

Searching New Orleans During Prospect.3

BY SCOTT INDRISEK | OCTOBER 27, 2014



Hybrid instruments from a project by the Propeller Group and Christopher Meyers.
(Photo by: Scott Indrisek)

The third iteration of Prospect — a city-wide event, now running on a triennial model, that this year showcases the work of 58 international artists across 18 venues — has what curator Franklin Sirmans terms its “structural entryway” in “The Moviegoer,” a 1961 novel by Walker Percy set in and around New Orleans. This slim, strange story, about a soon-to-turn-30 businessman and his romantic and existential ruminations, is an interesting, oddball entryway for an exhibition. Mardi Gras is the book’s temporal centerpiece, but Percy’s protagonist misses it entirely — he’s off on business in Chicago with Kate, his manic-depressive, borderline-suicidal sorta-girlfriend, and when they return it’s only to catch the road crews who “sweep confetti and finery into soggy heaps in the gutters.” Having seen a good percentage of Prospect.3’s

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programming while simultaneously working my way through the novel, I'm still not quite sure how the two are meant to align. The anti-hero of "The Moviegoer" is a man on an esoteric personal "search," but that prolonged, meandering soul-interrogation ends in dissolution rather than epiphany. One thing that does occupy him is a notion of site-specificity — an understanding of place, of background, of history — and he has that in common with Sirmans, who stressed during a press kick-off that the exhibition needs to address context and location (without that simply translating, as others throughout the week noted, into Art About Katrina And Its Aftermath). "Although I embrace the international aspect of these endeavors," Sirmans writes in his catalog essay for the show, "I have also sought to delineate focal points that relate particularly to New Orleans and, in some instances, I hope, only to New Orleans. If you can't smell, hear, and taste New Orleans at Prospect.3, then you are not experiencing the exhibition to its fullest intention."

Indeed, much of the success or failure of individual works on view here hinges on how effectively they engage with locale, space, and notions of community. But beyond any thematic considerations, Prospect.3 is aggressively, insistently inclusive and far-reaching, with artists hailing from Indonesia, Uganda, Iran, and Jamaica in addition to New Orleans and New York. Big names (Kerry James Marshall, Andrea Fraser, Carrie Mae Weems) are mingled with the emerging and little known. There are enough highlights to reward the effort required to follow Prospect's scavenger-hunt trail through far-flung neighborhoods, with works sited in cultural centers, parks, community colleges, and private galleries.

The Contemporary Arts Center is a good place to start. Minimalist painting using unconventional materials or found objects is amply represented with terrific works by Theaster Gates (composing with historically-loaded fire hoses or roofing tar) and Analia Saban (whose sculptural pieces incorporate mouldings, doors, and seat cushions). Hometown artist Douglas Bourgeois is one of my favorites from Prospect.3 overall: his oil-on-panel paintings have an intricate attention to fine detail mingled with a camp sensibility worthy of John Waters. Photographer Sophie T. Lvoff — a New Orleans resident by way of New York — is also a notable discovery; she's adept at capturing the city's ramshackle charm and energy. Other artists included at the CAC seem to have been chosen more for name recognition. Pieter Hugo's series of "Nollywood" photographs are great, but perhaps overly familiar by this point; and the prominent inclusion of a large Lucien Smith seascape on the ground floor is a slight misstep, to say the least. Across the street at the Ogden Museum there's a mini-show of Basquiat works that ostensibly engage with the South. It's great, but not nearly as captivating as a nearby suite of carved-and-painted-wood sculptures by New Orleans' Herbert Singleton, who spent 14 years of his life incarcerated in Angola, a Louisiana State Penitentiary. The compositions are like brutal cartoons depicting a legacy of incarceration, labor, drug addiction, and capital punishment. (They're paired with a series of photographs taken at Angola in the '80s by Keith Calhoun.)

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Bling and glitter rule the day at Newcomb Gallery, from mirrored, abstract wall-pieces by Monir Farmanfarman to sparkle-and-found-pattern works on paper by Ebony G. Patterson. Accompanying these are a room-sized wall-drawing (using black beads and cord) by Hew Locke, and a massive pile of discarded costuming from a Brazilian Carnival. The latter is an installation by Andrea Fraser; the vibrant junk-pyramid, a monument to revelry's hangover, is an abject rejoinder to the surface flash of the other works on view. There's a different sort of spectacle and drama over at the McKenna Museum of African Art, which has Carrie Mae Weems's holographic installation "Lincoln, Lonnie and Me—A Story in 5 Parts," 2012. Figures appear in convincing three-dimensions before lush red theater curtains; we see a re-enactment of the JFK assassination; an awkward dancer in a bunny costume, soundtracked by Neil Diamond; a woman who hisses and scowls and reminds us that "revenge is a motherfucker."

Some of the Prospect.3 exhibitions, while not always site-specific, seem designed to draw you into the various institutions themselves, where you're free to wander through their own idiosyncratic collections and architectures. This is the case with the McKenna, and also with the New Orleans Museum of Art. The latter hosts Prospect programming only in the sense that various works from the museum's own collection are earmarked as being part of the biennial, with corresponding P.3 wall labels: Paintings by Paul Gauguin, Tarsila do Amaral, and Ed Clark. Including them in the total tally of participating artists is a bit of a cheat, but it's worth stopping by NOMA solely for its non-Prospect offerings ("Photo Un-Realism," a survey of illusionary photographic techniques; "Five from Louisiana," which includes Lynda Benglis and Robert Rauschenberg, whose 1979 "Melic Meeting (Spread)" the museum recently purchased.) The ravaged hull of Treme Market Branch, which houses Gary Simmons's "Recapturing Memories of the Black Ark," is arguably as interesting as the piece itself (a platform stage with accompanying sound-system which, during the opening weekend, hosted a performance by hip-hop artist Beans). In some cases, Prospect artists chose to let the nuances of their venues speak mostly for themselves, performing the barest of interventions. At the New Orleans African American Museum, Zarouhie Abdalian's "Chanson du ricochet" alters tiny elements on the exteriors of buildings and fences on the property — replacing porch slats with mirrored rectangles, for instance. A sound installation of a man poetically intoning various terms of labor ("scallop tie, slurry holes, joint breaker") causes you to lean in close to the facades; the subtlety forces a sharpened look at the site itself.

Specific projects at other venues also stood out. The Propeller Group collaborated with Christopher Meyers to create hybrid marching-band instruments; these become props for both a series of photographs shot with New Orleans residents and a slickly dramatic video filmed in Saigon. At the Delgado Fine Arts Gallery, Piero Golia has "Comedy of Craft (Copying the Nose of George Washington)," an in-progress sculptural installation which conscripts local art students to carve a presidential schnoz from Mount Rushmore out of a huge mass of foam. The excellent group show "Convergences," at the Joan Mitchell Center, is also worth a look, especially for the Nam June Paik-on-Adderall retro-video assemblages by Carl Joe Williams and the room-sized,

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irreverent installation by Jer'Lisa Devezin, an explosion of music and graffiti hung with raw portraits of dancing women that incorporate Kanekalon hair extensions (and, in one case, a butt cheek hewn from a bifurcated Barack Obama basketball).

Not everything comes off perfectly, of course. The piece that has become most visually emblematic of Prospect.3 — thanks in large part to social media — is Tavares Strachan's "You belong here," which is a river-floating neon installation spelling out the titular phrase in bright purple letters. Admittedly I'm biased here, in that I firmly believe text-in-neon's elimination from the collective creative toolbox would have a net positive effect on contemporary art in general. But the issue with Strachan's work is that it purports to be so firmly site-specific — addressing a particular person, in a particular place, right here, right now! — and yet ends up making a vague, free-floating statement as effusively vacuous as a Coca-Cola slogan. You could send this boat to Detroit, or London — or anywhere, really — to much the same effect. The obverse of Strachan's surface-level gesture might be Andrea Fraser's showstopper performance at New Orleans Museum of Art on opening weekend: A roughly hour-long, one-woman re-enactment of a multi-vocal New Orleans city council meeting from 1991. The topic of discussion was an ordinance that would rectify discriminatory practices among the private social clubs involved with the city's Mardi Gras parade. Rather than offering a feel-good palliative, Fraser's commission here is engaged with the city as it might actually be experienced, in real terms — messy, fractious, burdened by history. Fraser chameleons her way through racial and gender identities, slipping in and out of metaphorical masks and accents. Like the Walker Percy novel that inspired Prospect.3, the performance was nuanced and discursive; it ripped open the complacency of settled narratives and left the audience — critics, artists, locals, out-of-towners alike — to grapple with the shifting meaning of this place.