

## Prospect.3: Notes for Now

PROSPECT NEW ORLEANS, New Orleans

October 25, 2014–January 25, 2015

Eighteen venues, scattered around New Orleans. Huge distances between them. A rusty pedal brake cruiser bike. And two and a half days to see it all.

This is now the third official Prospect New Orleans since the biennial was inaugurated in 2008. In actuality this is the fourth incarnation of the show I have seen and the second I have written about(1): there was a mini-version titled Prospect.1.5 that was held in a few venues in 2010. Do the math and you'll immediately note that Prospect has never been a biennial—a chronically postponed event, it has always been, in fact, a triennial.

Prospect staff fudged the books in a more significant way when, in self-congratulatory fashion, they announced at the exhibition's press conference that Prospect.3 would be free and open to the public, except for entrance to venues—the Ogden Museum of Southern Art, the Contemporary Arts Center (CAC), and the New Orleans Museum of Art (NOMA), among others—that charge general admission. According to the posted admission rates at these institutions, to see only these three main venues of Prospect would set back a single adult \$30, and a whopping \$82 for a family of two adults with two school-aged kids. Not free.

Communication and administrative snafus aside, Franklin Sirmans, artistic director of this year's Prospect, and his curatorial team selected some truly moving works, which unfortunately were buried in the underwhelming sprawl of the show.

The matter of access is a big issue for Prospect, and one can imagine that situating works in dispersed locations might offer a way for disparate publics to come into contact with the show. The best ambitions of this Prospect and the previous ones have been to consider the stories art tells about inequality, and the access to art in cities that have serious income and racial gaps. The strongest works of past editions have been those that couldn't exist anywhere else, and that activate their sites with specificity. Yet the spatial logic of this Prospect—those eighteen venues and the over fifty miles I biked to see them—makes seeing the works a chaotic and scrambled affair, and most of the projects in far-off venues subsequently appear quite inconsequential and pushed to the periphery. It was deflating in one case to encounter a few good projects—the prison-based drawings and collages Time Divisa (2006–2010), in which artist José Antonio Vega Macotela exchanged his labor for artworks with inmates at Santa Martha Acatitla prison in Mexico City; Camille Henrot's video *Grosse Fatigue* (2013) about classification systems and the enervation that results from information saturation; and a mini-survey of celebrated architect Shigeru Ban—stuffed into a gatehouse and converted kitchen, at the Longue Vue House and Gardens in Metairie. Or worse yet, a pair of video works installed on monitors in a glassed-in corporate atrium, as at the Exchange Gallery in the downtown Central Business District (CBD), which look like that kind of art you scurry past on the way to your dentist's office because there's so much light and sound bleed that you wouldn't be able to look at it properly anyway. That one of these works, *Crossroads, Days and Nights ("No Loitering")* (2014) by Liu Ding, concerns anti-loitering laws in New Orleans makes its site in a foyer abutting the building's security guard station particularly awkward.

The bulk of the artwork in this Prospect is installed in the large and centrally located CAC, which contains a vast amount of underused square footage (a construction zone taped over with garbage bags presented viewers with a stanchion reading "Please Pardon our Progress," a polite but sadly accurate catchphrase for some of biennial's problems). Important works can be found at CAC, however.



6 The Propeller Group, *The Living Need Light The Dead Need Music*, 2014.



7 The Propeller Group, *The Living Need Light The Dead Need Music*, 2014.



5 Christopher Myers, *Echo in the Bones* (detail), 2014.

Music) and Christopher Myers (whose altered instruments, such as horns with too many bells and marching drums that completely encircle the wearer, were used in the film) that connects death and brass marching bands in both Vietnam and New Orleans; Tavares Strachan's peripatetic barge work being tugged around the Mississippi River bearing a giant neon sign reading "You belong here"; and Andrea Fraser's riveting performance *Not just a few of us* (2014), about the efforts to desegregate Mardi Gras floats in 1991, presented live on Saturday at the New Orleans Museum of Art—like many of previous years' successful Prospect projects, concern the unique history of New Orleans with respect to particular spaces and histories in the city. Another great work, William Cordova's *Silent parade... or the Soul Rebels Band vs. Robert E. Lee* (2014)—including video documentation of the artist's invitation to the all-black Soul Rebels Brass Band to perform on a rooftop facing the colossal statue of Confederate general Robert E. Lee, located on the edge of the CBD—is buried with bad acoustics in a tiny side gallery in the arts building of Dillard University. It's wonderful that the piece found a home on the stately campus of a historically black college, but it isn't given its spatial due, especially as it is the only artwork Prospect located in that building. Unfortunately, a pair of Terry Adkins sculptures, *Ezekiel Double Drums* and *Ezekiel Wheel*, commissioned by Dillard in 2009, designated a part of the Prospect checklist as posthumous participation by the recently deceased Adkins (1953–2014), are also incredibly difficult to find, with no signage linking the projects some distance across campus to one another.

All of these concerns attest that it is time for Prospect to consolidate and organize itself, and stop acting like a regional show when it bills itself as the United States's only international biennial. New Orleans is a wondrous and resilient city, and it now has employed two talented curators in Dan Cameron and Franklin Sirmans to work on Prospect. The next curator of the biennial should have significant experience with performance events and works sited in public space around NOLA; whoever is chosen will certainly deserve better support to make this a more cohesive show.

I suppose it's a good sign for the Prospect organization that Friday's "Swamp Galaxy" Gala, with "discounted art professional tickets" starting at \$400, was a sellout. Maybe this will finally push Prospect into the black, and the administration can begin addressing the structural and logistical problems that are preventing the show from achieving its clearest articulation, and to properly allow the public access to the art with subsidized entry fees and free shuttles between venues. The best moments of this Prospect offer powerful and often harrowing reflections about racial and class inequity in New Orleans and the nation, but their geographical dispersion denies them the opportunity to converse with one another and build critical momentum. At present, Prospect represents the triumph of the neoliberal biennial: a show with little public funding whose artists struggle to reach an audience discouraged from attending by a structure of expensive admission fees and privatized transportation access. To quote from Andrea Fraser's work, as she ventriloquized the frustrations of the bulk of New Orleanians' lack of access to privileged krewes' floats on Mardi Gras: "Give us the power, you take the party."

(1) Eva Díaz, "Prospect.2, New Orleans," *Artforum* 50, no. 6, February 2012.

Lisa Sigal's photcollages *Home Court Crawl* (2014) reference text murals about access to housing she installed upon various vacant houses around the city. Charles Gaines's *Sky Box I* (2011), an evanescent, haunting video projection, shows excerpts from key texts of political liberation slowly fading into a starry night sky, as though the aspirations represented by these leftist manifestos need to be revisited before they slip away entirely. At the Ogden is Keith Calhoun and Chandra McCormick's *Slavery, The Prison Industrial Complex* (c. 1980–2014), an emotionally wrenching photography series documenting their over-30-year commitment to those incarcerated, often wrongfully, at Louisiana's Angola prison. This project is the rightful cornerstone to the Prospect.3 exhibition in its record of populations absented from justice in the United States, and it could have been granted more space at the Ogden. Works installed elsewhere around the city, most of which bear virtually no connection to their far-flung locations, feel like they were dumped in partner venues without regard for the implications of such marginalization.

The best works in the show—the tour-de-force collaboration at UNO Gallery St. Claude between the Propeller Group (the 2014 film *The Living Need Light and the Dead Need*