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Critic reviews Prospect.2 artist Keith Duncan's paintings

Doug MacCash - January 23, 2012



Prospect.2 artist Keith Duncan delves into complex social commentary at the New Orleans Healing Center.

Louisiana artist Keith Duncan isn't shy about social commentary. His paintings on display at The New Orleans Healing Center deal with issues from the 2010 Gulf of Mexico oil spill aftermath to the ongoing plague of Crescent City street violence. In a pair of striking compositions, Duncan depicts what seem to be surrealistic gangster funerals. In one, the clouds hovering over the ceremony take on a sinister scorpion-like shape as a golden second line band serenades the deceased. In the other, the cemetery ground is littered with symbols, such as guns, beer bottles and - incongruently -- the face of a minstrel show performer.

"I'm commenting on black on black violence and racial stereotypes that we're used to from history," Duncan said of the discomfiting cemetery image.

The irony of Duncan's paintings is that he manages to present his often edgy outlook in a charming outsider mode. The colors he chooses can be glowingly bold, his drawing style is affably cartoon-like and, instead of blank canvas, he sometimes paints on floral print fabric.

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Imagine a gritty gangster send-off taking place on a background that is poignantly reminiscent of grandma's curtains.

"The fabric is what ties me to my roots," he said.

Duncan, 47, was born in Charity hospital and grew up in Plaquemines Parish. He attended LSU before receiving a prestigious Camille Cosby fellowship that, he said, allowed him to embark on a successful 15-year career in New York where he attended Hunter College and showed his work in several exhibitions. In 2007 he returned to New Orleans where he began teaching art in a charter school and "falling in love with the culture again."

Duncan said he had to get used to New Orleans' slower-paced lifestyle but "I knew there was going to be an up and coming art scene here." Collectors purchased every painting in his Prospect.2 exhibit, according to Duncan. He didn't reveal the prices of his works, but said that with the proceeds he'll be able to stop painting in his Gretna apartment and "hunt for studio space."

Despite the buoyancy of Duncan's style, he's not an artist to be taken lightly. His works are provocative social puzzles that defy easy solution. You're certain to be discussing Duncan's point of view long after you leave the exhibit.

The exhibit is part of Prospect.2 New Orleans, a collection of works by 27 avant-garde artists from the Crescent City and around the world, displayed in various locations. Regular hours are Wednesdays through Sundays, from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. through Jan. 29. Admission is \$10 for a one-day pass, \$20 for a week's pass and \$30 for a season pass. Passes are available at the New Orleans Museum of Art in City Park, the Contemporary Arts Center at 900 Camp St., and the Prospect New Orleans headquarters at 1036 Esplanade Ave., or at prospectneworleans.org. Take a video tour of Prospect.2 titled: "Visit all 27 Prospect.2 New Orleans avant-garde art exhibition," [here](#).