

## A night with Andy Warhol: Oslo hotel The Thief takes art very seriously indeed

Antony Gormley greets you at the entrance and Julian Opie's in the lift... Jay Merrick checks in to the new hotel in the Norwegian capital.

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Petter Stordalen, the 50-year-old Norwegian billionaire who zips around in a biofuel-powered Ferrari, has just opened a six-star hotel in Oslo that has dared to make art, rather than blinged-up luxury, its unique selling point. Art, as in the £1.7m Andy Warhol painting *Ladies and Gentlemen*, that hangs casually in the restaurant, just beyond the glass-walled wine cellar lined with backlit bottles of Dom Perignon champagne.

Warhol is the biggest name, but the public areas of this hotel carry the work of some of the most important names in contemporary art: Fiona Banner's pink-lettered, sub-pornographic text of *Lawrence of Arabia – The Desert* – for example; Tony Cragg's wryly brutish *Subcommittee*, a knobby metal sculpture that weighs the best part of a ton; Niki de Saint Phalle's sinuous steel-and-polyester sculpture *Le Grand Rossignol* floats touchably in a plush sitting area – a snip at £560,000, if it were for sale.

These works have been loaned, as part of an ongoing arrangement, by the new Renzo Piano-designed Astrup Fearnley Museum of Art, 100m away from the hotel on a spit of land jutting into Oslo fjord. Seventy-five of the hotel's 119 rooms contain works by lesser-known, but notable artists, bringing the total worth of all the art in the hotel to £3m.

Welcome to The Thief. You can call a hotel that if you're a billionaire who started by selling strawberries outside your father's small grocery shop in the provincial, porcelain-making town of Porsgrunn. And if you got – or, rather, demanded – your first big business break in your twenties. Petter Stordalen turned up to an interview "nervous, dressed like a fake Marlboro Man", admitted <http://www.independent.co.uk/travel/hotels/a-night-with-andy-warhol-oslo-hotel-the-thief-takes-art-very-seriously-indeed-8483775.html>

he knew nothing about creating shopping malls, but talked himself into the managing director's job.

He rapidly became a millionaire, then moved into the hotel sector; at one point in the 1990s, he was buying them at the rate of one a fortnight. Today, he owns 170 hotels and is personally worth \$1.2bn (£763m) according to the Forbes billionaire list. He despises the glinting, marbled luxury of ultra-premium hotels. When he recently stayed at the most exclusive new hotel in St Moritz, he was "treated like I was dust" because he wore jeans and a T-shirt rather than the default oligarch chic.

On a freezing, blade-bright day in Oslo, Stordalen's tightly-tailored, braid-lapelled jacket suggests a kind of New Romantic charisma. But his true characteristic is an intense, laser-like concentration – and bluntness. Samples: "Wealthy people don't even pay taxes. But everybody must pay taxes"; "It doesn't matter how rich you are, you know when you're being ripped off. Why should you pay \$10 for a Coke from a minibar?"; "One day, I saw this Ross Bleckner painting. And I thought: all the paintings that I had of cows and shit can be taken away".

Stordalen's Damascene purchase was a work by Julian Opie – "and from that day, I only bought art because I liked it". At The Thief, Opie is going up in the world: the lifts are lined with high-res screens showing two of his animations.

But what has serious art like Opie's got to do with the horizontal slit of the fake fireplace in the ground-floor sitting room, and the decorative copper brogues and tomes about Chanel, pink Paris and Playboy bunnies on the tabletops? And what about the safely stylish Bryan Ferry-directed images of Roxy Music album covers in the second-floor meeting room?

Can the experience of art be truly engaging in a hotel where the least expensive room will cost you £200 a night, per person? And where, as Stordalen admits, many of the guests will be high-powered bankers and lawyers who may be more interested in the restaurant's beautifully-prepared, organically-produced cuisine.

The Oslo Suite, with its Peter Blake artwork installation, would set you back £2,800. For that, you get bedrooms, bathrooms, and adjoining units suitable for PAs. "I'm loving the way the bathroom comes out into the bedroom," murmurs a writer from Wallpaper\* magazine.

Yet the potential for effective, engrossing art in hotels returns as you sip your vodka martini (made with ultra-clear ice chipped from chainsawed blocks). Here, you will find yourself studying Charlotte Thiiis-Evensen's exquisitely unsettling slow-mo video installation showing three Somali Muslim girls playing with their veils.

This is a potentially risky 'hang' by Stordalen's internationally eminent curator, Sune Nordgren: "But if it starts discussions, then that's really good". He's prepped the staff with an explanation about the artist's intentions, in case they're questioned about the video by guests.

The positioning of key works has been taken very seriously. The layout of the reception area was changed to accommodate Richard Prince's towering lithograph *The Horse Thief*. In an earlier art experiment at another of Stordalen's hotels in Trondheim, the reception desk was moved and three pillars were added to hold a 6m-high piece by Alex Katz.

"If we didn't do that," says Stordalen, "we totally destroy the project. We can just get pictures from Ikea. You can't start it with a budget, a calculator. You have to start it with the heart." And a story: *The Thief* is named after Tjuvholmen, the tiny peninsula it shares with the Astrup Fearnley Museum. It's the place where the city's thieves were hanged in the 18th century.

In the same century, the writer Daniel Defoe declared: "Pleasure is a thief to business". At *The Thief*, business depends on a new fusion of pleasures. "The art here needs to be very obvious, and

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present," says Nordgren. "People who go to art galleries are a prepared audience. The challenge here is to work with an unprepared audience."

But in a 21st century dominated by kaleidoscopic churns of information and entertainment, are they really unprepared? In my room, I ponder an Albert Merz etching while checking out the treats drawer: Smile Lab's "fast and effective smile touch-ups"; Moods of Norway underwear, which "may lead to amazingly good times if used correctly"; the funky Yumaki toothbrush; and the Yarok Feed Your Do Styling Whip.

In 1890, the Norwegian novelist Knut Hamsun produced a novel, *Hunger*, which portrayed the wanderings, in Oslo, of a young man crazed by constantly changing obsessions – one of which was the idea of an electric hymnbook with glowing verses.

*The Thief* is, indeed, a kind of illuminated hymn to the religion of constant, and preferably unexpected, stimulation. And if the hotel's most expensive painting could speak, we would surely hear a replay of two of Warhol's most perceptive remarks: "Being good in business is the most fascinating kind of art"; "An artist is somebody who produces things that people don't need to have, but that he – for some reason – thinks it would be a good idea to give them".

On the pavement just outside the entrance to *The Thief*, Antony Gormley's cast-iron figure lies as if in prostrate prayer. It faces the docks and cement silos a kilometre away, across the pewter waves of the inlet – and also Mecca, I'm told. Petter Stordalen and Sune Nordgren are artful preachers in a church that is also a commercial product. And at *The Thief*, the line between the sacred and the profane, the iconic and the sybaritic, wavers with an intriguing ambiguity.