

# Assembling art serves as theme for car-plant-turned museum/hotel in Oklahoma City



by Steve Lackmeyer • Published: May 19, 2016 •



Artist James Clar watches as conveyor belts on his work, "River of Time," start to move Wednesday morning at the 21c Museum Hotel set to open next month at 900 W Main in a former Ford Model T assembly plant. Photo By Steve Gooch, The Oklahoman

Industrial magic, labor and materials dazzled locals when Henry Ford opened his Model T assembly plant at 900 W Main in 1916.

A century later, those same themes are expected to generate excitement among a new generation as the landmark is set to reopen next month as the home of the newest 21c Museum Hotel.

Alice Gray Stites, chief curator and museum director for the full-service hotel, is overseeing art installations

this week that can best be described as a mix of wonder from Science Museum Oklahoma, contemporary art featured at the Oklahoma City Museum of Art, Untitled Gallery and Oklahoma Contemporary, and even a bit of risqué displayed during the IAO Gallery's annual "Biting the Apple."

Unlike other hotels, 21c is seen as not just a place to stay, but a destination for travelers who are then drawn to other nearby cultural attractions.

"We're hearing more and more from people who stayed in Louisville (the chain's flagship hotel) and then make it a point to stay in all the 21cs," Stites said. "Some are museum board members and trustees who arrange visits. And they often ask what else they can see while in the city. And this is important to us because 21c really wants to support the other vibrant arts institutions already in the city."

Stites also hopes the art will attract locals who might never book a room at the hotel, which will open with 15,000 square feet of museum exhibits — the largest yet for a 21c Museum Hotel.

The new hotel and museum opens during the 10th anniversary of 21c's first opening in Louisville. It was in Louisville where founders Laura Lee Brown and Steve Wilson, contemporary art collectors and preservationists, opened a hotel as a means of creating a free museum that never closes with a hotel aimed at revitalizing their city's historic "Bourbon District."

Six hotels later, Oklahoma City's sprawling four-story assembly plant provided Stites with ample opportunities to showcase cutting-edge art. And when the 21c opens next month, visitors will be treated to a permanent exhibition, "Industrial Magic," which will feature large pieces

custom-made for Oklahoma City, and a newly curated collection labeled “Labor and Materials.” “It’s important this first exhibition articulates what 21c Museum Hotel is and does, what is the history and meaning of the site, and what does transformation of an existing, historic site into a place for the future look like?” Stites said. “We want our exhibitions to articulate that.”

A tour of the building Wednesday revealed an eclectic mix of art that reflects the country’s industrial past as well as pieces that will likely challenge perceptions and provoke lively discussions. Each area of the building acts as part of a sprawling display of art, and artistic expression of the building’s industrial past is on display even in the waterworks assembly in the lobby restrooms.



### Whimsical penguin display

The permanent displays include the whimsical; artist Daniel Rosen is installing a “penguin mirror” that will feature 450 stuffed animal penguins that are connected to a monitor that will trigger the penguins to reflect the visitor’s form. Chinese artist Lui Wei is installing “The Kiss,” a life-size stuffed polar bear that will be displayed upside down kissing a child.

Each room floor, meanwhile, will include a display of “Always Wanting More,” a series of large lighted arrows pointing in different directions that range in size from 6 feet to 12 feet high. The arrows will point everywhere, and yet will provide no helpful directions to guests exiting nearby elevators.

Some of the largest, permanent displays will be viewable even by those who simply drive by the building, day or night.

#### VIDEO:



21c Hotel and Museum art installation

“This is to highlight the building is about art first, and also to engage the public space,” Stites said. “The boundaries of the museum should not just be within the space, but outside the walls.”

New York City artist Matthew Geller is installing what will be the hotel’s signature outdoor public art, “Wozzy Blossom.” Each 21c features a large outdoor piece, ranging from a large anatomically correct golden statue of David in Louisville to basketball hoop tree outside the hotel in Bentonville, Ark.

The metal tree will light up in various colors, and will emit a mist.

“It blends perfectly with the outside,” Stites said. “The tree itself will be planted among the living Bald Cypress trees. It will be woozing with mist.”

Another display visible to passers-by will be “River of Time,” which was created by New York City artist James Clar. He was on site Wednesday, assembling and tinkering with “River of Time,” which will greet visitors to the hotel’s Mary Eddy’s Kitchen and Lounge and also will be visible through a large display window that once showcased Ford cars.

“River of Time” features moving panels that flow along conveyor belts like an animated river. Mixing digital technology and mechanical components, it synthesizes the movement of time and the transformation of the built and natural world. As the four belts meet at the top of the sculpture they will provide accurate illuminated displays of the time.

Clar, who specializes in sculptural lighting pieces and created his own systems to manipulate light, first attracted the attention of Stites and Wilson during an arts conference in Miami, Fla., a few years ago.

“He uses light to address a wide variety of issues,” Stites said. “He has done large-scale projects before that reflect on technology, its past and future. That made him perfect for Oklahoma City.”

### **Art reflects building history**

Clar said his priority was to create a piece that would directly tie into the building's history as an assembly plant while also reflecting the hotel's location along Film Row.

“It being a Ford Model T assembly plant, I thought it would be fun to use assembly line materials,” Clar said. “The conveyor belts are reconfigured into a structure that creates a river that winds in and out and into each other.”

Clar and other artists creating permanent works for the 21c noted their commissions sometimes followed months or even years of ongoing communications before they were deemed the right first for a new exhibition.

“When I first met them in Miami a few years ago, I was aware of what they were doing and they had become aware of what I'm doing,” Clar said. “And for me to become involved in that is pretty great. The exposure is really great and 21c is very supportive of artists.”