown the business into a burgeoning juggernaut. The couple owns one in Louisville KY, Cincinnati OH, Bentonville AR, Durham NC and has plans to open three more in Lexington KY, Oklahoma City OK, and Kansas City MO.

I visited their most recent hotel in Durham last month, so I could get a sense of the art experience but I came with a few reservations. I've seen enough hotel art fairs to know that most spaces in those buildings aren't designed with art viewing in mind. Awkward installation is almost inevitable.

Let it be said that this problem has not been solved by 21c. I saw art work crammed into elevator bays and works that just barely fit onto the columns or walls they were hung on. I assumed this was an issue specific to hotels, but when I visited [The Art](#) two weeks later in Denver, a hotel that similarly houses the collection of its owners (in this case, Corporex and Lanny Martin), they did not have the same problems. Works seemed to have plenty of room to breath — even their Sol LeWitt, which was only about 12 feet behind the glass of their valet service. It costs about \$35 more a night to stay at The Art.



Ed Ruscha, Industrial Strength Sleep

The Art probably had more of the type of art I respond well to—an enormous Ed Ruscha that read “Industrial Strength Sleep”, a beautifully crafted pink paper fish by Frank Gehry and a huge gestural Sam Francis abstraction in greens. But there was also so little risk taking in this collection, it’s hard to get excited about it. No political work. No nudity. Plenty of blingy lights. (That’s the Leo Villareal ceiling of lightbulbs in the parking bay.)

While the work at 21c wasn’t always to my taste, you can’t say it doesn’t take risks. Their show curated by Alice Gray Stites, “[Seeing Now](#)” includes the work of two dozen artists who are make social and political statements about the seen and unseen. For example, Hank Willis Thomas’s seemingly blank canvas only is transformed into lynching documentation when viewed through the lens of a camera and a flash. The history of African American murders goes unseen without your help. Matteo Mate’s “Paiseje Uniformado”, points more obliquely to violence, rendering a 19th century impressionist landscape in hues derived from military camouflage patterns. Brutality can be found anywhere. And on a less depressing note, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer’s “Zero Noon” simply tells us our online life is too fast. He’s made a clock that runs on internet refreshed statistics that conflates time.



Installation view of the 21c lobby

Now, this work is more didactic than I normally like, but credit has to be given for placing left leaning and social conscious work in the context of a hotel lobby in the south. It takes courage and I'm glad it exists. In fact, I'd guess that most New Yorkers would come out appreciating art a little more, even if they weren't fond of it all. Viewing art in this city means dealing with the class tension by the disconnect an average person's living conditions and those who will buy multi-million dollar art works in multi-million dollar buildings. It's depressing. But none of that exists at 21c. The rooms are affordable and the art approachable. Ultimately, the art makes guests feel richer, which is exactly the kind of experience you want in a hotel.



All the bathrooms come with this rubber ducky, which you can purchase at 21c. My only regret of the visit was not picking one of these up.