



Art at Nordstrom and Simons retail stores

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An artist's life is the sum of many bittersweet goodbyes. You pour heart and soul into a piece, you're proud of it, someone likes it, you hand it over to a stranger and it's goodbye, have a nice life!

Well, not so with George Vergette's last painting. The Vancouver artist's four-piece work will be displayed prominently in the Nordstrom Vancouver store when it opens in September and he's got visitation rights any day of the week.

"I usually have no control over where my art goes and buyers put it where ever they want. I rarely see my pieces once they've sold," he said after packing up the paintings that assemble into an eleven by seven foot piece near the elevator.

He's no shopaholic himself but he's happy to see high-impact stores like Nordstrom have a thing for art. In fact, his atmospheric abstract is his sixth Nordstrom commission. "I break it down to science the way I create colour. There are layers of underpainting and transparent resin that creates the colour. It's a thousand drops of this and 80 drops of that. I know how to shift things a certain way depending on the light."

Fashion retailing giants Nordstrom and Simons open this fall in Vancouver and West Vancouver respectively; they're longtime believers of art and culture in a shopping environment — and in no small way. It might just give other retailers pause, given the longevity and health and thus, happiness, of the two stores.

Nordstrom in Vancouver commissioned 66 artists and 130 works. "Of that, we have 20 Canadian artists who have produced 51 pieces for the store," says Karen Percelle, Nordstrom's store design planner. Vergette's painting will have "the biggest splash," she says. "His piece will be huge as you walk around the corner (to the elevator area). His colour sense is really beautiful. The surface is what's so amazing. They're on big wood panels and there are layers of resin and paint. There's so much depth and sheen and it's so intriguing." Other B.C. artists represented at the Vancouver store are Phillip Buller, Jeff Depner, Steve Goring and Bryan Ryley.

Simons at Park Royal commissioned a sculptural piece by none other than Canada's Andy Warhol — Douglas Coupland. The giant piece is called Bow Tie, "a sculpture of two brightly coloured striped cones that meet at a nearly imperceptible point" at its two-storey atrium according to a Simons description. The store also commissioned West Vancouver painter Bobbie Burgers known for her evocative floral paintings and Jody Broomfield, a Coast Salish artist, who will create a bas relief built into the concrete exterior inspired by a Salish weaving pattern.

Says Burgers: "It's in a department store. It's not a museum or a gallery but it's even more poetic in a way. The store is like a home, a salon. You go to have bigger experience than just buying clothes. There are beautiful designers, all high-end, hand-picked from all over the world; there's going to be a beautiful café. It's like a mini outing."

Burgers finds commissions difficult but the Simons' commission was particularly freeing, she says. It was so liberating, she took a road not taken; instead of her usual expressionist florals on canvas she's creating a ceramic wall sculpture called Innocence Disobedience, "representing feminine rebellion."





There'll be more than 50 ceramic flowers in brilliant hues of blues, greys, whites and black, some of them 'floating' off the wall in a show of strength and resilience. "The flowers were docile at the beginning of the process but as I was making the twentieth and fortieth pieces, they became really raw. It's going to be like a disintegrating bouquet coming down the wall. The top ones are literal and as it comes down, it's more about movement, decay, decline. It's been a fun and fascinating process and it was a really big 'aha' for me."

Burgers describes her work as raw and sexual. "Florals are considered feminine and sensual; I put a lot of energy in it, in the brushwork which is raw and sculptural."

The commission, she says, is a welcome departure from the norm. "They're usually for private homes. This is a way to show myself in my new era."

Both Simons and Nordstrom have built-in philosophies incorporating capital-A art in their stores. All 118 Nordstrom stores in the U.S. and Canada feature and invest in art as do all 11 Simons stores.



"The company feels strongly about buildings with beautiful spaces relegated to the arts. We want everyone to feel comfortable and relaxed when they come in. It's intrigue just as it is with our merchandise. It makes a store interesting and it's been that way since around the 1960s," says Percelle.

Peter Simons, president and CEO of Simons, and a fifth generation Simons, says art is part of the 175-year-old store's legacy and he's impassioned about the subject during a phone interview from the head office in Quebec City.

In an earlier interview with Sun reporter Gord Kurenoff, Simons said the Park Royal store's art and extras added \$10 to \$15 million on an otherwise \$25 to \$30 million project.

"We were raised around art," he said. "We've been creating an experiential environment for 70, 80 years. For me it's part of community involvement. Beauty remains one of the truths. In the pursuit of a perfect space, art has to have a role."

Being a private company allows liberties to indulge in beauty and truth, "but it's not capricious," he says. He talks of art as a search for truth, beauty, creativity and community. "Great art somehow has to be communal," he says, adding that he considers the high quality fashion in the store as art, too.

"I think it's a little ridiculous that 99 per cent of the time, people are not in museums. I believe in the power of architecture and art. Even subliminally, it adds to the quality of a space."

One stunning art piece for all to see is Aurora in the West Edmonton Mall Simons store, a 68 by 26 feet light installation that responds aurora borealis-like, to customer movements.





The family learned through the decades not to interfere with artists. “The secret is to let them go, not to tell them what to do. The one time something was said about colour to an artist, she changed her whole palette and it was a disaster,” says Simons.

He has ongoing relationships with artists. Coupland is next circling back to a project Simons had first proposed to him. “It’s the idea of crowd sourcing art,” says Simons. “It will involve 3-D printing. He’ll travel around, scan people’s heads, create an art piece and it’ll travel around to our different stores. I’m going with the flow. We’ll see if you can create art from crowd sourcing. We’re interested in getting people engaged and looking at the place of art in our modern society. What Douglas has done in a lot of his work is look forward.”

He’s offered to sell limited-run sculptures by Burgers in the store and she’s thinking it through. “I’m a little nervous about delving into a more commercial level but at the same time since the store is all about quality, it would be a really safe collaboration,” she says.

Is it worth it for a store to divert customer focus from merchandise to art? Percelle feels the love from customers daily and in retail, that’s gold. “The lovely thing is, almost every day, I get an email or personal call. They might have looked at and loved a piece in the store and I can tell them where to contact the artist. We get so many great reactions to what we do in our stores,” says Percelle. “Most people are really surprised and amazed that we go above and beyond what they’d ever expect.”

The Vancouver store, she says, is her favourite for the art pieces. Three floors, three different elevator lobbies, washroom areas (“since everyone visits them”), several entry points make for lots of exhibit space. “This store might be right up there with the Seattle flagship and Chicago and San Francisco stores. This one’s a big deal,” she says.

“The Bay’s going to have to step it up,” jokes Vergette. Come September and October, when Nordstrom and Simons respectively open, The Bay execs might not think it’s so funny.

