

David Shrigley's artworks at Sketch



Restaurants and art have always enjoyed a close relationship, where both restaurateur and artist benefit from a mutually advantageous partnership. In the first of a two-part series, *Sophie Orbaum* discovers the benefits of displaying art in restaurants

Art and food are closer than ever before. Last year the Royal Academy, the Serpentine Gallery and the Tate all noisily launched or relaunched their restaurants, and this year several high-profile restaurants are keen to promote their notable artworks in the same breath as they do their signature dishes.

But is art really an important consideration for a restaurateur? What is the benefit for the restaurant in displaying art and what's in it for the artists whose work is shown? Will the right art affect customers and sales, and how do you go about finding it?

For the Caprice Holdings restaurant group, art in its many guises is integral to the look and feel of its restaurants. At the Ivy, art has been an essential component since it opened in 1917, and its refurbishment in 1990 involved commissioning site-specific works by sculptor Sir Eduardo Paolozzi and artist Tom Phillips. More contemporary works secured under Richard Caring's ownership have ensured that the restaurants and the Club at the Ivy remain a 'scene' for the cultured crowd.

Mark Hix has also identified the benefits that the right artworks can provide with key pieces from friends like Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin creating a fun and irreverent vibe. This spirit is further embodied in the artists themselves – they dine as guests at the Hix restaurants in exchange for artistic contributions.

At Skye Gyngell's upcoming opening, Spring, which will launch at London's Somerset House in October, the art on the walls is chosen as a visual expression of the restaurant's light and feminine philosophy, rather than an addition to it.

"To me, running a restaurant is like a theatre experience – the art shouldn't take over, but it is part of a bigger picture," says Gyngell. Instead of provoking independent intellectual consideration, like the works on show in the neighbouring Courtauld Gallery, specially commissioned works by ceramicist Valeria Nascimento and a 20ft verre églomisé piece

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– gilded and engraved glass – by Emma Peascod are intended to please and provoke an emotional response in the same way menu design and lighting evoke a certain mood.

Artist takeover

In an opposite model, at the new 18-month incarnation of the Gallery at Sketch, the whole restaurant is dictated by resident artist David Shrigley's vision for the space. Curator Clea Irving describes how a long series of discussions ended up with Shrigley designing 239 new drawings for the walls. He worked with Paris-based architect and designer India Mahdavi to design the furniture, creating a 28-piece crockery set with the words 'forget about it' on the bottom of the teacup and 'it's OK' on the little sugar pot – he even collaborated with executive chef Pierre Gagnaire to design new dishes for the room's menu.

Indeed, the only aspect of the restaurant not touched by Shrigley is the tessellated marble floor, left as a remnant from former resident artist Martin Creed's installation, and kept because it is "extremely beautiful".

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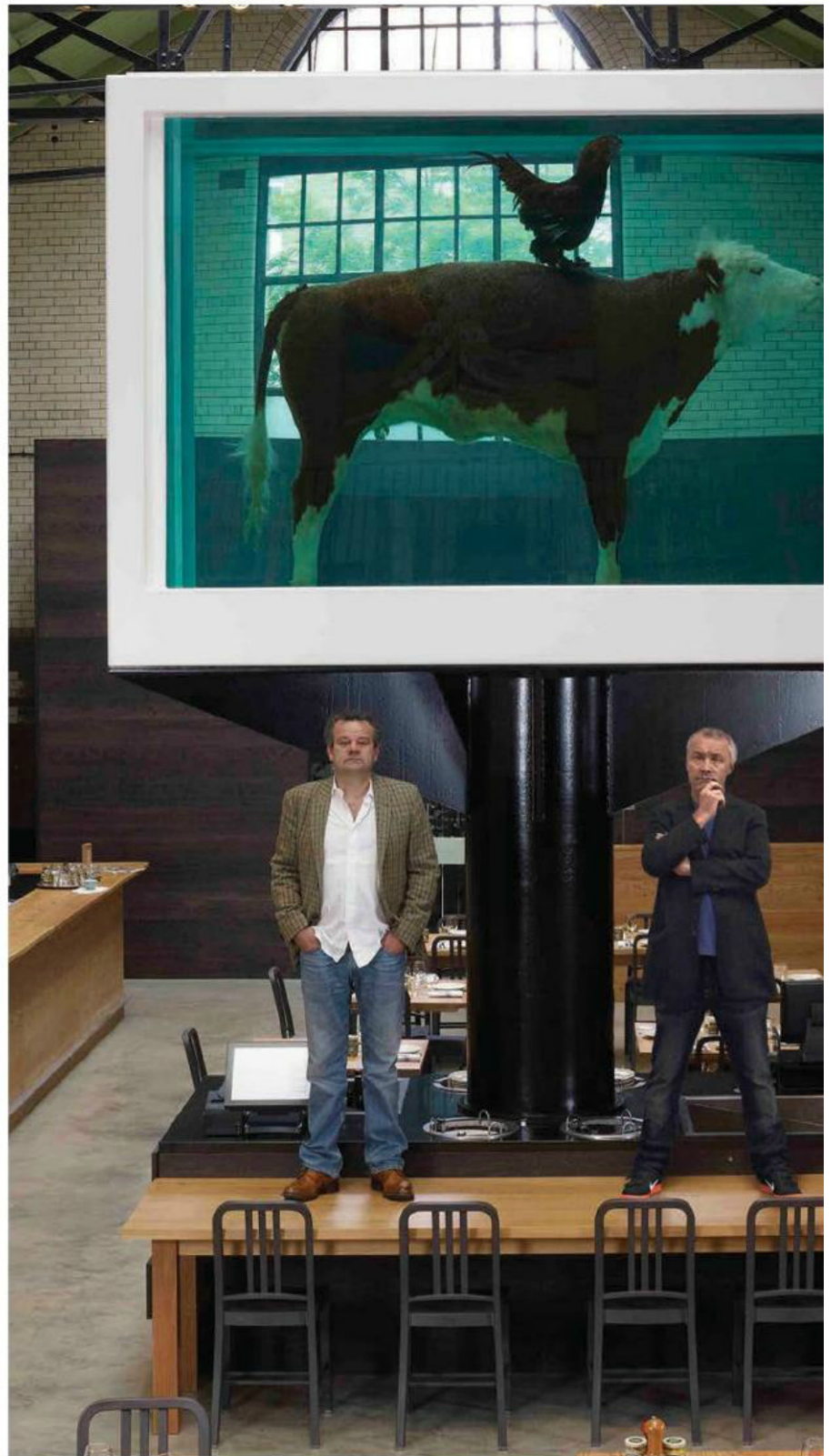
Skye Gyngell

For Irving, the permeation of art into all the various restaurant spaces at Sketch represents “a point of difference in London, where the restaurant scene is incredibly competitive”. She emphasises, however, that it is also “very much an extension of the personality of [serial restaurateur and co-founder] Mourad Mazouz”, who she suggests, if asked the question himself, would probably reply “why not?”.

A fact noted by both Hix and Irving is that restaurants have a far greater footfall than the small galleries of Mayfair and Fitzrovia, and so the exhibited artists gain much broader exposure for their work. At Sketch, diners can buy the displayed artworks from artists or their lending galleries, and almost 50 Shrigley drawings have been sold between June and July for around £3,200 each – with more original artworks created to replace each sold.

Irving also observes that some younger artists are looking to move away from displaying in traditional galleries, because they're not completely satisfied with gallerists who want to take them on exclusively but without always giving them a full production of their work. They seek out opportunities at Sketch because it's a little bit freer. Similarly from a diner perspective, viewing artworks in a restaurant can potentially open up a greater spectrum of reactions than what gallery-goers are conditioned to experience in a “white cube”.

Mark Hix





Art is as much part of the DNA of brand Hix as pared-back British menus and signature cocktails. His restaurants, with their specially commissioned works from the likes of Tracey Emin, Damien Hirst and Tim Noble and Sue Webster, are inimitable and show a selection of art that many galleries would envy.

Hix credits Chris Corbin and Jeremy King and his time as chef-director at Caprice Holdings as influential in this respect, as well as the fact that he resided in the heart of an emerging art scene.

He says: "The relationship with art and the restaurants started because I lived around Shoreditch for a long time and I got to know a lot of the YBAs [Young British Artists]. It was always an exchange of food from me and art from them. Chris Corbin and Jeremy King used to do it with the OBAs when they owned the Caprice Group, so I followed in the same direction."

Hixter Bankside, the newest Hix site, which opened just round the corner from Tate Modern in July, is characteristic. A neon sign by Emin picks out the restaurant name, while elsewhere in the 19th century former tin box-printing factory are works from Mat Collishaw, Gary Webb, Henry Hudson, Gavin Turk and others.

It is clear that Hix believes art to be important, but he maintains that in order to work best, a restaurateur should have a relationship with the artist. It was only through having such a connection with Hirst that he was able to request the creation of the monumental formaldehyde sculpture *Cock and Bull 2012*, which sits on a plinth above diners in Tramshed as they eat the equivalent beasts below.

Hix clearly has an eye for aesthetics, but he is also alert to the marketing benefits of such works. "I was at a site meeting about the design, and I thought, this space needs something big," he says. "So I texted [Damien] and said, I need something for the new restaurant – and he got his guys to mock something up and send a picture, and then he made it. It works very well from a PR point of view too."

With a ready-made crowd of artist diners and original artworks on the walls, it leads to the question of what is the biggest draw for diners: the art or the cooking? The answer is, it's difficult to separate. "People come for both. The whole thing just mixes and works well," Hix says.

For the artists whose works are displayed, the benefits are apparent too. When you compare the daily footfall of a busy 80-cover restaurant like Hix Soho to many small galleries in the area, the exposure is much greater.

Despite the relative business merits, Hix is keen to point out that the main motivator in his pursuit of art is sheer enjoyment. He is heavily involved with the Royal Academy of Arts, to which he donates a yearly Hix Award, and a regular caterer at art fair Frieze. His commitment indicates a genuine dedication. As he says: "For me it always needs to be about fun."



Bridget Riley's artwork at the Ivy

IMAGE BY CHRIS TUBBS

For restaurateurs who decide to incorporate artworks into their sites, there are several options for sourcing. Hix emphasises the importance of having a relationship with the artist, but not all individuals will be so fortunate to have the right connections to set up exchange agreements like his. Gynge worked with her sister, interior designer Briony Fitzgerald, who discovered Nascimento through the Woolff Gallery and found Peascod through "trawling through Google" and then worked directly with Peascod to develop the 20ft glass painting.

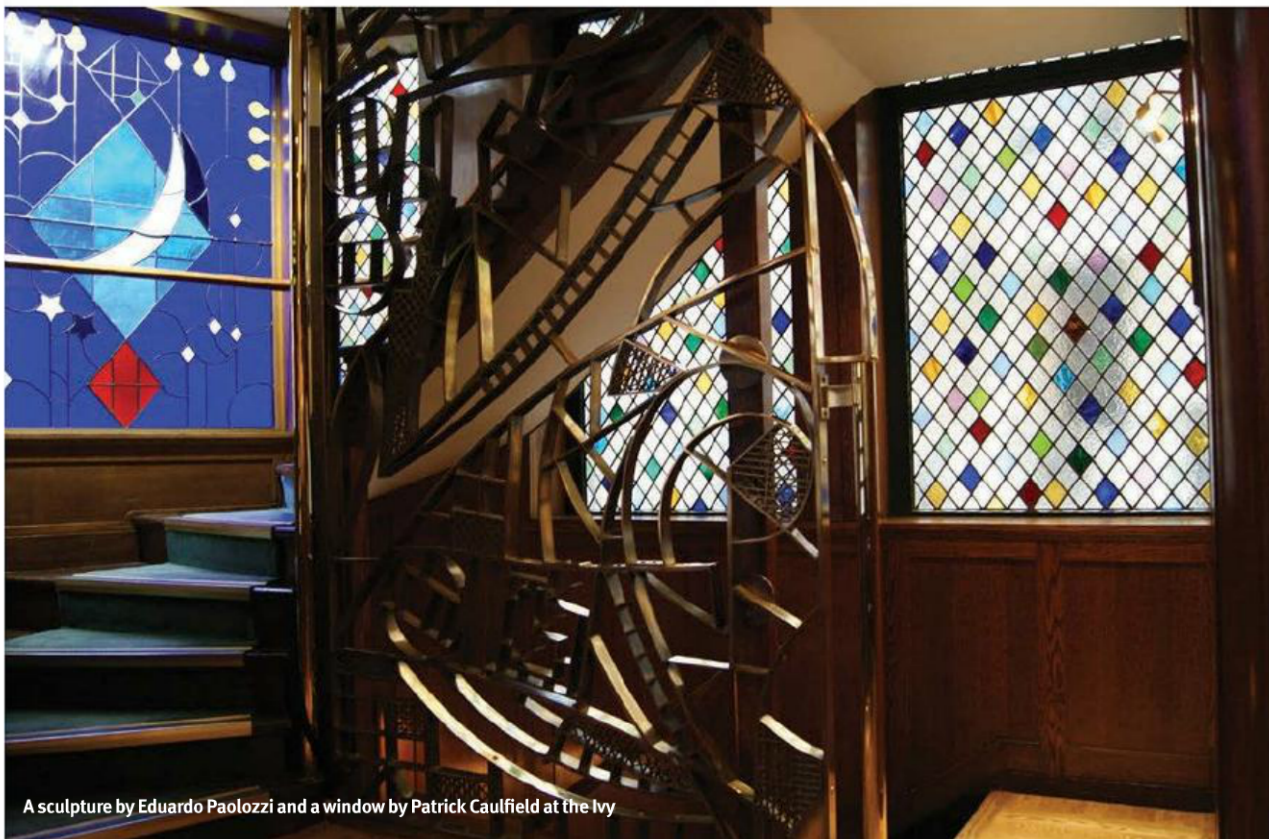
Personalised service

Tal Dana's company, ArtLink, provides a solution for those in the hospitality industry who want to access art but don't necessarily have the expertise, connections or know-how to select or brief an art consultant. Initially set up as a new model to create an international market for young artists, Dana spotted an obvious opportunity for helping restaurateurs with art that was "available, accessible and affordable".

Today the company has worked on over 100 hospitality projects in 17 countries, including installing the black shiny pineapple that greets diners at the entrance of Heston Blumenthal's Dinner at the Mandarin Oriental; a playful reference to the signature dessert. For a price between £3,000 and £35,000 for consultation, ArtLink then connects restaurateurs with a network of over 3,000 artists in 44 countries, as well as logistical operators, printers, framers, replica producers and researchers, to deliver a full art service tailored to their vision and values, as well as their budget.

For those who are thinking about engaging a consultant, Dana has some advice. "The consultant must demonstrate their credentials – ask to see their past projects; real examples

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A sculpture by Eduardo Paolozzi and a window by Patrick Caulfield at the Ivy

◀ that show where art has added real experience value to a carefully designed environment.”

He adds: “The consultant must consider the building – every project has features, which may be highlighted, enhanced, emphasised, hidden or even revealed with the help of the right art. A good art consultant will spend a considerable amount of time on the study and research of a project and those features before proposing artworks to suit them.

“The client is not always right. In commercial spaces the development of a good art programme is about understanding what art can contribute to the given space and how to best assimilate it. Whether a client likes or dislikes it must not be the most important criteria.”

Worth noting as a final caution is the example of Mark Rothko’s Seagram Murals. Initially commissioned to decorate a dining room in the Four Seasons restaurant of the Seagram Building in Manhattan, the artist withdrew them after becoming doubtful that a luxury restaurant with its wealthy customers was a fitting location for his work.

There’s a delicate line to be negotiated with artists as regards creative freedom. Fitting one’s restaurant with art takes time, care and varying degrees of cash. The value is hard to quantify in terms of a bottom line, but there is a consensus among aesthetically minded restaurateurs that, done well, the atmospheric and experiential benefits for diners and employees can be substantial.

● *Sophie Orbaum is writing an MA dissertation on the role of dining within the arts*



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Hixter Bankside