

A NIGHT AT THE MUSEUM

WHAT TO SEE AT 21C'S ART GALLERY HOTEL BY EMILY COX

Since 21c Museum Hotel opened in Kansas City in 2018, many have wondered: just what in the world is this place? A doorman opens the door for you, and you walk up a corridor lit only by bars of red and blue LEDs—a permanent art installation by Luftwerk—into a lobby with century-old tile work and 21st-century artworks.

The entrance corridor immediately informs hotel guests that they are not in for a conventional hotel experience. It perhaps also reassures museum guests: yes, this is the place. Contemporary art is certainly more fun than what is usually found in hotel lobbies. Glowing LEDs and colorful plastic penguins win over taupe wallpaper and fake plants any day. But for new visitors, it might be a disorienting experience—what rules do you follow here? Merging hotel and museum means remaking the social conventions for each. How loud can I be? Where can I drink? Am I supposed to be here at all?

For one, this museum is open to the public 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, for free. You need not be constricted by a conventional institution's hours: need a hit of contemporary art before work? After bars close? They've got you covered.

21c is a chain—or as they call it, a multi-venue museum. Steve Wilson and Laura Lee Brown, heiress to the Brown-Forman whiskey fortune, opened the first one in Louisville in 2006. The couple are avid art collectors, predominantly focused on work made in the 21st century, hence the name 21c. They set out to open a museum—something only people with heiress kind of money and connections can really aspire to do—when they were presented with the idea of combining it with a hotel and restaurant to simultaneously supporting Louisville's tourism industry. 21c was born and has since expanded to eight locations, with three more in the works, predominantly in middle-tier cities that are pumping money back into their downtowns.

There's one permanent art installation that's shared across all locations: life-size penguins made from recycled plastic in a special color designated for each location. Kansas City's are sky blue. The penguins are made by artist collective Cracking Art, intended to draw awareness to environmental crises, but here they've become a quirky, playful mascot for the brand.

"People love them," says museum manager, Jori Cheville. "They can touch

them! Gotta give them one thing they can touch. Guests request them at their dining table. They can take them up to their room. They take on a life of their own." If you really love them, you can have one of your own at home—they're for sale on the museum's website for \$5,000.

21c bought the historic Savoy Hotel and Grill in 2016 and did extensive remodeling before opening in July 2018. The Savoy Hotel originally opened in 1888 and was the longest continually operating hotel west of the Mississippi until its 2016 closure. As the building has historic landmark status, much of the building's original features are preserved: including colorful tile in the lobby and an art glass dome. Reupholstered chairs from the hotel's old barbershop can be spotted around the hotel. Walking the guest room halls, you'll see the old sealed off wooden doors, keeping that historical footprint though the rooms have been expanded. The hallways are also remarkably wide for a hotel: it was built in an era where guests arrived wearing hoop skirts and hauling steamer trunks.

All this tangible history finds a potent contrast in the 21st-century art that fills the building. The art glass dome in the lobby, installed in 1903, now has a bright neon colored chandelier hanging from it, by artists Ken and Julia Yonetani. They made 31 chandeliers to represent the 31 countries with nuclear power, the chandelier's size representing each's capacity. This is the largest in the series, representing, of course, the United States. The chandelier is lit with the soft blue glow of uranium glass.

Jori Cheville says they get some travelers who are unaware that the place they've booked accommodations is not a conventional hotel. They are pleasantly surprised to find that they're spending the night in a museum. "People who wouldn't normally find themselves in a contemporary art museum," says Cheville, "are now immersed in one."

To ensure travelers get a taste of local artists, each location has an exhibition series entitled Elevate, featuring local artists in the elevator lobbies on guest floors. Through mid-February, Jillian Youngbird's works are currently on view in this series. While Cheville often features multiple local artists, Youngbird has such a substantial amount of work in a variety of mediums, that she's been the solo artist for Elevate for the last year.

"While I know in the back of my head



Inside the lobby at 21c Hotel. © CHASE CASTOR

it is a hotel," says Youngbird, "when I walk in, I still get museum vibes. There has been incredible museum-quality work there in every exhibition that I have seen and it's humbling to have my work in the same vicinity."

The space for the main exhibition is dispersed throughout the first and second floors of the building, in six separate galleries, as well as hallways. Unless taking a docent tour, it is unlikely most visitors would endeavor to find every artwork on display. There's still a sense of trespassing, of am-I-supposed-to-be-in-here? when you wander up to the second-floor conference rooms. They call these rooms galleries, but really, they're meeting rooms that just have better art on the walls than most.

The current exhibition, Off-Spring: New Generations, is curated around the themes of family and ritual. The hundred or so works in the show encompass almost any medium you can think of: sculpture, fibers, video, photography, paintings. Each location's main exhibition is a rotating, traveling show that stays in each for 10-12 months. All the exhibitions are curated

GET OUT

21c Museum Hotel

219 W 9th St.
888-511-0078

Upcoming exhibitions at 21c:

February:
Elevate features new artworks by local artists Armin Mühsam and Megan Pobywajlo

April:
Portraying Power and Identity, a group exhibition featuring contemporary portraiture

from Wilson and Brown's extensive private collection. With eight locations open, they may have around 800 works on view at any given time. They reported collecting 264 new works in 2019, by which they were

LEARNING BEYOND LIMIT

LAUREN KRUM DOES NOT LET ONE GENRE DEFINE HER. BY RILEY COWING

mostly, if not entirely, supporting living artists.

While there is an air of public service when private art collectors endeavor to share the art they own with the public, it also feels self-serving for philanthropists to expect ovations for sharing what they have too much of (that is, wealth).

Marrying the social mission of an art museum with the business venture of a hotel is a very twenty-first century late-capitalism move. It caters to a fast-paced lifestyle that means you can't spare the time to go to a museum that's any farther than the lobby of your hotel. What's more, it's an example of the way we've accepted the privatization of everything, including cultural spaces and artifacts.

Simply saying that an elite space is open to the public is very different than actually making it welcoming to the public. Who feels comfortable venturing into a pristine boutique hotel? This is open to the public in a very different way than, say, the public library is open to the public. Even a traditional institution like the Nelson-Atkins feels more accessible because it's not sharing air with hundreds-per-night luxury accommodations.

21c might feel new and exciting in its format, but ultimately it remains a business venture and still has the entrenched gatekeeping of the modern art world.

While much contemporary art grapples with issues of the uneven and unjust power structures in our society, these works are now held within places that replicate that status quo.

For those who do make it inside to see it, there are artworks that speak potently on the powers that be.

The Savoy Grill retained its antique wood bar and booths, original stained glass and light fixtures, as well as its original murals painted by Edward Holslag in 1903. "These murals are depicting expansion, settlers traveling west," Cheville says, "and that has a negative history attached to it." The museum's chief curator, Alice Gray Stites, commissioned Brad Kahlhamer, a Native American artist, to create a response piece. Now hanging in front of one of the murals, dominating the space visually, are seven dreamcatchers made of wire and bells, entitled *Super Catcher, Vast Array*. "He's healing the space for us, in a way," says Cheville, "Dreamcatchers are meant to filter out negative energy or spirits."

The delicacy of the wires and the simplicity of the metal adornment serve to enhance the spiritual effect of the installation. In a room that was originally a smoke-filled club for white men out to fulfill their manifest destiny, some spiritual cleansing is definitely necessary. **P**



PHOTO BY RILEY COWING, ILLUSTRATION BY JACK RAYBUCK

Local singer-songwriter Lauren Krum is no stranger to the Kansas City music scene. She's become a regular at The Ship in the West Bottoms, playing monthly Honky Tonk Tuesdays with her band Lorna Kay's One Night Stand.

But the musician's interests don't stop at honky tonk: over the last 11 years, Krum has explored genres from country to jazz in three primary projects—The Grisly Hand, Lauren Krum Quartet, and Lorna Kay's One Night Stand. These collaborations have provided an opportunity to remain true to herself and reclaim the music she loves.

"Sometimes I feel overly precious because I'm someone that wants to practice and feel good at something," Krum says. "But I have way too much zeal for music and for people to just be in one genre, you know. Especially doing the jazz stuff, where I started to kind of unearth and almost had this rebirth of what do you actually like? Stripping away some of your teens and twenties and 'Do you like that or did cool dudes tell you that it was cool?'"

GET OUT

Lost Cowgirl Presents: The Cosmic Country Ball
Saturday, February 15
VooDoo Lounge

Lorna Kay's One Night Stand at The Ship
Tuesday, February 18
The Ship

She admits that she sometimes struggles with self-doubt in her music and will create hurdles for herself, which often manifests as procrastination. Over time, she's learned to dabble in different interests, like playing guitar, and to give herself space to be more than just one type of singer.

"The older I get too, I just feel braver," Krum says. "I've grown in my own power and understanding of myself, so I feel more willing to be like, maybe it's not what you expect-

ed but it's what I'm doing."

Working with trusted collaborators and dear friends in each of her projects combats self-doubt and maintains creative momentum. She also draws inspiration from those around her.

"I think I've definitely gotten less self-conscious, and there's a good community in KC right now of people that are five and 10 years younger than me," Krum says. "And maybe that's always true, but they're a good source of inspiration of, 'Wow I wish I would've already been that brave.' And instead of being jealous, like the ship didn't sail. [laughs] I'm not on my deathbed like, 'You kids have fun!'"

She adds: "I think too the richness and experience of being 35, I do also feel like there's things that I'm learning and things that I want to talk about and just being braver about that."

On Valentine's weekend, Lorna Kay's One Night Stand will play at The Cosmic Country Ball at VooDoo Lounge, alongside Miki P & The Swallowtails, Unfit Wives, El-exa Dawson, and a number of other country power-house women. It's an exciting start to 2020. This year, she finds herself very close to something new: releasing a project that's entirely her own.

"I've learned so much, and I've made so many excuses about things," she says. "It's been really wonderful too, but I think it's so easy to be like, 'Well there's always someone next to me that's better at this thing.' And that's not really what it's about."

Reflecting on over a decade's worth of performing, Krum feels more confident in what she brings to the table. She recalls watching bands growing up that seemed disconnected, seen with their arms crossed or facing toward their equipment. Krum calls on her sense of humor to break down the wall that exists between the performer and audience.

"I think when you make people laugh, then they feel like they belong there," she says. "Like then they're pulled in and they're all in it together."

While Lorna Kay's One Night Stand plays primarily country music, Grisly Hand plays original music and Lauren Krum Quartet covers beloved songs, Krum doesn't limit performances to one genre. Krum acknowledges that country can be a divisive genre; to pull more people in, Lorna Kay's will incorporate 50s rock and roll or a country music reimagination of "Crazy" by Gnarls Barkley into their set.

"That's always fun because again it's like ok sure, you might still be the kind of person that's like 'I like everything but country' but you still liked that cover and it was fun," she says. "And letting people know that you can play with styles or dip into things, again we have such all or nothing, pigeonhole way of wanting to think about the arts I think. It only robs us of good experiences." **P**