

November 7, 2008**BLEEDING-HEART BIENNALE**

by Walter Robinson

Dan Cameron sounded a little aggrieved in his brief remarks to a bunch of New York art writers on the fourth floor of the New Orleans Contemporary Art Center, where he is curator. After Hurricane Katrina, he claimed, the art world had turned its back on his adopted city. That neglect broke his heart, just like the hurricane broke the levees.



Dan Cameron at the "Prospect.1 New Orleans" press conference

Cameron was right about one thing: though a mecca for music and food, and possessed of a unique way of life, New Orleans plays a negligible role in the international art world.

All that should change with "Prospect.1 New Orleans," Nov. 1, 2008-Jan. 18, 2009, the ambitious, sprawling, \$3.5-million international art show that Cameron has organized, bringing 82 artists from 34 countries to two dozen venues spread across the city. A sizeable number of the works are custom-made for sites in the Lower Ninth Ward, the Garden District and the Warehouse District, and installed at the CAC, the New Orleans Museum of Art, the Louisiana State Museum, the New Orleans African American Museum and a half-dozen other institutions.

Cameron says the show is the largest biennial exhibition in the United States, and he's right (though it's not the first; the Site Santa Fe Biennial takes that honor). He dismisses the famous Whitney Biennial as a paltry affair. "To be a real biennale," he says, "it must be international."

Cameron doesn't mince words about his goal for Prospect.1, either: to help revitalize the city through art tourism. "I don't like the way New Orleans promotes itself -- drunks on Bourbon Street is so over," he said. According to calculations, the show could draw 100,000 visitors to the city.

And "Prospect.1" is not just a one-time event. Cameron has signed on for a ten-year term, overseeing -- if not curating -- "Prospect.2" through "Prospect.5" in 2016. All but 10 percent of the budget of "Prospect.1" comes from outside the state of Louisiana, by the way. The city of New Orleans has contributed no funds, but 300 volunteers have signed on.

For once, I agree with a curator: you should go to New Orleans, stay at the W Hotel, eat at Lüke -- easily one of the best, most comfortable meals I've ever had -- and see "Prospect.1." You won't be sorry. The art is a perfect excuse to tour the city, which Hurricane Katrina has made into a showplace of the kind of dilapidated industrial and urban architecture that has great appeal to art lovers. New Orleans, which was 80 percent under water for two months, has plenty of such buildings.

"The idea is to see New Orleans, not stay locked inside some art mall," exclaimed the Chicago artist Tony Fitzpatrick, who had his heart stolen by the city about 18 months ago. Fitzpatrick's works, a suite of collages on the poetical and entirely New Orleans-appropriate theme of "Chapel of Moths," are installed at a funeral chapel, where their heraldic white shapes are like ghosts.

Many of the artists who came to New Orleans for "Prospect.1" have been touched by the city and its citizens, and made works that address directly the hurricane and subsequent flood, as well as the racism and poverty highlighted by the disaster.

Perhaps best of these is the Los Angeles artist Mark Bradford's towering, Brutalist ark made of 4 x 8 ft. sheets of plywood hoarding, covered with tattered posters, erected in a weedy lot in the Lower Ninth Ward next to an abandoned, flood-wrecked two-story house.

Nearby is another flood-themed work by South African artist Robin Rhode, a simple fountain installed inside the cinderblock shell of an outdoor bathroom that once served a local park. "Water was a destructive force," Rhode said. "I wanted to make it the center of a place of contemplation."

Rhode also noted the mischievous humor of placing a fountain in a toilet, "where we make our own fountains." After noting that the flood itself was a "mark-making mechanism" -- specifically, the "bathtub ring" that marks the high water level on structures throughout the city -- he assayed that "humor allows us to find some small pleasure in harsh reality."

In the three years since Hurricane Katrina, the destroyed houses in the Lower Ninth Ward have been cleared away, leaving behind a network of streets and weed-strewn lots, dotted here and there with leftover concrete foundations and the occasional building. Most of the structures are shells of wrecked houses, though some are new homes built by Brad Pitt's "Make It Right" project and others.

With "Prospect.1," the art projects provide a third element in this unique, de-peopled landscape. In one still-standing brick structure, the Battle Ground Baptist Church -- the building remains though its congregation is scattered -- New York artist Nari Ward has installed a mirrored room containing a freestanding metal armature in the shape of a brilliant-cut diamond, filled with cast-off exercise equipment.

Though the work's iconography, if you can call it that, is personal (next to Ward's Harlem studio is an office of Rev. Al Sharpton's National Action Network, located in a building that formerly housed the Diamond Gym), it nevertheless provides an image of strength and hope for the neighborhood, and holds the place till the congregation can return.

A few blocks away is a work by the Nairobi-born New York artist Wangechi Mutu that has an even more practical purpose. A wood-frame outline of a house, festooned with lights and containing a single, welcoming chair, *Mrs. Sarah's House* is dedicated to a local woman, the widow of a great New Orleans jazz drummer, who not only saw her home washed away in the hurricane, but also had her funds for rebuilding stolen by a disreputable contractor.

As part of the project, Mutu is producing a print edition, whose proceeds are devoted to the Miss Sarah House Fund. The goal: \$120,000.

The New Orleans artist John Barnes Jr. lost everything in the hurricane -- his work and his home in the city's Gentilly neighborhood -- but says he regarded the event as an opportunity to start from scratch. His canoe-home hybrid structures of painted wood, most of them small and displayed on plinths at the CAC, are designed as testaments to survival, a metaphor of the city as a capsized boat.

Barnes speaks eloquently of "the disaster esthetic," so much a part of the New Orleans landscape that it's as normal as a McDonald's sign. "There is value," he said, "in showing people the effects of this continuous devastation."

As Barnes' attitude suggests, in New Orleans, the jazz capital of the world, an elegy can be a joyful thing. For "Prospect.1," the Thai artist Navin Rawanchaikul organized a festive funeral (featuring the Preservation Hall All Stars) for the celebrated local banjo player Narvin Kimball (pronounced as "nahvin" in the New Orleans patois), who didn't receive a proper send-off when he died because of Hurricane Katrina.

Rawanchaikul has an ongoing project called "Navin Party" (see www.navinparty.com), a kind of outreach effort for Navins around the world. For the New Orleans incarnation, done in collaboration with Tyler Russell, a space was decked out with festive posters picturing Kimball and his two lovely wives and daughter, all done by Thai movie billboard painters (a dying art given second life, as is not uncommon, by the contemporary art world). As in the first Singapore Biennial in 2006 [see "[Uniquely Singapore](#)," Sept. 8, 2006], the social context adds its own ineffable bittersweetness to much of the work. Installed among the works at the CAC is a suite of five new paintings by Julie Mehretu. Always suggestive of global flows of population and power, the bright pictures here seem tailor-made for New Orleans.

The abstract painter Jacqueline Humphries, who was born in New Orleans, installed a group of large gestural monochrome abstractions in a raw brick building in the warehouse district. The paintings, in their antic scrawls, occupy a threshold between avant-garde studio practice and an emblem of social and physical disarray. Most poignant are the black squares spray-painted directly onto the uneven brick walls, as if to hold a spot, like an empty grave.

At the New Orleans African American Museum, the team of McCallum & Tarry has installed more than 100 small portraits, done in black and white and covered with a transparent silk scrim, copied from the mug shots of demonstrators at the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1956, a seminal Civil Rights action in the South. That so many noble images of somber historical power, including a portrait of a young Martin Luther King, should result from bureaucratic police procedure fifty years ago is nothing short of bizarre.

As an international contemporary art biennial, "Prospect.1" features works by several artists who are familiar on the global biennale circuit, all of whom provide worthy examples of high-key "Festivalism." Monica Bonvicini installed glittering, stainless-steel letters spelling the word "Desire" on the edge of the roof of the

New Orleans Museum of Art, while Candice Breitz presented her 30-channel portrait of *Bob Marley, Legend* (2005), at the CAC.

The show also features local talent, including large-scale collage works by Shawne Major, dubbed "the Cajun Schnabel" by somebody who shall remain nameless, and Srdjan Loncar, an artist who has just opened his own independent art space in the city. His contribution to "Prospect.1" includes a tall pile of bundles of \$100 bills, made of blocks of wood faced with digital prints, that is sited, appropriately enough, in the Louisiana State Museum in the Old U.S. Mint building.

And "Prospect.1" contains plenty of work that is not tied to New Orleans. The show includes a wealth of films and projections, some new and some older, that are worth seeing in any venue: works by Isaac Julien (*Baltimore*, 2002, starring Melvin van Peebles), Kalup Linzy, Josephine Meckseper and Shirin Neshat.

John Pilson's new film, *A Thousand Miles Away*, however, was made on the spot in New Orleans, and is a muscularly formal look at several everyday scenes in the city, including the near-mystical methods of a local taxicab dispatcher. Rico Gatson's new video installation, *Spirit, Myth, Ritual and Liberation*, focuses on that moment at Altamont in *Gimme Shelter* (1970) that put an end to the Summer of Love.

In an event like "Prospect.1," with outsiders jetting into the city to offer their suggestions and comments, however sincerely, some works can seem like parodies of themselves. The artist Paul Villinski's modified FEMA trailer, *Emergency Response Studio*, described by the artist as "a toxic tin can transformed into something green," allows artists to arrive at any emergency and begin making art immediately in their 32-foot-long, solar-powered workshop.

Villinski imagines a dozen *Emergency Response Studios* deploying around the globe (the price is \$89,000 each), but perhaps the work is most notable for provoking the question: just what kind of contribution does an artist make in post-trauma situations, anyway?

The celebrated British graffiti artist Banksy also parachuted into New Orleans, posting his light-hearted graphics at public spaces around the city. Call me cranky, but the one that remains, a silhouette of a girl with a wind-blown umbrella (off a salt container?) painted on the concrete levee, strikes me as a bit too blithe.

A local art vigilante, dubbed The Grey Ghost, seems to agree, for he has painted out most of the other Banksy graffiti, along with any other graffiti he can find, with swathes of neutral gray paint. The late Minimalist Donald Judd is said to have done the same thing when his building in SoHo was hit by graffiti.

The overall effect of "Prospect.1" cannot be underestimated. People love New Orleans, and the art shows that love. For a New Yorker, the effect of the city is as dramatic as it is unexpected: New Orleans takes the reprobate scallywag nihilists of the contemporary avant-garde and converts them, like Saul on the road to Damascus, into goody-two-shoes bleeding-heart believers in the nobility of humankind.

For this image, I like a resin-coated collage-painting by Fred Tomaselli from 2004, titled *Abductor* and featuring not a hurricane but a tornado -- Dorothy's tornado from the *Wizard of Oz*. May "Prospect.1" help bring to New Orleans the brains, heart and courage it needs to thrive.

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