

## NEWS US &amp; Americas

# Biennial hoping to heal New Orleans provides no easy answers

Third edition of Prospect shows it has the potential to become the nation's leading biennial – if only more money flowed down the Delta

## REVIEW

**New Orleans.** Great art can change the world: people remember works that alter the way they think. The Prospect biennial in New Orleans, founded as a kind of saviour in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, has always aspired to this. But its ambitious first edition in 2008 finished with the organisation nearly \$1m in debt – and almost wrecked by the ensuing infighting. Now, it returns under new leadership with a third edition, P3, also called “Notes from Now” (until 25 January 2015).

The organisers had a daunting mission: to stabilise the event, repair severed relationships within the community and mount a show of international standing. Franklin Sirmans, the curator of P3 and the head of contemporary art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, has organised an ambitious exhibition that probes sensitive issues such as race, nationality, crime and migration.

**Great works can change the world, but people need to see them**

“Notes from Now” uses as its touchstone Walker Percy’s classic 1961 novel *The Moviegoer*, in which the detached hero Binx Bolling is in pursuit of some semblance of inner self. Such existentialism seems apt: P3 is prone to introspection, or the question of “how we see ourselves through others”, as Sirmans describes his curatorial aims. This edition has a tremendous amount of promise, but the organisation has yet to fully live up to its potential. Its quest for identity is still ongoing.

Given its Herculean rehabilitation task, P3 has done well. The budget is, for the first time, stable, after the organisation raised \$4m in 18 months. Sirmans has worked with 18 venues across the city to display the work of almost 60



Tavares Strachan's floating pink neon sculpture *You Belong Here*, 2014, is one of the standout works of the exhibition

artists and has staged a biennial meatier than most in the US, and far more diverse: 22 of the 58 participating artists are African-American. In total, 44 are artists of colour.

New Orleanians appreciate the effort. “This edition is a quantum leap,” says Carol Bebel, the director of the Ashé Cultural Arts Center, one of this year’s venues. “Their intention is to be a national biennial that has an international draw, and also to be as local as they can. It’s a very big aspiration, and they get points for trying.”

P3 indicates that Prospect has the potential to become the US biennial.

Its location is unique. Although the city hums with vitality, it is impossible to ignore either its traumatic recent history or the longer legacy of South-eastern class systems and racial prejudice that formed New Orleans.

The most successful works in P3 are the most disquieting. These include *The Living Need Light; The Dead Need Music*, 2014, by the Propeller Group, and a display by the artists Keith Calhoun and Chandra McCormick, which features photographs of inmates in the Louisiana State Penitentiary (also known as “Angola”) and a film about Henry James, who spent 30 years in the prison before

DNA evidence proved his innocence.

There are flaws: like the city itself, the show is not easy to navigate, and local people seem to have little idea that there is an international art exhibition taking place. Although the organisation has recently made more effort to embed itself, there is still much work to do.

There are also some odd artistic choices. Will Ryman’s large sculptural flowers are pretty, but ineffectual in this context. In contrast, the socially minded practice of Theater Gates seems a good fit, although his older works made from fire-hydrant hoses feel tokenistic – what a wasted opportunity not to have

commissioned a site-specific piece.

Despite these issues, the organisation has great dreams and a chance of achieving them. It aspires to become the visual arts equivalent of Jazz Fest, the legendary music festival in New Orleans. Prospect needs a bigger budget to allow for the commissioning of more site-specific works that interact with its location and its mission. More money would also allow for more marketing, both locally and within the art world, so that more people are aware of the biennial. Great works can change the world, but people need to see them.

Charlotte Burns

## The art world's impressions of Prospect

**SHEIKH MOHAMMED RASHID AL-THANI**, collector  
The biennial allows us to experience two sides of the city’s reality: one affected by Katrina and the other that has transcended its struggles. The emphasis on the city’s multicultural make-up is reinforced throughout the venues. The notion of life, death and rebirth is a constant theme: the Propeller Group’s *The Living Need Light; The Dead Need Music*, 2014, at UNO St Claude Gallery, explores the traumatic funeral tradition of Saigon that mirrors the raw reality of violence and resistance that has become endemic in New Orleans. The video immerses viewers in a fascinating and transformative world of surreal imagery and sound. In a building scarred by Katrina, Gary Simmons’s interactive stage [*Recapturing Memories of the Black Ark*, 2014] celebrates the role of music that is deeply woven into the local culture. But New Orleanians seem largely unaware of the city’s revitalised art scene. How does a biennial of this scale encourage the community to become part of P3?



**CHRISTOPHER Y. LEW**, associate curator, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York  
Inspired in part by Gauguin’s painting *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*, 1897–98, Franklin Sirmans infuses the peripatetic artist’s probing questions with the spirit of the Mississippi Delta. The exhibition of paintings by Jean-Michel Basquiat at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art delves into the artist’s ruminations on the South. A grim reality informs other presentations: at the museum, namely Keith Calhoun and Chandra McCormick’s photographs of “Angola” as well as the work of Herbert Singleton, who was imprisoned in the very same prison. On the opening day, Andrea Fraser revisited a tense moment in the city’s recent history through her performance *Not just a few of us*. Re-enacting 19 voices from a 1991 city-council hearing on the integration of private clubs and carnival krewes, Fraser embodied a debate around race, class, private ownership and equal opportunity that continues to resonate today. Equally compelling is a new video by the Propeller Group and Christopher Myers. The work emphasises a South-to-South dialogue, a conversation that is emblematic of P3 and continues connections made by previous biennials in Havana, Johannesburg and Dakar.



**DAN BYERS**, curator of Modern and contemporary Art, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pennsylvania  
Eschewing the Lower Ninth Ward and other neighbourhoods most badly scarred by Katrina, P3 has insulated itself across a variety of neighbourhoods and cultural centres, articulating a latent network of extra-governmental institutions in a city that has recently privatised its entire public-school system. Works resolute with symbolism, ritual and process, by Lonnie Holley, William Cordova, Terry Adams and Piero Golia, occupied humble university art galleries. Each fraught juxtaposition of under-funded gallery space and auratic works of art conjured “precarity” as both inspired thematic and frustrated reality.



A well-chosen route between the show’s venues is essential. Begin with the Propeller Group’s unforgettable new work. A fluent and sexy music video, *The Living Need Light; The Dead Need Music*, 2014, sets the tone for the most persuasive thematic strain of the biennial: an accumulating succession of works steeped in storytelling, ritual, music and landscape. Follow it with works by Akosua Adoma Owusu, Los Jaichackers, Carrie Mae Weems and Tameka Norris, whose work is shown in an interesting small space called May Gallery. The other high point was Andrea Fraser’s unerring performance that troubled the waters around the ever-evolving and celebratory racial complexity of New Orleans and our country, filtered through a brilliantly precise modulation of tone and address.

**NAIMA KEITH**, associate curator, the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York  
What makes this biennial so successful is its acknowledgement of the complex histories of New Orleans. An emphasis on immersion and site-specificity as ways to engage with place, time and audience stood out as common factors in the presentations with the most impact. My favourite works include Tavares Strachan’s stunning bright pink neon sculpture *You Belong Here*, 2014, which is fixed to a 140ft barge and floats down the Mississippi River. It prompts important questions for visitors and locals alike. Glenn Kaino’s new installation *Tank*, composed of fragments of an armoured tank and coral in a series of aquariums, takes a critical look at systems of power in war, spectatorship and ecology. P3 continues to stake its claim as an important platform for international artists.

