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The New York Times

A Show With Its Host City, New Orleans, as the Protagonist

The contemporary art triennial Prospect New Orleans looks at the city's cyclical history of challenges.

By Hilarie M. Sheets – October 20, 2021



"White Picket Fence #2 (Myth or Reality)," 2019, is one of Willie Birch's charcoal drawings of streetscapes on display in Prospect New Orleans. "You've got these old raggedy funky-looking houses," he said, "but yet there's something very beautiful in terms of their resilience." Courtesy of Willie Birch.

"We all felt after this devastating year, but especially after Ida, we had to pick ourselves up and make this show happen," said Nick Stillman, the executive director of Prospect New Orleans, an international contemporary art triennial. Prospect was conceived in 2007 after the catastrophe of Hurricane Katrina with the idea of helping New Orleans rebuild.

Ida, of course, refers to this year's hurricane, which, though it didn't result in the level of devastation Katrina caused, has had a profound effect on the city, compounding the challenges of the pandemic and the surge of the Delta variant.

The first multivenue exhibition of its kind staged across an American city, now in its fifth iteration, Prospect is one of New Orleans's few major cultural events still opening this month after those hurdles prompted the cancellation of the city's two major jazz festivals in October.

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The small, nimble organization rejiggered the schedule quickly after the hurricane, which knocked out power for days and set back fabrication, framing and shipping. Fifty-one art projects are scheduled to open in three waves this weekend, next Saturday and Nov. 6 (with a final piece to be unveiled in early January) across 20 cultural spaces around the city; a gala has been postponed to the last weekend of the show, which closes Jan. 23.

Prophetically titled “Yesterday we said tomorrow” by its artistic directors, Diana Nawi and Naima Keith, (the show was originally scheduled to open just before the 2020 election), Prospect looks back at the past as a portal to understand the present and asks whether the present is really as “unprecedented” as the media repeatedly called it. The added hurdle of Ida only reinforced the cyclic theme of the exhibition.

“This is a condition of living in New Orleans,” said Ms. Nawi. “We were thinking about the ways that New Orleans is a nexus of so many definitive social, political and climate issues of our era.”

The pandemic and latest hurricane have pushed Prospect to double down on its commitment to local audiences and artists. Nine of the artists are New Orleans-based — including Willie Birch, Ron Bechet and Anastasia Pelias — a larger percentage than in previous editions of Prospect, which has drawn crowds of 100,000 to 150,000, split about equally between regional and national or international visitors.



Mr. Birch in his studio in New Orleans. “We’ve been through disasters most of our lives and keep moving forward,” he said. Courtesy of Annie Flanagan for The New York Times

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“We’ve been through disasters most of our lives and keep moving forward,” said Mr. Birch, who relocated from New York in 1994 back to the Black neighborhood where he grew up. On Nov. 6, at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art, alongside seven other artists including the locals Katrina Andry and Welmon Sharlhorne, Mr. Birch will show several monumentally scaled charcoal drawings of acutely observed quotidian streetscapes that capture the light and atmosphere of New Orleans.

“You’ve got these old raggedy funky-looking houses but yet there’s something very beautiful in terms of their resilience,” Mr. Birch said, noting that the families in his neighborhood often go back six or seven generations. “You realize the history and the ghosts that are in these houses and how these people survived.”

The haunting of the New Orleans landscape is a recurring thread in many of the artists’ projects. The Chicago photographer Dawoud Bey has documented the exteriors of slave quarters on Louisiana plantations in large-scale black-and-white images going on view Oct. 23 at the Historic New Orleans Collection, which is also hosting a performance by Josh Kun and photographs by George Dureau.

In Mr. Bey’s pictures of ostensibly empty cabins, one feels “the pain and terror that exists in them,” said Ms. Keith, “the crazy weather and other things they’ve withstood all these years.”

Dineo Seshee Bopape, who lives in Johannesburg, locates New Orleans as a capital of slave trade in her animated film at the New Orleans African American Museum, alongside works by Paul Stephen Benjamin, beginning next Saturday.

Using clay pigments sourced from the Mississippi River in New Orleans and other ports pivotal to the trans-Atlantic slave trade in Virginia, Ghana and Senegal, Ms. Bopape made over 900 drawings of water for her animation that speaks to how the landscape is witness to its history.

Part of the magic of Prospect New Orleans, said Franklin Sirmans, the artistic director of the third iteration in 2015, is the unexpected encounter with work at more idiosyncratic venues beyond the white cube aesthetic of museum and gallery spaces. Scheduled to open Nov. 6, viewers can discover Rodney McMillian’s two videos espousing political rhetoric on either side of the divide at Happyland, a silent film-era movie theater in the Bywater neighborhood, and Jamilah Sabur’s installation exploring the geological fault-line running through northeastern New Orleans, where the work is sited at the small Art Deco-style Lakefront Airport.

Nari Ward has appropriated portable police floodlights, typically used to monitor areas considered suspicious by the police, and transformed them into a giant megaphone. It will travel to several locations around the city, including the U.N.O. Gallery in the Bywater neighborhood and affiliated with the University of New Orleans. “It’s a call to prayer,” said the New York-based artist.

He is one of five artists returning from the original iteration of Prospect in 2008; the others are Mr. Birch, Mark Bradford, Dave McKenzie and Wangechi Mutu.

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The only surviving remnant of Mr. Ward's first New Orleans installation is a sound component sampling empowering speeches by Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X and Marcus Garvey, along with Buddhist chanting by Tina Turner.

Now, Mr. Ward has remixed this soundscape with additional Black voices, including the poets Amanda Gorman and Amiri Baraka and the groundbreaking politician Shirley Chisholm, and is amplifying it from speakers replacing the police floodlights.

"The same statements King and Malcolm were saying, the messages still resound with the Black Lives Matter movement," Mr. Ward said.

In early January, Simone Leigh, the Brooklyn artist representing the United States in the Venice Biennale next spring, is installing a monumental bronze female sentinel at the center of Tivoli Circle, where a 16-foot statue of the Confederate General Robert E. Lee was dismantled in 2017. Rather than replace the monument at the top of the 90-foot-tall column, Ms. Leigh will position her figure on the ground beside the towering column for several months as a temporary counterpoint.

Prospect New Orleans has helped nurture an ecosystem that sustains artists emerging from schools in a city associated with its music, architecture and cuisine than contemporary art. Mr. Stillman, the executive director, who has commissioned an economic impact study for Prospect. 5, estimated the effect of Prospect.4 at \$10 million throughout the city.

For Mr. Birch, an elder in the art community and mentor to many artists who have come up in New Orleans, the most important thing that Prospect does there is "bring the attention," he said. "It is a wonderful opportunity for us as visual artists to rival the music."