

THE SEEN

Prospect.3 // Interview with Franklin Sirmans

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Prospect, the New Orleans biennial, is now in its third chapter—reflecting the city’s rich cultural breadth with a wide array of exhibitions and performances. Like so many metropolitan areas, there are many different neighborhoods, and each make up a very different climate. Between historical significance and the work of some of today’s most important artists, Prospect 3 has a unique rhythm that is part of the experience created by Artistic Director, Franklin Sirmans.

The biennial is spread out across 18 official venues, encouraging visitors to engage New Orleans. Venues naturally include the Contemporary Arts Center New Orleans and Ashé Cultural Arts Center, but they also extend to city parks and the Mississippi River. Prospect has grown beyond the French Quarter, and this happens with projects such as The Propeller Group with Christopher Myers at the Uno St. Claude Art Gallery, or Terry Adkins and William Cordova at Cook Fine Arts and Communication Center.

THE SEEN sat down with Sirmans, to discuss his approach to this American biennial and what his selection of artists bring to the table.

Maria Avila Risolute: For Prospect 3, it’s known that you are using the 1961 Walker Percy novel “The Moviegoer” as part of your curatorial direction. Can you talk about the relationship between this novel and the biennial, besides the location being in New Orleans?

Franklin Sirmans: In my opinion, in order to make a successful “biennial,” its location should be an integral part of the exhibition. Secondly, I was aiming to have a conversation with other exhibitions of its type—say Venice, Documenta, Gwangju, São Paulo, etc. This exhibition is a philosophical inquiry, and Percy’s book does both of these things: it is located in New Orleans, but it also deals with ideas that are local to that time place—yet they are universally of importance to humans everywhere. Ostensibly, the book is about how we see ourselves through each other and that is what this show is about to me.

MAR: In so many recent biennials, the location of the curatorial event branches out to different venues. Prospect 3 is spread out amongst 18 official venues—what went into your decision to spread the project out physically and over such a length of time? Can you talk about some of the positives in having such a widespread exhibition, as well as some of the challenges?

FS: The idea is that in order to see the entire show—which I do not believe is necessary to get something out of it—that one would have to traverse a good deal of the city and find oneself in very different kinds of neighborhoods. I believe that’s beauty of the city, that there is so much difference abutting against each other.

MAR: M. H. Miller posted on ARTNews last week the question, “Who’s you, and where’s here, and who gets to say who belongs where?” [1] Obviously he was referencing the Tavares Strachan piece that is on the Mississippi river as we speak. How do you think this response to Strachan’s work might evolve over the course of the biennial?

FS: I am not sure. I think that the context of this piece changes constantly and that is what makes it such a great work of art. There’s another one on sale at Phillips next week. Though the work is much smaller, it has very different context in an auction, and eventually new context in someone’s home.

MAR: This work is all about context. Whether it’s large or small, whoever is looking at it is going to become more self-aware, or perhaps community-aware. Having it on the Mississippi river, and having this many people see it and interact with it as public art, what has been the initial reaction?

FS: The initial reaction has been overwhelmingly positive. And, of course, the work’s presence in social media makes it a formidable presence in the conscious of many who may not see it in person. That is powerful.

MAR: Glenn Kaino is showing at the Contemporary Arts Center New Orleans. Kavi Gupta has a current show of his work here, but I think his work in New Orleans is far more sociological. How do you think this work fits into the curatorial direction of the show?

FS: Well, like the work in Chicago, it deals with massively large ideas and complex systems. Glenn was one of the artists I spoke to at the beginning of the process. And, although I didn't know what work we would have, I knew he had to be in show. His work at Prospect deals with natural organisms like us except—they are coral. That these coral seem to function in a manner aggressively towards each other may help explain why, although we have big brains, we continue to take over each others land and war with each other around the world.

MAR: Theaster Gates has been making huge ripples in the art world these past few years, especially in Chicago, which makes it no surprise you invited him to be part of this international exhibition. He created a space at EXPO CHICAGO, an extension of his project called Retreat. Besides the buzz circulating around Gates, what can you say about your decision to include Gates in Prospect 3?



FS: Theaster is another artist who I talked to very early on in the process. In the end we borrowed 2-dimensional work but it is safe to say here that your readers will be familiar with his Dorchester Project and other more socially related art interactions. What won't be seen in the show is the fact that Theaster Gates and Carol Bebel, our partner and collaborator at Ashe in Central City, have been talking and will be cooking up something in the future that comes out of that part of his practice. For me, it was important to represent in some way Theaster's versatility and parallel approaches to making art and sharing ideas that may empower people.