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REACTOR

Notes from New Orleans: Prospect.3 Artists Announced

by John d'Addario on May 15, 2014



Huguetta Caland *Bibens de Corps, 1973* Oil on linen 60" x 60" Courtesy of the artist and Lombard Freid Gallery, New York

NEW ORLEANS — From a much-anticipated and generally well-received opening iteration to a less-than-spectacular second installment marked by 66% less art and an artistic director who announced his resignation on its opening day (not to mention a largely forgettable stopgap exhibition in between), the Prospect New Orleans biennial has in many ways been an object lesson of what happens in the art world when the best of intentions collide with the hard facts of financial and administrative realities.

To be fair, Prospect.1 couldn't have happened at a worse time, opening as it did in the throes of the national financial crisis in the fall of 2008. Actual attendance fell far short of expectations, and expenses wound up outstripping pre-opening estimates.

The corresponding budget deficit led to strained relations between US Biennial (Prospect's parent organization) and many in the New Orleans and

international arts communities — not to mention the resignation of most of the biennial's board members in early 2010 and eventually the departure of its founding curator Dan Cameron. Meanwhile, Prospect.2 opened to tepid reviews a year behind schedule in October 2011.

So hopes were high when the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's (LACMA) star contemporary art curator Franklin Sirmans was announced as the new artistic director of Prospect.3 barely a month after Cameron's departure. Clearly a shakeup at the artistic helm of the biennial was in order. And judging from this week's press events announcing the artistic and venue lineup for Prospect.3, it looks like things are indeed going to be shaken up considerably in New Orleans this fall.

Sirmans introduced the Prospect.3 artist lineup at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art in New Orleans yesterday with an extended, if vaguely platitudinous, quote from Walker Percy's 1961 New Orleans-based novel *The Moviegoer* ("To become aware of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair", etc.), which to my mind wasn't nearly as illuminating or succinct as Sirmans's own explanation of how he chose the artists:

"The list includes artists who I'm interested in, as well as artists whose work I may not fully understand but which has stayed with me in some way."

(After reading through at least two too many long-winded curatorial statements at this year's Whitney Biennial, Sirmans's forthrightness was a welcome relief.)

And it's an interesting list, starting with the numbers. Its 64 artists fall short of the 81 represented in Prospect.1, though the number of countries represented (24, from Algeria to Vietnam) remains proportionately similar and just as far-reaching.

Several of the artists are deceased, some recently (Terry Adkins, Frederick J. Brown), some not-so-recently (aristocratic Brazilian modernist Tarsila do Amaral, noted French vagabond Paul Gauguin). Several more (Huguetta Caland, Ed Clark) are in the later years of their lives and careers, hinting that Sirmans is admirably more interested in exploring historical continuities and cross-generational influences than with the latest flashes-in-the-pan.

Nine of the artists live and work in New Orleans; about twice as many come from post-colonial nations. Only one (Liu Ding) is from China. And one will be the subject of a special “show within a show” at the Ogden Museum of Art in New Orleans within the context of the greater biennial as a whole: Jean-Michel Basquiat, whose definitive 2005 retrospective was not-so-coincidentally co-curated by Sirmans as well.

The list gets even more interesting to parse once you get past the numbers and begin to look for specific themes that link Sirmans’s choices together. Artists whose work engages notions of post-colonial and racial identities seem to be well-represented; those exploring issues of queerness perhaps less so. Music, as Sirmans pointed out, is a theme common to the work of artists like William Cordova, David Zink Yi, and Los Jaichackers (Julio Cesar Morales and Eamon Ore-Giron), and artists who have engaged a dialogue with New Orleans (including husband-and-wife team Keith Calhoun and Chandra McCormick) constitute yet another common thread.

Press material for the show indicates that work will be exhibited in 15 sites across metropolitan New Orleans under broad curatorial themes including “The South,” “Crime and Punishment,” “The Carnavalesque,” “Abstraction,” and (most intriguingly) “Visual Sound.” But those don’t really tell us much beyond the vaguest generalities.

Sirmans himself noted in yesterday’s press announcement that “different people will see the list differently.” So perhaps it’s best to follow his cue and view the list yourself to draw your own conclusions, which you’re welcome to share in the comments. We’ll be able to continue the discussion when Prospect.3 opens this October.

Prospect.3: Notes for Now will be on view from October 25, 2014 through January 25, 2015. Visit www.prospectneworleans.org for more information.