

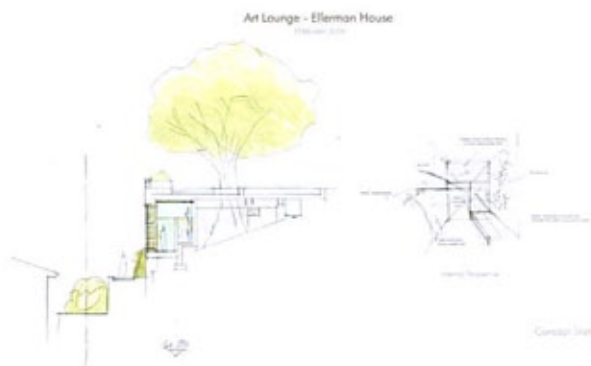
# Talking to Julia. . .

This month I chat to Nick Dreyer who is the assistant general manager of the renowned luxury hotel in Cape Town, Ellerman House. For the past year Nick has been project managing the creation of the Ellerman Contemporary, which is the modern arm to the hotel's prestigious South African art collection. We meet to discuss art and an ultra-cool new gallery that has been built entirely by hand.



In true *Relais & Chateaux* style Ellerman House in Bantry Bay is celebrated around the world for its hospitality and cuisine excellence. The hotel is also home to one of the largest and finest private collections of South African art. "The owner Paul Harris has a passion for beautiful things of high quality," says Nick as we settle down to chat in the main sitting room of the hotel, surrounded by an awe-inspiring selection of artworks. "The collection has grown over the last fifteen years and showcases over a century of South African Masters, from Thomas Bowler, Maggie Laubser, Pierneef and Irma Stern right through to John Meyer, one of South Africa's leading contemporary realists who still regularly comes to visit."

Having a hotel transformed into something of an art gallery means guests coming from abroad have instant access to a rich visual history of South Africa. "Sometimes they'll ask me to take them on art tours round the hotel – now I'm not an art historian, but I do love to read up on all these fascinating and often eccentric personalities, recounting one or two marvellous stories. Rather than being a forty-five minute recreational activity, it ends up an intriguing three-hour-long discussion . . . and I invariably walk away having learnt something new from the guests!"



An architect's drawing of the gallery beneath the lawn



Assistant general manager Nick Dreyer (left) with South African artist Angus Taylor and his sculpture *Sit 2/4*, which marks the entrance to the new Ellerman Contemporary gallery

Recently the decision was made to expand the Ellerman collection to include more contemporary artworks and house them in a thoroughly modern gallery space located beneath the lawns of the hotel. "While keeping with the traditional integrity of Ellerman House, we're developing a new feel for the future," says Nick, "celebrating living artists in this country and promoting young creative talent. (And remember that old and new have already sat very comfortably together here; there's the very modern Ellerman Villa, which stands right alongside the classically-inspired main house)".

The challenge of once again juxtaposing two extreme styles fell into the hands of Jane Visser of Visser Architects, who suggested a garden to help ease the transition – "so that guests aren't walking from floral soft furnishings and Victorian architecture straight into a white box," as she puts it. "The garden creates a moment of quiet before reaching the gallery," she says, "and by positioning sculptures there we've provided further visual contemplation, also allowing the contemporary art collection to spill out of its box and greet visitors on their journey."



Ellerman front lawn above new gallery

Inviting me down into the new gallery space, Nick explains how the front lawns at Ellerman House are actually one big floating deck, supported underneath by concrete pillars. This means that down below there was a ready-made roof and all the basic structures already in place and with the same sweeping sea views as the hotel. What is also phenomenal is that the entire excavation and building process has been done by hand, with no heavy machinery allowed, making this one of the greenest projects around and meaning that while builders have been busy digging underneath, guests above are completely unaware.

In terms of the design of the new gallery, there's still about a month or so to go before completion, but basically it will be rectangular in shape with an oak-smoked herringbone floor, slatted wooden ceilings (which are warm on the eye and improve the acoustics) and white Beechwood walls. Paarl Grey granite is also being used, the same as that found on Table Mountain, thereby highlighting the building's mountainous location.

"One of the biggest construction challenges was safeguarding the large hundred-year old Ficus tree," says Nick. "It's a main feature of the front lawn above us, rising up from the mountain slope through a hole in the lawn's floating concrete deck. Huge effort has been made not to damage any roots during the excavation of soil and, though it necessitates a narrower entrance to the gallery, it also means you see the stunningly raw root and base element of the tree as you walk in."

Nick already has his eye on a number of talented, up-and-coming South African artists. John Walters is one, busy doing his Masters of Fine Art at Rhodes University. "John is incredibly talented, his work intimately connected to that of Caravaggio," says Nick. "Then there's Anton Kannemeyer, who is the co-editor of the comic magazine *Bitterkomix* and is all about sociopolitical satire; he's also completed some amazing sketches, which are so different from his other work. Others are Kevin Brant, whose work displays on the side of the Cape Town Castle and Colin Richards, who was the star of the show at the Johannesburg Art Fair."



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The Ellerman Contemporary is open to visitors by appointment only.  
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