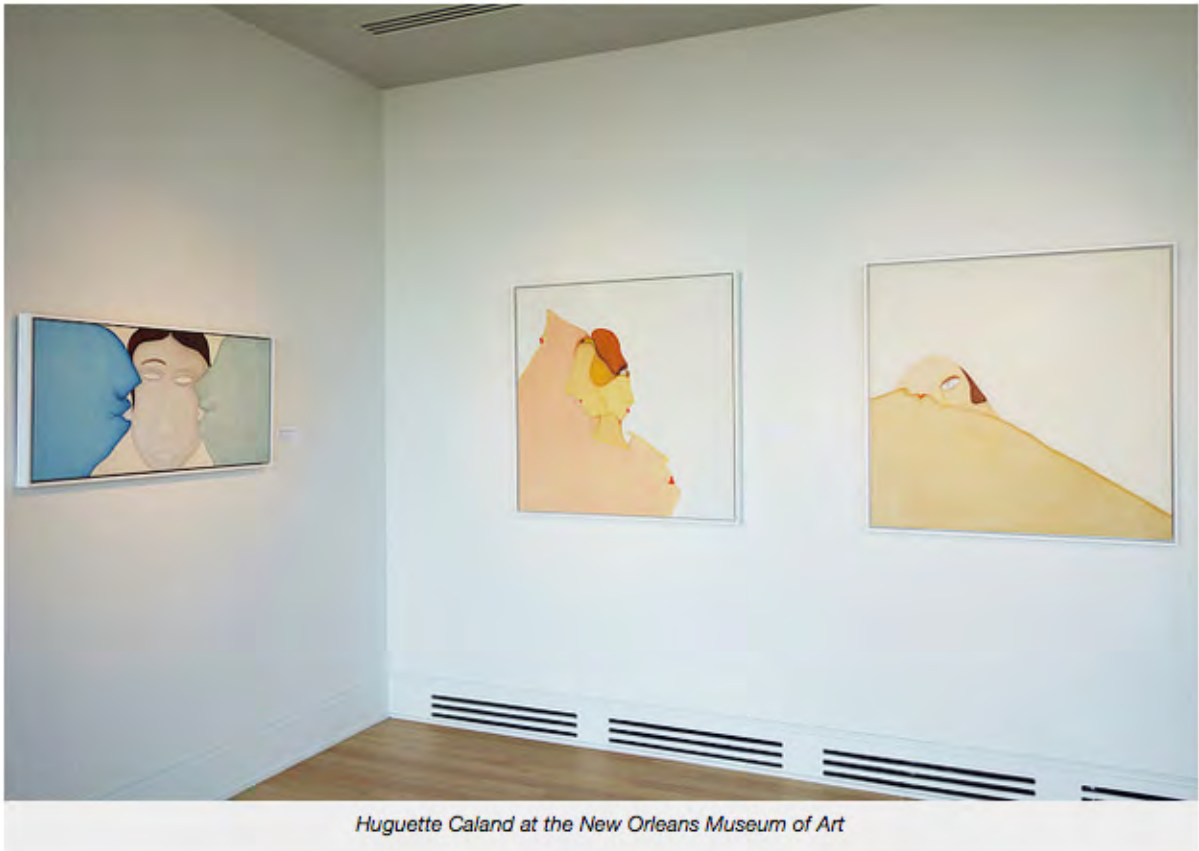


## Prospect.3, Notes for Now: The Lesser Biennial

by PADDY JOHNSON on OCTOBER 31, 2014 · 0 COMMENTS [REVIEWS](#)



*Huguette Caland at the New Orleans Museum of Art*

In his opening remarks, LACMA Senior Curator and Prospect.3 Artistic Director Franklin Sirmans talked about how, in true New Orleans style, he'd stayed out too late the night before and had no prepared notes for the opening statements. And I kind of liked this: you got to hear the words of curator, unfiltered and unrehearsed—a rarity in a world where curators seem to have been born with a series of career-launching press releases embedded in their brains. But after about twenty minutes of a meandering speech about the biennial's themes, I began to feel a little less privileged. Where was the planning for this speech? Should it really take this much energy to tell the press that the biennial takes its cues from the 1961 novel *The Moviegoer*, and is about understanding ourselves through each other?

This problem mirrors the organizational issues in "Notes for Now," a biennial in name only; as Eva Diaz notes, Prospect has been postponed often enough that it's more accurately described as a triennial. Finding locations is a nightmare; users have the option of using an app we learned was built by a 16-year-old as is filled with locations listing only the street name and number (not the venue), or using paper maps that aren't to scale and consist only of tiny location dots. And my own experience, coupled with that of other critics, seems to indicate that despite all the excitement over the biennial's opening, somehow Prospect failed to excite the rest of the city. None of the museums offered reduced admission prices to the city's residents—the small print on Prospect's claim that biennial is free to the public. And aside from the commercial galleries we visited, telling New Orleans locals that "We're here for Prospect" was most commonly returned with a shrug or a blank stare. This is a far cry from Prospect.1, in 2008, which worked with far more locals and actually drew their attention.

I suspect part of this has to do with the volume of site-specific works in abandoned houses, lots and factories that naturally garnered the attention of residents the first time around; Mark Bradford made an ark out of Katrina debris; Sebastián Preece arranged concrete slabs taken from the foundations of destroyed homes; and in his tour de force "Diamond Gym", Nari Ward crafted the shape a giant gem out of weight-lifting machines, and installed it in a baptist church in the Ninth Ward. This required a budget the biennial did not have, though, and put the organization in debt for years.

This year, we're offered a biennial governed by a spreadsheet. It has its own strengths, certainly one of them being the incredible

amount of diversity this show brings to the field of biennials, but there's simply nothing that comes close to approximating the ambition and heart that oozed from site-specific artworks produced for Prospect.1. (Some Prospect.1 artists spent savings and lived in the city for up to six months to create work.)

Probably the most visually arresting project of Prospect.3 is Travares Strachan's enormous pink neon sign floating on the Mississippi river with the words "You Belong Here" in script. It's a Hallmark-card greeting, but I liked it regardless. You have to walk through an ominous-looking factory storing heat-fusible plastics to even see the piece, and then the grand reveal was botched by timing. This involved waiting for the factory's giant garage doors to open to a view of the river; when that happened, the boat was still pulling into position. It was a nice welcome, if only for being so human. During this opening, it also came with a lecture by a historian who offered background on the location (though we missed this).

Large-scale works are often the most memorable in citywide biennials—just look at the number of critics who have mentioned "You Belong Here"—but some of the more thoughtful and insightful works were both the easiest to miss and most closely tied to the city itself. Mary Ellen Carroll's "Public Utility 2.0", provides perhaps the best example of this, with her installation nestled inside the poorly-marked storefront of The New Orleans Center for Design. This piece proposes to exploit the unused UHF and VHF spectrums with wi-fi devices developed at Rice University to provide Super Wi-Fi to residents currently without in New Orleans. These residents live in a poor area divided by an ill-advised highway by Robert Moses. It goes without saying that the potential impact of the piece is enormous—it would give people access to resources they don't currently have—but its biggest hurdle has yet to be jumped: It doesn't yet exist. Hopefully, that can be achieved without the presentation we saw, as it displayed a dense historical timeline on printed boards out of chronological order. Without spending hours there, there's no way to absorb it.

While the solo shows we saw tended to do a better job showcasing artist work, the group shows were plagued with unremarkable work that only superficially related to the city or the residents this show is supposedly for. Why, for example, should the public care about Analia Saban's tedious formalist explorations with sink dust-on-canvas at the Contemporary Arts Center (CAC)? We're given a wall label filled with impenetrable artspeak as explanation (though the real answer may be that she currently has a show at LACMA, so Sirmans was already working with her in a place where her work was a good fit). Then came the art fair staples: Lucien Smith, Pieter Hugo and Theaster Gates. Gates's submission was particularly disappointing, as he's a wildly charismatic singer and performer, but Prospect chose to show the generic assemblage work he sells to fund his more socially-driven projects. We saw a bunch of firehoses stitched together, side by side—perhaps it was cheaper to have the gallery pay to get the work down there than it was to cover his performance fees?

Inclusions like that didn't sit well with me, even if they met the show's unstated theme, that New Orleans should be the testing ground for embracing difference and working towards racial integration. (We're told the biennial draws from *The Moviegoer*, a novel about a damaged, day-dreaming soldier from New Orleans who rediscovers himself at Mardi Gras.) With the Katrina disaster still lingering, and racial divisions as prominent as ever, does the city really benefit from viewing more art from the blue chip gallery world?

But stand out work made these otherwise lackluster shows worth viewing, even if they had no direct connection to the show's theme. Douglas Bourgeois's painstakingly-rendered figures in lavish interiors and landscapes were one of the few bodies of representational painting at the Contemporary Arts Center (CAC) and were a pleasure to view; such luminosity and detail are rarely seen these days.

A few other notable pieces, shadowed by head-scratching decisions, continued over at the New Orleans Museum of Art (NOLA). Huguette Caland's paintings of cartoonish flesh mounds, stuck in the far corner of the museum provide one such positive example. Of the five works on display, the image of man peering over a sleeping woman's gargantuan face succeeded on all fronts. Caland humorously captures man's fear and curiosity of the female body perfectly; what strange new land indeed.

But as Caland's far-flung placement suggests, exhibition design proved the largest issue at this venue, with many works integrating so seamlessly into the museum's permanent collection, it was impossible to identify them without the help of the guards. The Paul Gauguin painting of two figures from Tahiti and a dog, for instance, is hung away from the bulk of the other Prospect work, and all but disappears in the Impressionist section of the museum. Not that it mattered much. The painting was included more for the artist's own personal history than its quality—which was B-rate at best. As the wall text tells us, like *The Moviegoer* protagonist Binx Bolling, Gauguin decided to live a life in a strange new land (Tahiti) in a search to understand oneself. It's a thematic stretch, and costly considering the cost of insuring this piece—all for a near invisible historical pinning. And Prospect, as we were repeatedly told, is on a budget!

While a few exceptions stuck out within the fields of mediocrity, the Joan Mitchell Center (JMC) was the only P3 venue to show entirely New Orleans-based artists. Technically, a "P3+" program—shows assembled by other curators—JMC hosted both their own show, "Convergence: JMC@Prospect.3," curated by Deborah Willis, and Prospect.3 work in the same building.

Unlike the rest of the exhibitions, we were given a sense of the local culture. Most of the JMC work was fairly accomplished, but even

Two doors over, in a P3 section of the space, Remy Joungerman's room of Mondrian-esque arrangements stood out. These consist of black wooden grids adorned with objects like bottles, chalk, and pennies. It's simple stuff, but the longer you look, the more details emerge from the works; an image of two black men appears in what at first appears to be a colored poster wedged behind the wood. Formalism can blind us to race.

That said, Sirman's curatorial M.O. seemed to be seamless integration, so you were only supposed to celebrate sameness—an overall problem with the biennial.

The resulting subtlety in art work placement and curation diverged drastically from the more (understandably) Katrina-focused installations of Prospect.1. While rare exceptions allowed the voice of Prospect.3 to shine in its own right, the end result was too non-descript to make its own statement.

This, combined with Prospect's longstanding failure of vision when it comes to working within financial constraints simply created too many problems to overcome. And that's a great disappointment, because without these issues, I am sure we would have seen a lot more poetry, a lot more heart, and a lot less crap.