

Lone Star Artists at Home on Display



Fine art and fine hotels are two subjects rarely joined by the same sentence.

But visitors and guests of downtown's new Hilton Americas-Houston Hotel will find a collection of masterpieces by Houston and Texas artists to rival that of any high-end gallery.

The lobby, in particular, serves as backdrop to three color litho prints by Houstonian Robert Rauchenberg, a 19-foot-long oil canvas of a desert sunset by West Texas artist Katherine Alexander and a concrete "fabric" wall by local artist Joe Mancuso.

Hotel General Manager David Villarrubia explains that the decision by the Houston Convention Center Hotel Corporation – builder of the hotel – to highlight Texas artists was part of an overall plan to make the hotel distinctly Lone Star State.

"Throughout the construction, the idea was to bring in as much of Houston and Texas as possible," Villarrubia said. "It just made sense for a Houston-owned hotel to feature Houstonians and the region."

To find just the right pieces to fill the hotel's nearly 100,000-square-foot of public space, the corporation hired former Texan Ryan Garrett, an art consultant who's garnered national recognition for her work on hotels and hospitals.

Decorating the hotel with local art just made good business sense, Garrett said. "In the tourism industry people want a cultural experience, they want to learn about the area they're visiting," said Garrett, now a resident of San Diego. "What better way for a hotel to do this than with art?"

Assembling the collection, which deftly moves from contemporary to traditional, took two years – time spent scouring local studios and huddling with museum curators and gallery owners.

It was a revelation, Garrett said, even for her. "I was blown away," she said. "I'm from Texas myself, but I had no idea of the quality of art being done here."

Not content to buy works off the shelf, Garrett commissioned all but three of the 150 works now on display in the public areas of the building. The 30 artists ultimately commissioned had six months to complete the works.

"I tried to pick artists that would complement and improve the interior," Garrett

explains, "But really, about the only restriction the artists got was size."

Texture and variety, she adds, were important. And, though she looked for pieces that would grab attention, Garrett said she tried to avoid pieces that might be blatantly upsetting.

"Different styles appeal to different people," she said. "They may not like all the pieces, but they will like at least one."

Houston artist Paul Kittelson, an associate professor in the department of art at the University of Houston, has several pieces in the hotel including three resign sculptures themed on food in The Café restaurant on the hotel's main floor.

"Orange Slices is a cast resin sculpture inspired by the succulent forms and patterns found in nature. Rendered in bold shapes and bright color, the geometric triptych characterizes the zest for living large, that is quintessentially Houston," said Kittelson.

Placement of the art was critical and included in the construction plans for the hotel, Garrett said.

But even the most carefully designed blueprints can't foresee every contingent. Case in point, the carefully orchestrated installation of a granite sculpture by Corpus Christi native Jesus Moroles. Because of its weight – nearly 3,000 pounds – the piece had to be installed before the hotel was completed, Garrett explains, and set in an area with enough structural support to keep it from crashing through the floor.

"Bringing in the Moroles' piece was a big production, an event in itself," Garrett recalls.

Installing the Mancuso work, and its panels of concrete, was also more complicated than hammering in a few nails and hooks. Made of concrete, the work consisted of nine smaller blocks that hang together to give the appearance of one, 7-foot by 6-foot piece.

"My installers were sweating that one," Garrett recalls chuckling.

In addition to works by Texas artists, Garrett selected pieces from up-and-coming young artists to hang in other areas of the hotel. Texas and Houston landscapes served as inspiration for works that hang in the 1,200 individual guest rooms, Garrett said, "giving guests an experience that is unique to the hotel."

Both Villarrubia and Garrett measure the success of the project by the comments made by both out-of-town guests as well as locals who stop in to view the works.

And the collection has generated interest from those in the hotel industry, Garrett said.

"It's really become a model," she said. "A lot of other hotels are now trying to do something similar to this."

