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The Hotel as Art Gallery

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The [James](#), a sleekly designed hotel rising over Grand Street in SoHo, will open for business on Wednesday with all the support staff a guest could expect: a concierge, receptionists, bellhops, chambermaids, parking valets.



Employees installing art in the hallways of the James.

Matthew Jensen, the art curator of the James Hotel in SoHo, chose works from emerging artists for the hotel's 14 floors of guest rooms. The owners of the James, which is scheduled to open on Wednesday, tried to reflect the artistic microclimate of SoHo.



An installation by Sarah Frost of typewriter keys glued to a wall in the lobby of the James.

All that, and one helping hand a guest might not expect: a hotel [art](#) curator. Hotels have been hanging fine art on their walls for decades now. [Ian Schrager](#) commissioned a series of [Robert Mapplethorpe](#) prints for what is considered the original boutique hotel, the Morgans, in 1984; the [Roger Smith](#), a small property in Midtown Manhattan, transformed its lobby into an art gallery and performance space as part of a 1991 renovation.



But few have gone so far as the James, which hired a young artist, [Matthew Jensen](#), to select original artworks to adorn each of its 14 floors of guest rooms.

Mr. Jensen, 29, a photographer whose work was acquired this year by the [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#), may have an unusual job description, but he is also part of a growing breed. As business and building owners look to inject their properties with a little artistic personality, a new class of curators — some of them contractors like Mr. Jensen and some of them staff members — has arisen to help.

“There’s all these empty walls and there are thousands of artists out there who are living in the city and have never had their art seen by anyone,” said Leah McCloskey, who places works by students at the Art Students League in restaurants and apartment and office buildings. “It’s about connecting to that generation of artists and to what’s going on out there.”

That connection has been particularly important in they are or aspire to be, hotels are taking their artistic endeavors more seriously, industry analysts say, using art to build an identity rather than just to make it look good.

“Hoteliers are not only trying to come up with a theme or a style that attracts customers, but they are approaching it in a much more professional and involved way,” said Sean Hennessey, chief executive of Lodging Investment Advisors, a consulting firm in Valhalla, N.Y.

“It used to be that you could get away with just slapping something up in the lobby,” he added, “but more and more customers are looking and evaluating it much more closely.”

For the James, meeting that demand has meant trying to reflect the artistic microclimate of SoHo. Though many of the artists who once made the area a creative mecca have fled, an emerging art scene is still represented through nonprofit institutions there that support artists and show their work.

[Denihan Hospitality Group](#), which is developing the hotel, operates another James Hotel in Chicago that is also dedicated to emerging art. At the Surrey, one of its New York hotels, work by established names like [Jenny Holzer](#), [Claes Oldenburg](#) and [William Kentridge](#) nods to its location on East 76th Street, near major art showcases like the [Whitney Museum of American Art](#).

Mr. Jensen's relationship with the hotel grew from a chance meeting last year with Brad Wilson, the chief operating officer at Denihan, at an exhibition for Mr. Jensen's project "[Nowhere in Manhattan](#)," featuring billboard-size photos of the borough's remaining wildernesses that are meant to spur people to visit those places.

"It's a way to remind people in a subtle way, if they complain, 'Oh, I never get out into the woods,' well, you can just get on the A train to Inwood, or you can go in the other direction to the Rockaways," Mr. Jensen said.

The pictures appealed to Mr. Wilson — who hung three of them on the building facade when it was under construction — and Mr. Jensen's job evolved from there. Once hired, he settled on the idea of using New York-based landscape artists working in different media, one per floor.

Using an online database, he amassed a list of about 1,000 artists, which he whittled to the final 14 in three months, creating something that "kind of feels like 14 solo shows stacked on top of each other."

Taken as a whole, the installation, called "Stand Here and Listen," is meant to play off the idea of travel, inspired by signs at revered destinations like the Grand Canyon that urge visitors to look out from a particular spot, Mr. Jensen said.

One of the artists, [Jessica Cannon](#), said the installation offered guests — perhaps more open to seeing things differently because they are removed from their everyday routines — the chance to experience art in a new way.

"You can have this encounter with work that's very intimate, almost like it's in a home or an empty gallery, but you can have it on your own time," said Ms. Cannon, a painter whose work imbues landscapes with a sense of an impending event. "If someone's got insomnia at 3 in the morning, they can pace the halls and have a really intimate and personal encounter."

In addition to curating the hotel art, Mr. Jensen manages the studio of [John-Paul Philippe](#), a painter and designer who created several decorative elements for the hotel, including the room numbers. Mr. Jensen has also been overseeing the installation of the collection — the hotel bought the works — and the text that goes with it, along with a potential catalog.

Mr. Jensen said the curatorial foray, his first, took him to studios all over the city, exposing him to a whole community of artists.

"It was pretty exciting to me to see how many artists are working, just like I do, like obsessively hard, in their own studio tucked away, but nobody's really paying attention to them yet," he said. "There's a lot more emerging than established in New York — once they're established, then they all move upstate. So everyone who wants to do it is doing it here."