

# Artists land 'suite' deal as Robson hotel turns gallery

By Janet Smith

Hotel guests staying in room 411 of Listel Vancouver will wake up to Carmelo Sortino's plump peaches, passion fruit and ripe, red apple.

The Vancouver painter has an instant international audience for his Mediterranean fruit still lifes, thanks to a new program that's turning hotel suites into mini-galleries.

"I think having this original art makes people feel like they are at home," says the artist, surveying the toney surroundings of the suite that has seven of his works on the walls. "I feel proud of myself to have my art chosen for these rooms, and I feel proud of the hotel."

The program at the Listel hotel at Jervis and Robson is the first of its kind in Vancouver. Last year, in the midst of a major renovation of half his suites and rooms, general manager John Nicholson approached the nearby Buschlen Mowatt Gallery with the idea. The gallery's Greg Lejniaks continues to curate the art in the upscale rooms as well as changing exhibits in the lobby and hallways.

In all, 54 hotel suites now display original art by local artists like Sortino, as well as big Canadian and

international names. In all, more than \$500,000 worth of art has been collected in the hotel.

Nicholson has not had any fears of theft: "We believe no art would be stolen; it would be purchased," he says, then adds with a laugh, "If you take one, you will find the charges on your bill."

Nicholson says the concept is already paying off. "When you look at what's happening in the industry in this city, everything's becoming very 'cookie-cutter,'" he says, referring to the number of hotel chains in the downtown. "When we approached them, the gallery said, 'This will be great for the artists.' It also gets people to look at art who don't normally go to galleries, and it gives the hotel a chance to be something other than 'cookie-cutter.'"

Lejniaks has curated a surprisingly diverse array of art, giving each suite a different look. Art ranges from French painter Bernard Gantner's traditional landscapes to Sortino's near-pop art still lifes to Canadian artist Otto Roger's serene abstracts. Meanwhile, the lobby is home to giant bronze sculptures and glass pieces, and two massive, open pomegranates emblazon one of Sortino's canvases in front of the main elevators.



Local artist Carmelo Sortino has seven of his vibrant fruit still lifes displayed in a single suite at the newly-renovated Listel Vancouver. Says Sortino: "I think having this original art makes people feel like they are at home."

Photo: Doug Shanks

Since all the art is for sale, Lejniaks is especially excited about the marketing potential for local artists. "There's nothing worse than having artists' work in the stacks, not being seen," he says from San Francisco, where he's just opened a Canadian-strong gallery called Lejniaks Fine Arts. "When I came up to Vancouver a few years ago I was struck by how difficult it is for Vancouver-based artists to get out in the marketplace, and I saw this as an opportunity."

Nicholson adds the suite displays offer the chance for people to see the art in a home-like setting—not on an empty gallery wall.

Like a gallery, each room has a small, framed biography of the artist and a catalogue of his or her work. Hotel guests can read about Sortino's boyhood in Sicily, when he often went hungry during World War II, and the way that experience, and his later work as a marzipan chef, still influences his painting today.

Nicholson hopes guests who return to the hotel will sample different rooms. "For the first time, art connoisseurs will have a place to stay here," he adds.

Sortino's wife, Jennifer Goodwin, who has had her floral and semi-surreal figure paintings displayed in the Listel's hallway gallery "windows", hopes international travellers get to know the artists by name. "The real fun will come when you get guests requesting 'The Sortino Room,'" she says.