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Paula Crown Reveals How She Straddles Art And Business At The Little Nell



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Style & Beauty



Aspen's The Little Nell hotel which sits directly at the base of Aspen Mountain, has undergone a renovation led by Paula Crown and Luis Bustamante to create the space. Part of Bustamante's vision for the Living Room of The Little Nell was to accentuate lines with pops of bright color. [-]

DAVID MARLOW

Paula Crown is no stranger to business, and she is no stranger to art. In

her world, she masters both.

On one end, she is an accomplished artist, sits on the board of the Museum of Modern Art, and was appointed by Barack Obama to the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities. On the other end, she graduated from Duke Magna Cum Laude, and was a VP at Salomon Brothers before she joined a family-run investment firm. These days, she helps oversee The Aspen Skiing Company and run Aspen's The Little Nell hotel as a co-owner and shareholder to both these Crown family businesses.

The incorporation of art and design into her hospitality business is based on the idea that environments should engage and ensconce people with the importance of art, but without the alienation it sometimes brings. Hotels, after all, are in the business of welcoming people, whereas art has a very *do not touch* quality.

“When I think about the ethos of our ski company, it's about things that make you feel comfortable and that are useful, and not just superficial,” Crown says during a phone interview. She is casual and powerful at once, engaged and interested in dialogue from the start. “In my experience and my advocacy, art creates space to pause. You look differently you tilt your head. You get better sightlines as you get closer. Even if you don't care for it, you are in a moment for yourself.”

Crown has executed her artistic vision for The Little Nell through a myriad of examples. The hotel halls are adorned with [Walter Niedermeyer-commissioned](#) images of Aspen while the gift shop sells framed prints of the vintage-inspired, nostalgia-evoking collaboration with Gray Malin called *Gray Malin in Aspen*. The shop also contains pieces from Crown's own *Solo Together* collection, while, in the past, she's had pieces from Theaster Gates's *Civil Tapestry* series on the walls and a Cameron

Mitchell piece which, “Someone backed a chair into,” Crown says with a laugh.



Paula crown received her MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago to pursue arts after a successful career in finance which included VP at Salomon Brothers. [-] PAULA CROWN ART

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“We had one of the [Theaster Gates] hose pieces on the wall which people might find disturbing because they are hoses that were used to spray black protestors,” she explains. “But I wanted them to be part of the discussion. At a minimum, I want to open up our sense of empathy of others.”

Crown recently engaged sculptor and interior designer, Madrid-based Luis Bustamante (who worked on the recently-opened [Four Seasons Madrid](#)) to renovate The Little Nell's public areas including the lobby and its Living Room lounge.

“When I brought the idea to the local team, which includes my husband, their immediate reaction was, ‘this is going to be expensive, how will this work?’,” she explains. “Because I have this understanding of business and finance, I can figure out how to bring these projects in without putting us out of business.”

The conversation around exercising the balance she's had to master to execute, and even sometimes validate, her vision for the business causes her to divert the conversation slightly towards the challenges women face, and have faced, in the workplace. Challenges which even she has to navigate in her high-ranking positions.

“It hasn't been pleasant at times, so I'm a huge advocate for a woman's voice. You have to create friction and you have to take a stand,” she says, full of conviction. “And you do it for your friends, and you do it for your children, and you do it for the next generation because your voice matters. It's important that women are part of the story, because it matters.”

Because we matter.”



The linear theme to the redesign is seen in every element, to the design of the screen-like partition walls, to the carpets, to the placement of pictures. [-] DAVID MARLOW

The Little Nell has long been considered the most-advantageously placed hotel in Aspen as it sits at the base of the mountain’s main lift, the Silver Queen gondola. Its position next to this artery up Aspen Mountain makes The Nell (as it’s called by those who love it) the only truly ski-in, ski-out hotel in Aspen as the gondola is a mere 60-second walk from most of its rooms. The Nell is the only five-star, five-diamond hotel in town and its location, along with its ever-famous and après hotspot, Ajax Tavern, also situated at the base of the gondola, has etched the hotel deeply into the mainstay of Aspen life.

Crown’s collaboration on the hotel’s renovation with Bustamante, with whom she shares a kinship as both are artists-cum-businesspeople, grew out of trips to Madrid where she was working with [Factum Arte](#), the

factory of artisans entrusted by the likes Marina Abramovic and Anish Kapoor to help produce their works. It was during these trips her introduction to Bustamante came through a mutual friend, and she immediately fell in love with his work and saw it as the perfect opportunity to bring a feeling of Madrid to Aspen.

“I love Madrid and the aesthetic they have there. There is a comfortable feeling mixed with beautiful design, which felt right for the fluid communication systems that has to go between architecture and ski operations,” Crown explains. “This is the second time we worked with an international team with our properties and they were better than anyone in terms of processes and workflow. Even better than anyone domestically.”

The redesigned parts of The Nell bring together Bustamante’s appreciation for linear perspective, wood, metal, bright bursts of color, art, gallery-style lighting and a plethora of books, to create spaces that are dynamic and inviting, warm and assertive.



The goal for both Crown and Bustamante for the lobby and Living Room renovation was to create a space that is contemporary but also in line with Aspen ideals. [-] DAVID MARLOW

“Somehow, with only a few elements applied to the existing space through strategically-placed pieces of furniture, artwork and wood panelling, the hotel’s image and atmosphere changed radically,” Bustamante says.

An intimate space—The Nell is more boutique than resort—the floors of the new lobby lounge are covered in charcoal grey carpet printed with a melange of intersecting white lines which traverse asymmetrically throughout to create a kind of unexpected geometry. Sitting atop it are plush seating options in the form of banquettes, sofas, and chairs all of which are accented with bright pops of cobalt blue, which is most exciting in its covering of two curved sofas in front of the fireplace which look like pieces cut from a circle. All the wood, panels and artwork are strategically placed to add to the linear equation that defines the space, like the hearth-to-ceiling lines of framed photos placed parallel alongside both sides of the fireplace, or the well-placed wood slats arranged throughout the

ceiling.

It all starts at the front door, though. Upon entry, there is a large square carpet under the entryway table striped in thick, graphic black and white lines. The entire lobby as whole is shaped and divided with panels and partitions created by fusing large, square, wooden frames inset with thin, wood slats arranged in parallel to each other to create a screen-like, and bordering, effect.



Paula Crown's painting hang over a sofa in the Living Room at The Little Nell. DAVID MARLOW

“I like structured interiors that suggest the order and rhythm we find in classical architecture and all the western traditions linked to it,” says Bustamante. “We found lots of lines in the existing space already, so we simply enhanced them to give us the order I mention while at the same time adding nice proportions and human scale, the scale of proximity and detail.”

The outcome of Bustamante’s redesign was so successful that Crown has

asked him to redesign another property, the Aspen Mountain Club.

For Crown, this appreciation and support for art and artists continues beyond the hotel's walls. She, and the Aspen Skiing Company, include art in the larger societal conversation in Aspen, which fits comfortably into the town's already-existing appreciation of culture.

Through touch points like works of commissioned artists printed onto ski passes, placed onto the Silver Queen gondola itself, and even onto the lap bars that go over skiers on the open-air lifts, artist's are given a platform to showcase their work, while the Aspen community is treated to unique visuals and experiences other ski resorts lack.

This season, Aspen Skiing Company has commissioned [FriendsWithYou](#), an artist duo comprised of Samuel Borkson and Arturo Sandoval III, known for their massive installations where they take weather elements like the rain and rainbows and reimagine them as playful, cartoon-like figures through the motto of "Magic, luck and friendship." Part of this commission includes a work of performance art featuring gigantic pink and blue orbs with faces that dance about on the ski rink at the base of Aspen's Snowmass mountain.



Known for their massive installations, The FriendsWithYou collaboration was on everything from the lift tickets to the gondola, and also this performance piece which takes place twice weekly at Snowmass's skating rink. [-] ASPEN SKIING COMPANY AND FRIENDSWITHYOU

“I think you find really strong artists then you work with them to design a ski pass, or create prints all to help get their voice out there somehow, and because art belongs everywhere, it’s essential and it’s broadening,” she says.

When asked how she handles all the various parts of her professional life, from creating art, to supporting it, to running large-scale family businesses, she says through a laugh, “I do everything poorly.”

“But really, I’m also driven by a strong sense of curiosity and an acute observational sense, and it is important to me as a part of this family enterprise to do what I can, and give more than I take and be in a place of gratitude,” she adds. “Practically, though, this translates to segmenting everything out. We can do everything we want, we just can’t do everything at the same time.”

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