

Linda Yablonsky

Bright Prospects

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Left: Prospect 3 Biennial curator Franklin Sirmans with Joan Mitchell Center director Gia Hamilton. Right: Solange and artist Kerry James Marshall. (All photos: Linda Yablonsky)

THERE'S ALWAYS A GOOD REASON to be in New Orleans. Last weekend, the draw was "Prospect 3: Notes for Now," or P.3, the resonant third edition of the international biennial that Dan Cameron created in 2007, two years after Hurricane Katrina doused city and spirit. Under artistic director Franklin Sirmans, P.3 opened with work by fifty-eight artists from the Americas, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East planted in eighteen venues around town. On Thursday, October 23, a few visiting dealers and collectors joined a veritable congress of American museum curators to track them down.

During a press conference at the Ashé Cultural Arts Center, where Sirmans and P.3 executive director Brooke Davis Anderson introduced the biennial, the first people I saw were the Museum of Modern Art's Stuart Comer and Thomas Lax. Spread across the room were the Whitney's Christopher Lew, Andy Warhol Museum director Eric Shiner, Bronx Museum director Holly Block, and Carnegie Museum curator Dan Byers. The Speed Museum curator Miranda Lash, ICA Philadelphia exhibition director Ingrid Schaffner, and Jewish Museum deputy director Jens Hoffmann would soon appear, along with both Rita Gonzalez and Christine Y. Kim of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, where Sirmans heads the department of contemporary art.

All gave the same reason for being there: "Franklin." Despite the support, Sirmans seemed nervous when he spoke of the anchors for his citywide show: Walker Percy's 1961 New Orleans novel of displacement, *The Moviegoer*; a Gauguin-in-Tahiti painting; and the cultural cannibalism of the early-twentieth-century Brazilian Antropofágico movement. "The exhibition is about trying to understand ourselves through others," Sirmans said. Remembering the late Terry Adkins, a biennial artist, he choked back tears.

But New Orleans is a city that elicits strong emotions. The events following Katrina made that clear. If the Crescent City is now beginning to prosper as a convention and music center—Win Butler and Régine Chassagne (of Arcade Fire) and Solange Knowles have moved here—it is also stuck in a romantic, nineteenth-century vampire haze that masks (or excuses) racial and economic inequalities as well as violence. None of that is unique to New Orleans, just more visible—and also more deniable—here. "What does the art do?" Sirmans asked. "That's the most important question."

Kerry James Marshall's response was to fill two of the Ashé center's display windows with gift-wrapped boxes and mirror every surface to reflect the street. Initially, this was baffling, but that was before I knew that the building was in a neighborhood that was once the only one in town where blacks could do their shopping. The area also saw action in the early 1960s as the birthplace of the city's civil rights movement. The mirroring gaiety, Marshall told me later, was one way to counter the dark past without pretending to escape it.

Some of that history was on display a few blocks away in a "P.3+" satellite (i.e., independently financed) exhibition of vintage news photographs at the Myrtle Banks Building housing the Creative Alliance of New Orleans and Alembic Community Development. Outside, the activist New Orleanian Robert Tannen, who is not in Sirmans's show, was posting a sign that would appear at nearly every venue. It said: "Elect Robert C. Tannen Artist."

Registered VIPs wearing hot-pink P.3 buttons spent the rest of the day shuffling around institutional sites, beginning with the Contemporary Art Center, where the largest concentration of biennial works are installed. A number of them dated from years, sometimes decades, past. This made the show old news for some people and welcome information for others. "It's not looking like the usual biennial," ventured Lew. Sirmans included few market darlings (Theaster Gates, Lucien Smith) and many lesser-knowns (Douglas Bourgeois, Thomas Joshua Cooper, Pushpamala N.), representing a wide variety of political and social behavior as well as media and style. "It's nice to see art that engages with the world, for a change," observed Performa founder RoseLee Goldberg. White artists are the minority.

David Zink-Yi's two-hour video collaboration with Cuban musicians performing voodoo rituals was quite hypnotic, but the sexiest entry is a 1973 painting by the nonagenarian Lebanese artist Huguette Caland. The most Instagrammed work was probably Glenn Kaino's set of aquariums. Installed on low pedestals under Gulf Stream-blue light, each housed an armored tank fragment encased in resin and barnacled with species of live coral fighting each other for territory. "They're organisms reclaiming the instruments of their displacement and creating the borders of their own nations," he said.

Next door, the Ogden Museum of Southern Art had a peculiar stand-alone show of Jean-Michel Basquiat paintings—an odd addition to the biennial, though something of a coup for New Orleans. Next to it were painted reliefs by the late outsider artist Herbert Singleton, and next to that a series of photographic portraits of inmates at Angola (the notorious Louisiana prison) by Keith Calhoun and Chandra McCormick, New Orleans natives. "We gotta talk about the new slavery," Calhoun said. "Our schools are incubators for the prisons." Louisiana, he said, has more prisons per capita than any other state—five in the town of Monroe alone.

What gave Cameron's Prospect 1 show its pulse were the many works artists created on site in devastated areas, or in direct response to the cultural and political conditions of New Orleans. The same is true for P.3. The farther afield one went, the more life it had. If you weren't on a shuttle, exploring meant calling a taxi, only to be told there were none available. (Fair warning to future visitors: Rent a car.) For "Home Court Crawl," Lisa Sigal painted pastel Tyvek scrolls with quotes and stage directions from plays by Suzan-Lori Parks and mounted them on derelict houses in four blighted neighborhoods. When I went to see those in Midcity, I was stranded. During the long wait for transportation, I studied lines like, "Man: It's Burning. Woman: Mmm," while occasional passersby asked after my health and kept me company but took no notice of the art. (The Junebug Theater will perform on the porches of Sigal's houses later on in the biennial.)

At last, P.3 artist Mary Ellen Carroll sent an assistant to bring me to Public Utility 2.0, her inspired project at the AIA New Orleans Center for Design. It is vaguely set up as a broadcasting station, and she is lobbying for the use of old UHF/VHF television channels as free WiFi networks for people too poor to pay for online access. "It's treating white space as architecture," she said, pointing to charts that map all the places where such a transformation could take place.

After an Uptown pit stop at Tulane University's Newcomb Art Gallery (where Sirmans installed a tactile group exhibition), it was dusk-time for an opening-weekend performance by Tavares Strachan (pronounced "Strawn"). After listening to Timothy "Speed" Levitch, a professional tour guide, spiel about the origins of the po'-boy sandwich and other local histories, about a hundred people gathered on Esplanade Avenue Wharf to sip prosecco and witness the launch of Strachan's bright P.3-pink neon on a donated, 120-foot-long Mississippi River barge. YOU BELONG HERE, it said. Sweet words they were, too. The citizens liked it. "We're used to moving heavy equipment, not neon signs," said Porter Randall, a representative of the barge company. "So working with Tavares has been a lot of fun."

Next morning, I worked up an appetite by romping through the P.3 galleries at the New Orleans Museum of Art, where I also discovered "Reparation," an unaffiliated, thunder-stealing show of 4-by-4-inch paintings by 180 local artists organized by the New York-based curator Diego Cortez. Hitching a ride in a friend's car, my next stop was Delgado Community College, where the Los Angeles-based Conceptualist Piero Golia was working with students to carve a mold of the nose of George Washington's face on Mount Rushmore—a bronze that he admitted may never be cast. "I live in Hollywood," he shrugged, "where fiction is more powerful than reality."

By then I was ravenous. Fortunately, the Joan Mitchell Center was hosting a delicious gumbo lunch for the New Orleans artists currently working in the foundation's Rampart Street studio residency program, where a P.3+ group show, "Convergence," curated by Deborah Willis, is on view. One of the most soulful, and melancholy, works in the biennial was also the least visible: a ghostly spoken-word sound installation by Zarhouie Abdalian in the shuttered former servants' quarters of the beautiful house that is the New Orleans African American Museum, now going to seed for lack of funding. Tragic.

The evening was far jollier. After a Julia Street gallery walk came "Miss Vesta's Swamp Galaxy Gala," a sprawling P.3 fundraiser that brought about a thousand guests, including all of the biennial artists, to a cavernous space adjacent to the CAC. An open-air cocktail party with live music—a feature of just about every gathering in New Orleans, even the press conference—warmed up the crowd for a dinner honoring the absent theater director Robert Wilson, the present 2015 Venice Biennale director Okwui Enwezor, film producer (and P.3 board chair) Susan Gore Brennan, art historian Robert Farris Thompson, and the New Orleans artist Dawn DeDeaux, a

Prospect 2 legend whose design for the party turned a cold-blooded expanse of concrete into exactly what was advertised—a cosmic swamp garden. “We think Prospect is worth saving,” she said, referring to years of financial stress and political squabbling that preceded Prospect 3. “So we do what we can to help.” Cameron, now chief curator of the Orange County Museum, took some pride in the biennial’s survival. “It’s all very satisfying,” he said.

Saturday, Prospect 3 opened to the public with a ribbon-cutting and second-line parade in Washington Square Park. It was also the day that the scope of the biennial (and the character of New Orleans) truly revealed itself. The morning began with a visit to Longue Vue House and Gardens, a magnificent estate where Camille Henrot’s Silver Lion–winning video, *Grosse Fatigue*, has its best installation yet. Driven to the McKenna Museum of African American Art by another friend, Tulane architecture school professor Grover Mouton, I was both captivated and disturbed by the holographic ghosts in Carrie Mae Weems’s powerful *Lincoln, Lonnie and Me*. With no time to recover, we scooted over to the Uno St. Claude Gallery of the University of New Orleans, where the Vietnamese Propeller Group collective’s film with Christopher Myers had surprising parallels with the bayous, voodoo grief rituals and the second-line funeral music of New Orleans.

Emotionally spent, we headed back to NOMA for Not just a few of us, an absolutely spellbinding performance by Andrea Fraser who had a sold-out house on the edge of its collective seat. In just under an hour, without changing clothes or putting on makeup, she inhabited the voices of nineteen distinct speakers recorded during a heated 1991 City Council hearing called to vote on a proposal to desegregate Mardi Gras krewes. “I know all these people!” Mouton exclaimed. “This is exactly the way it was.” (The ordinance passed but didn’t make much difference.)

Personally, I wasn’t aware that such a confrontation over race, class, power, religion, and love had ever taken place in New Orleans. Every city in every state in the country could use such debate today. “I was surprised at how often people laughed,” Fraser said later, during a reception for the P.3 artists in a private Lower Garden District home. I was even more surprised to hear that she had put the piece together only two weeks earlier.

Meanwhile, there was an all-out P.3+ block party going on in crime-ridden St. Roch. It began with a gun buyback sponsored by Kirsha Kaechele, a former New Orleans producer of nonprofit art events, and her husband, the Tasmanian collector David Walsh. Police on the scene told me they had collected four hundred working guns (\$75 for a handgun, \$150 for a rifle, \$250 for automatics). Curators Claire Tancons and Delaney Martin organized the opening ceremonies, which featured rappers recording in a makeshift studio (a car wash), Mardi Gras Indians and the Betty Squad Gumbo dancers performing in the street, preachers preaching against violence and for the unjustly incarcerated, and four men dancing on horseback wearing orange vests imprinted with the words “Don’t Shoot Me/I’m a Man.” This was New Orleans at its carnival best.

That evening, a slightly more demure block party developed in the St. Claude Art District, where young galleries threw open their doors to all comers. I had just enough time to take in a bit of biennial artist Tameka Norris’s four-screen, feature-length film at May Gallery, an ambitious nonprofit founded by Keene Kopper, who has established residencies for visiting international artists as well as a vigorous publication and exhibition program. Shot in New Orleans, the film stars Norris as her stylish alter ego, Meka Jean. She seemed to be in character at the opening, which I was sorry to leave but I didn’t want to miss the speed-rapper Beans, who was performing at biennial artist Gary Simmons’s invitation at Treme Market Branch, a beautifully decrepit old bank.

Somehow, the night still felt young. I joined Comer for a visit to a “secret site” on Elysian Fields, where DeDeaux is building her version of a space station within the remains of a house where trees are growing through the roof. With just a few lights, many long shadows, and several sculptural installations spotlighted in the garden, it felt very haunting, very sensual, and very right.

Prospect 3 continues through January 25. Don’t bring a map. Let it find you.

— Linda Yablonsky