

Must-See Projects at Prospect New Orleans, a Citywide Art Biennial

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Though it only launched in 2008, Prospect New Orleans — the city’s ambitious attempt at an internationally competitive art biennial — has seen more than its share of trials and tribulations. Board blunders and cash-flow hiccups delayed the edition planned for 2010 and marred its reception. But at Prospect.3, the event’s third iteration, which opens on Saturday, Oct. 25 and runs through Jan. 25, 2015, things are looking up. The event has found a dynamic executive director and effective fund-raiser in Brooke Anderson. And the city has eagerly opened up its venues and streets — as well as rallied its local social contingent, including T contributing editor Sara Ruffin Costello, who has lured art-inclined friends from New York, Los Angeles and Europe to support the endeavor at tonight’s sold-out opening benefit party, titled Miss Vesta’s Swamp Galaxy Gala.

Prospect has also appointed a dedicated curator, Franklin Sirmans, whose day job is stewarding LACMA’s contemporary department. His vision is as grand, deep and complex as the Big Easy itself. Titled “Notes for Now,” the biennial is staged in 18 venues across New Orleans and features 58 participating artists, from current art stars like Theaster Gates, Carrie Mae Weems and Andrea Fraser to younger, buzzy practitioners like David Zink-Yi, Analia Saban and Camille Henrot. Sirmans describes the affair as an existential search beyond the norm: “trying to understand ourselves through each other.”

The curatorial direction of Prospect.3 was inspired by the 1961 Walker Percy novel “The Moviegoer,” which Sirmans identifies as a launch point into the biennial’s theme of searching, and “a book that you can taste, smell and hear New Orleans in.” The

event represents a move away from the post-Katrina daze still imposed on the city in the popular imagination. And like its hometown, the show is diverse: Some 70 percent of those included are artists of color and a solid chunk are women. On the eve of this new chapter of the only true citywide biennial in the U.S., T highlights a few key projects.

En plein air

One thing New Orleans doesn’t lack for is warm weather — and lots of space. Sirmans collected a group of artists who understand how to utilize the great outdoors, and the results are dotted across the city. The sculptor Will Ryman, for one, has installed his three-story-high red rose sculpture, “Icon” (2011), smack in the center of City Park. Perhaps the most striking work is by the Bahamian artist Tavares Strachan, who created a floating barge with the slogan “You Belong Here” pulsating in neon lights, which will sail the Mississippi throughout the biennial. There’s an accompanying smartphone app with guided tours of New Orleans by the comedian Speed Levitch, and proceeds from its sales will be donated to local nonprofits the Platforms Fund and Big Class.

Memory lane

Biennials mostly cull contemporary artists, but as Sirmans sees it, Prospect.3 looks inward — and in 1897, Paul Gauguin’s famous canvas “Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?” asked the same sort of questions as those guiding this biennial. At the historic New Orleans Museum of Art (NOMA), a showing of a few Gauguin works in the Impressionism galleries highlights the artist’s relevance today.

The outsiders

Though outsider art is currently enjoying increased curatorial attention — Massimiliano Gioni’s 2013 Venice Biennale dealt directly with this theme — the folk art of the South remains largely a Southern concern. However, at the Contemporary Arts Center’s multi-art-

ist exhibition, the line of influence between Southern art traditions and modern-day practices pops out in fantastical paintings by Douglas Bourgeois, the coral water tanks of Glenn Kaino and “Skybox,” a political multimedia installation by Charles Gaines that has an epic, celestial twist.

Sound and vision

New Orleans is known for music — but the artist Gary Simmons is not. (He’s best known for works on paper, wood and canvas that mimic the haunting effect of semi-erased chalk drawings.) However, staged in the Treme Market Branch — a vandalized, abandoned bank building in the Treme neighborhood — Simmons’s “Recapturing Memories of the Black Ark” is an interactive sculpture involving live music performances by professionals (such as the rapper Beans, who will inaugurate the work on Oct. 25) and amateurs alike.

Satellite fare

If the 18 official venues weren’t enough to satiate the city, there’s a satellite project, called P.3+, in which 68 venues across town have staged shows by local artists. In and around the hip St. Claude neighborhood, galleries such as Staple Goods, David Rex Joyner and Barrister’s Gallery have planned exhibitions that speak to the diversity and sophistication of homegrown talent.