

Prospect.2 in New Orleans

Written by Colleen Fava

November 2011. Hitched to the Universe: International Art at home in the Big Easy: "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe." – Robert Muir

The New Orleans International Contemporary Art Biennial is back for round two. Like the inaugural event, Prospect.2 is expected to positively impact the local cultural and fiscal economy as it attracts artists, art lovers, and collectors from near and far. Prospect.2 kicked off with a Friday night gala on October 21, and special performances on Saturday accompanied the official opening of all venues. Exhibits will run through January 29, 2012.

The impetus for the 2008 iteration, Prospect.1, was to reinvigorate tourism and support recovery in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Two independent impact studies credit the first event with producing over \$20 million dollars for the local economy and generating positive international attention in the national press.

While recovery was a centralizing force, it was not the sole purpose of the event. It is the tradition of international art biennials to showcase innovative visual art created by contemporary artists practicing all over the world. There is a growing tradition of soliciting international artists to generate site-specific works that actively engage the history and geography of the host city. Several artists from varying locales created projects expressly for both biennials.

A good number of pieces generated intentionally for Prospect.1 responded explicitly to the post-Hurricane environment, and many were installed in the Lower 9th Ward – but Prospect.2 is even more reflective of the city's broad history.

"It has nothing to do with Katrina anymore," director and creative mastermind, Dan Cameron explained to me. "We are establishing ourselves as a part of the cultural economy of New Orleans. We intend to become an institution."

Katrina, it seems, was a centrifugal force to Prospect.1, because the devastation it left behind was a force awaiting its reckoning. These days most of us in South Louisiana suffer from Katrina-fatigue. We're ready for people to remember that New Orleans was famous long before 2005.

Prospect.2 features twenty-eight artists from nine countries across fourteen locations, from traditional museums and galleries to public spaces and historical landmarks. The sites are clustered through several adjacent neighborhoods, including the French Quarter, Tremé, St. Claude, the Warehouse District, City Park, and Tulane and Xavier Universities.

Cameron, a transplant from New York, wants the New Orleans biennial to be the visual arts equivalent to Jazzfest. "Music and food are easier arts to rally around, and the city has done an amazing job of celebrating that." Participation in the visual arts is more complicated. These arts do not inherently translate into festivals, at least not the way the average person conceives of a festival. Thankfully, South Louisiana is far from average. Placing the visual arts within the biennial framework of an ongoing cultural event reminds us that all art invites participation. Most artists yearn for engagement, and New Orleans visitors and residents constitute an eager and appreciative audience.

Jennifer Day, Director of the New Orleans Convention & Visitors Bureau, puts a finer point on it. "Events like P2 highlight New Orleans' vibrant arts community and promote the city to creative types across the globe. These visitors tend to be dynamic, engaged, and we love that!"

The artists working with the city's inherent tensions this time around have engaged a wide range of challenges and treasures unique to the cultural geography of this place. The resultant pieces range in medium and motif, and at turns celebrate the rich culture and traditions of New Orleans and/or consider the social and political concerns plaguing the region.

Environmental challenges to the complex ecosystem of Louisiana's wetlands are explored in a scientific mural by Alexis Rockman (New York). His painting imagines a war between indigenous and invasive species battling in the bayou. Rockman's painting is up at the Contemporary Arts Center along with six other artists, including thirty innovative pieces by local artist Gina Phillips carefully sewn at a custom machine so that the thread lines look like paint.

Cultural conservation and individual agency converge in the hands of Sophie Calle (France), world renowned writer, photographer, director, installation artist, and conceptual artist. Calle's work regularly examines identity and intimacy, and these concepts are often explored through autobiographical inclusions, intentionally blurring (or questioning) the lines between truth and fiction. For Prospect.2, Calle transforms the 1850 House of the Louisiana State Museum by infusing artifacts from her own narrative history into the restored antebellum home.

Native New Orleanian Dawn DeDeaux's installation illustrates an exceptional level of collaboration between the artist and the geography of art. She has integrated literary and architectural iconography into her large-scale multimedia installation work entitled *Goddess Fortuna And Her Dunces In An Effort To Make Sense Of It All*. The piece is inspired by John Kennedy Toole's prize-winning novel, *The Confederacy of Dunces*, and it is installed at the Brulatour Mansion and Courtyard, recently purchased by the Historic New Orleans Collection.

"The entire building is not up to a designated code that would allow full public access to all of the upper interior spaces. This influenced my decision to animate the building itself infusing the four surrounding walls with an electronically driven 'occupation,'" DeDeaux said. "I decided to create the symbolic presence of book protagonist Ignatius Reilly right in the center of the courtyard and to utilize the four surrounding walls as a landscape for his dreams of medieval order, his nightmares of mediocrity and mendacity, and his habitual dialogues with the Goddess Fortuna."

As physical realities guided DeDeaux's conception, she hopes the audience, too, will be influenced by the literal space. "I would like to prompt further meditation on our relationship to nature and the conditions of 'fate' as presented within *The Goddess Fortuna's Wheel of Fortune*. I want to see people seated within the courtyard, looking up at the stars, deep in thought writing their own stories."

DeDeaux is a central character in the "story" of Prospect.2 New Orleans. She laments that she often had "to leave my city to produce my work." She is grateful that a major art event is happening at home.

Numerous local artists and small galleries have launched satellite shows throughout the city, recognizing the biennial tour as a gateway to more attention on up and coming working artists in the area.

Despite being at the helm of an intercontinental, multi-million dollar, three-month long venture that is establishing New Orleans as a cultural tourism destination, Cameron has maintained a level of warmth and accessibility that we cherish in the Southeast. He modeled the biennial's brand new welcome center at 1036 Esplanade Avenue into a no-admission gallery featuring six local artists. Visitors can purchase tickets, pick up a map of the participating venues, and ask staff members for recommendations on other area hotspots, or you can just pop in and take in some amazing homegrown art.

After a few days in New Orleans researching this story, Colleen H. Fava returned to Baton Rouge and attended the Sunday service at the Unitarian Church. In an attempt to convince her that all things really are connected, the Universe conspired that morning to send the Reverend Steve Crump to New Orleans, while Reverend Jim VanderWeele of the Crescent City was giving the sermon in Baton Rouge. Reverend VanderWeele even provided the quote that opens this story. Colleen hopes this story of synchronicity reminds you that you're already hitched so you might as well enjoy the view. Go to New Orleans and check out Prospect.2.

Details. Details. Details.

Patrons can download a map of the exhibit venues, purchase tickets, or read more about participating artists and venues at ProspectNewOrleans.org.