

Putting up Ontario artists at the Ritz

Ritz-Carlton guests get dose of art appreciation from local talent

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In the lobby of Toronto's first fivestar hotel Canadian visions abound. From the bronze maple leaves in the marble floor to views of windswept Georgian Bay, the art speaks only of Ontario, even though the Ritz-Carlton is part of an international chain. "We wanted people to know, when they visit the Ritz-Carlton, they are in Toronto, Ontario, Canada," says general manager Tim Terceira, pointing out the maple key patterns woven into an upper lobby carpet. "It localizes you and gives a sense of place." When the hotel was just in the planning stages, its Atlanta-based designer sent a portfolio of work for the developer to consider. "While they were nice, they were all American. I thought, 'that's not right,'" Garnet Watchorn recalls. "We have some terrific artists here." He hired Ross Marks, a Toronto art consultant, who contacted Ontario artists to bring in work for Watchorn's review. Some even brought their kids because they couldn't afford babysitters. The end result — 450 pieces of new art, all from Ontario artists. Some are at the start of their careers, others well established. Their work — painting, sculpture, drawings — is in public areas and guest rooms and cost about \$500,000. "It had to be five-star art," Watchorn says.

THE YOUNG ARTIST Janna Watson had never set foot in a RitzCarlton until last month when she rode her bike to the Wellington St. W. hotel and saw six of her paintings in the lobby. Though acclaim has come fairly quickly — her first solo show sold out in Vancouver last year — it was a big moment. "I felt really overwhelmed," says the 27-year-old painter raised in Flesherton, where her father is a Pentecostal minister. Part of it has to do with a feeling of permanence. "The fact that they put my name and the painting's title on a plaque . . ." After graduating from the Ontario College of Art and Design, she worked as a server at the Soho Hotel. One of her earliest shows was at the Soho condominiums. "I was supporting myself, but starving," she says. She quit in 2008 to concentrate on her painting. "People say they are attracted by my work, but often don't know why," she wrote in an email. "They turn to me for an answer." Watson blends colours on the canvas, then uses lines to connect forms. "I think of it as the lifespan of a thought caught on canvas." She explains that she paints intuitively and doesn't plan things out. "I'm not in my head at all when I'm painting." She lays the canvas or birch board on the floor so the stain she applies doesn't drip but creates glowing, ethereal blooms of colour that are her signature. Her next solo show in Toronto is January 2012.

TO UNDERSTAND how Michele Woodey and Mary Kennedy work together harmoniously, it's best to think of music. What makes their partnership unusual is that they paint together under the single name of Fiona Hoop. Kennedy starts a new canvas applying the building blocks of the painting, the broad strokes of colour; Woodey adds a layer of fine detail to elaborate on the theme, then back to Kennedy and so on. By the end, they are painting side by side. Think of a composer writing a symphony, says Woodey, adding there has to be room for all the instruments. Some of their paintings are called Sound Strings; one of the six

paintings at the Ritz-Carlton is titled Tonal Rhythm No. VI. “We weave colour and composition together the way a composer weaves separate melodies together to create one whole musical piece,” she says. They work in Woodey’s studio behind her West Toronto house, which has the feel and plush texture — rugs, naturalist collections of shells, bird’s nests and crystals — of an Edwardian drawing room. They have managed to avoid being competitive or feeling tension from working too closely. “We pretty much leave our egos behind,” says Kennedy, who also takes issue with the notion of the impoverished artist. Both make a good living from their work and have a roster of corporate clients. “There’s a stigma attached to that and many of us don’t identify with it.” Woodey adds: “We’ve actually been very successful. There were times in the past when we couldn’t have afforded to stay at the Ritz, but your life changes and after a lot of years of hard work, we’ve reached a point where we could actually stay in the Ritz and might want to.”

IN HIS MID 20S Scott Steele, who was at the time earning his living as a model in Europe, stood in front of Rembrandt’s great painting *The Night Watch* and, as he tells it, felt a shiver of excitement. “Something weird happened,” he recalls. “Enough of this modelling,” he told himself. “It’s time to get back to making art.” Back in Toronto, he went to design school, where he met his wife and set up a business with her. His first jobs as a self-taught painter were functional — floor and wall decoration. In 1990, he held his first show of 50 paintings and sold many of them. “You have to have a little confidence and wing it,” he says. Steele, now 45, is known for his photo realism paintings — so sharp they look like photographs — and impressionistic landscapes. His subjects are easily accessible, familiar Toronto storefronts and diners. “I learned to give the public what they wanted,” he says from the studio behind his Leaside house, where he lives with his wife and two children. If a buyer likes one of his paintings, but not the colour, he’s happy to do another in a different one. “I want to paint to make enough money to pay my bills and live in a house like this,” he says.

