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▶ NEW ORLEANS

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Prospect.3 New Orleans

Honoré de Balzac wrote: “Ideas are a complete system within us, resembling a natural kingdom, a sort of flora, of which the iconography will one day be outlined by some man who will perhaps be accounted a madman.” This passage was included in Camille Henrot’s writings about her video *Grosse Fatigue* (2014), now on view in Prospect.3, a sprawling biennial in both geographic and thematic terms. The “madman” in this quote might be Franklin Sirmans, the artistic director of Prospect.3; Sirmans attempts to create a cohesive exhibition in a city that is perpetually unhappy with easy definitions and straightforward thought. However, Prospect.3 has some stunning and kindhearted works that try very hard to carve clear connections to a place that is a constantly shifting landscape of one part earth and two parts water.

Prospect New Orleans has had an awkward childhood. Prospect.1, founded by Dan Cameron, opened in October 2008 with eighty-one artists from thirty-four countries in about thirty locations. Artistically, the biennial was a smashing success, drawing comments such as, “Prospect.1 takes the reprobate scallywag nihilists of the contemporary avant-garde and converts them ... into goody-two-shoes bleeding-heart believers in the nobility of humankind.”[1] Unfortunately, Prospect.1 ended over a million dollars in debt, defaulting on the public’s trust. Then, unable to meet funding expectations, Prospect returned in 2010 with something called Prospect1.5, a mostly local affair that was as awkward as the first iteration was ballsy. Prospect.2 opened the next year in 2011, with a graceful mix of international and local artists, but was still significantly less exciting than the first iteration. Prospect.3 now has grown into early adulthood and has regained some of the energy that made Prospect.1 so great. This year’s iteration opened on October 25 with fifty-eight artists spread around eighteen locations.

Tucked between a bank and a barbershop, the University of New Orleans St. Claude Gallery is an easily overlooked spot, but *Shrine*, the collaboration between the Propeller Group and Christopher Myers, is one of the most successful works of Prospect.3. Sirmans says in the catalog, “That one learns much about oneself in and through the Other is at the crux of this project.”[2] Nowhere can you see this as clearly as with the film *The Living Need Light, And The Dead Need Music* (2014), part of a collaborative installation with Myers. The film, which takes its title from a Vietnamese proverb, reveals the relation between the culture of Vietnam and New Orleans via the “butterfly effect of ... non-locality whereby two distinct phenomena affect one another across a vast expanse of space and time.”[3] Replete with lush imagery of funeral rituals, characters such as a bandleader with a peripatetic orchestra lead us through marketplaces, streets, and into a marsh. Sprawling mourners and spiritual leaders crowd the frame. This film is accompanied by costumes and sculptures from the film (for example, a six-headed tuba). *The Living Need Light* unites two groups that, only one generation ago, perpetrated unspeakable acts on each other. The Vietnam War continues to leave deep scars that are only now beginning to heal in our current generation. It is deeply moving to see how uniquely spiritual and commonly human are our shared funerary practices.

One of the disappointments of Prospect.3 is the frequent lack of care for exhibition space. Works by Jose Antonio Vega Macotela, Camille Henrot, and Shigeru Ban seem to be stuffed into the corners at Longue Vue House and Garden. Macotela’s works, which explore the idea of proxy, were hung in an awkwardly small room off the side of the house. In *Time Divisa* (2006–2010), the artist trades his time with Mexico City prisoners: The prisoners request Macotela to perform an act for them, such as visiting a grave, asking forgiveness from a family member, or spying on a lover. In return, the prisoner completes a work of the artist’s choosing: picking up cigarettes, writing down everything they did that day in chronological order, etc. Camille Henrot’s *Grosse Fatigue*, a film that moves through the history and systematization of the universe, was in an even smaller area. Shigeru Ban’s work was relegated to the gatehouse; any hope of a conversation between the works is unlikely. Similarly, William Cordova’s and Terry Adkins’ work at Dillard University is in two far-flung locations of the campus; Cordova’s work is stuck in what feels like a side room, and Adkins’ work seems pushed into a corner in the entranceway of a building. All of these works would command more attention if their presentation was made with greater care.

Overall, the curatorial concept is one of finding specific connections—through ideas, aesthetics, or traditions—to New Orleans. The majority of Prospect.3 artists are exhibited at the Contemporary Art Center.[4] Some of the works here are standouts—Zarina Bhimji’s film *For Waiting* (2014) is a stunningly beautiful series of scenes of a sisal-processing factory near Mombasa, Kenya. Sisal is a species of agave harvested for its fiber, which is used to make rope, cord, sacks, and carpets. Huge mountains of decadent white filament are piled up in an antiquated warehouse. Slow camera shots, rich textural shots, and quiet natural sounds add to a feeling of stillness and beauty. Yet I also felt a very clear sense of dread, possibly from a shared colonial history. Bhimji’s visceral film is entrancing.

In the opening of *Invisible Cities*, Italo Calvino wrote, “Only in Marco Polo’s accounts was Kublai Khan able to discern, through the walls and towers destined to crumble, the tracery of a pattern so subtle it could escape the termites gnawing.” New Orleans is a city suspended in space and time. Prospect.3 strives to describe, as Marco Polo does, a reflection the imagination, memory, artifact, and spirit of the world through the rippling mirror of New Orleans. Distortion of these ideas is a natural effect, but what new concepts and notions will be born from that distortion? These will be the true reward that Prospect.3 will give to New Orleans.