

# NolaVie

## The Man Behind Prospect 3

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NolaVie



As a Los Angeles transplant to New Orleans, it is always a bit of a jolt when the chasm between L.A. and LA is bridged. That is happening to me with Prospect 3: Notes for Now, the international contemporary art biennial that opened this weekend in galleries and museums throughout New Orleans. The director behind all of this exceptional art is Franklin Sirmans, Los Angeles County Museum of Art Curator, who in 2011 was my mentor as an intern at LACMA and who is now, serendipitously, the subject of my first assignment for NolaVie.

In L.A., I discovered Sirmans to be a curator who left no stone unturned when it came to pulling together an exhibit. My chief duty as a contemporary art intern was to make PowerPoint presentations of artists' bodies of work, so that Sirmans could meticulously comb through a massive amount of information to find the perfect artist or piece to inspire or complete a show. That same attention to detail is evident in Prospect 3, on view across New Orleans through Jan. 25.

Sirmans wants the New Orleans biennial to be "in a conversation with" the famed biennials of Sao Paulo, Brazil, and Venice, Italy. They, too, are cities with rich histories of arts and culture. As in those international cities, Sirmans says that he wants the art to be mostly informed by direct context of place, as well as imbued with a youthful, adventurous and singularly American spirit. Prospect 3, Sirmans says, is above all "an American show for an American city."

Sirmans' reading of *The Moviegoer* by Walker Percy inspired the exhibition's subtitle, *Notes for Now*. It's not the first show curated by Sirmans with a literary influence. The *NeoHooDoo: Art for a Forgotten Faith* exhibition for the Menil Collection in Houston was inspired by Ishmael Reed's novel *Mumbo Jumbo*.

In thinking about putting together Prospect 3, Sirmans says that he posed the question, "What literature could benefit from more visual attention?" He found his answer in Percy, a Southern existentialist, whose protagonist Binx Bolling engages in a quest of self-discovery during Mardi Gras in New Orleans. Although Prospect 3 covers a myriad of themes, "the New Orleans experience" is arguably the most central. New Orleans-based artists have a very strong presence among the 58 international names in the show; others come from countries as far-ranging as Saudi Arabia and Peru.

"An international view of contemporary art is part of our backdrop," says Sirmans, who defines contemporary art as an expression of "something happening in the world in the not-so-distant past."

Some Prospect 3 artists have made works applicable to the New Orleans experience. The Propeller Group from Vietnam created a piece that highlights similarities between Vietnamese and New Orleansian funeral practices.

Sirmans chooses pieces that he believes will educate and entertain. He admits, sometimes, that he often picks a work because "I want to know more" about it. He wants abstract and conceptual pieces to speak to viewers as deeply as something with a more pop influence. They are works meant not just for connoisseurs or collectors, but for all people. Only two of the 18 venues of Prospect 3 will charge entry, making it accessible to a wide range of viewers.

Ultimately, Prospect 3 is a show about conversations. Conversations between artists and their context. Conversations about the difference between the classically trained and the self-taught artist. Conversations about man versus nature, as evidenced in Los Angeles-based artist Glenn Kaino's fighting coral aquarium installation at the Center for Contemporary Arts. By including such pieces, Sirmans prompts deeper questions: Are we reflections of nature or are we fighting it? Collectively, the show is a conversation about the human -- not just the New Orleans -- experience.