

HOMEPAGE

NEW ORLEANS PROSPECTS

BY MARCIA E. VETROCQ

I CAME BACK TO NEW YORK in 1998 after having lived in New Orleans, with some interregnums, for a long time. ("20 to life" I used to say, reflecting how long it took me to embrace the city, but not acknowledging all that it had given me in return.) I've revisited NOLA just twice, and these trips inevitably have come to be thought of as the post-Katrina visit and, last November, the post-BP-spill visit.

The residual anguish of the oil spill is largely invisible in the city, confined to the devastated shrimping and fishing communities of the coast and waterways. In town, the vulturish impulses of disaster tourism are in decline: the Lower Ninth Ward, still scarred by hundreds of desolate lots, shows a defiant if too-small number of rebuilt houses plus some 50 new residences sponsored by Brad Pitt's Make It Right Foundation—all clean lines and swooping roofs, the palette a touch too Seaside, the 8-foot pilings on which they perch a mix of right-thinking preparedness and heart-breaking optimism. Grocery chains have yet to show any interest in serving the neighborhood, but there's now a weekly farmers market on St. Claude Avenue, which has become the boulevard of upstart galleries that showcase—and are often run by—local artists. At one, The Front, I was given a little catalogue celebrating the scrappy space's first 15 months. Far from presumptuous, it may have been a wise move to not delay a commemorative publication until the 10th anniversary, or even the 5th, things being what they are in New Orleans.

My November visit did not coincide with the Prospect.2 Biennial, the scheduled follow-up to 2008's much-publicized show, which was organized by Dan Cameron and energized by a roster of prominent international artists eager to help a city brought to its knees. Lingered debt and the defection of disenchanted funders led to the second edition's postponement. Determined to make low-cost lemonade, Cameron devised Prospect.1.5, a roughly four-month season [through Feb. 19] of events and exhibitions. For me, the name instantly conjured not the generational nomenclature of smart phones and computer programs but the Martin Flemer Building's floor 7½ in the film *Being John*



Still from Dave Greber's *The Fool, The Hierophant, The Devil and the Wheel*, 2010, four-channel video installation. Courtesy the artist.

Malkovich—a bit absurd and cramped, but also furnished with a portal to some extraordinary things. And so I found Prospect.1.5 to be. With its focus on local talent, the program also feels a bit like a "correction" aimed at area artists who felt slighted when attention was showered on the guest celebrities of Prospect.1. The celebrity factor was not entirely absent from Prospect.1.5, though: New York resident/New Orleans native Rashaad Newsome showed a version of his "Shade Compositions," the sharpest videos in the 2010 Whitney Biennial, at Good Children Gallery on St. Claude.

Indeed, for me one revelation was the vitality of video in New Orleans. In "Fresh Off the Turnip Truck" [through Jan. 20] at Madame John's Legacy, the 18th-century Creole gem on Dumaine Street, the standout is *The Fool, The Hierophant, The Devil and the Wheel* (2010), a mind-bending installation by Dave Greber (Philadelphia-born, New Orleans-based). Four fever-dream-colored channels conflate two "systems" concerned with the unspooling of destiny: tarot cards, a standard diversion for tourists in nearby Jackson Square (the Devil is incarnated by Greber as a flame-eyed cat whose grinding purr is picked up by a clutch of telephones brandished like reporters' microphones), and the globally broadcast game show "Deal or No Deal," from which he borrows the trope of the mystery suitcase that is chosen by the contestant (the Fool in the tarot deck). Here, the suitcase opens to reveal not trea- >



sure but glowing apparitions of toxic-looking fruit (an allusion to slot machines?) and sometimes a leaping cat.

"A Second of Your Time," at the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts [through Jan. 7], includes *DRIVE IN EVITABLE* (2009-10) by Kourtney M. Keller (Grand Rapids-born, New Orleans-based). At just over 16 minutes, the looped video (in this instance looping feels formally essential and not merely expedient) documents the artist's nocturnal projections on the sides of freight trains that slowly cut through the city at St. Claude and Press Street, in the Bywater district. There's a man doing handstands, a bicyclist, a woman mopping—all projected as rubbery white silhouettes that appear to move across the cars, jump the couplings and vanish, as if Muybridge's motion-study pictures had been animated by a giant magic lantern.

Some parts of Prospect.1.5 have been sited in commercial spaces, but Elizabeth Shannon's exhibition at Heriard-Cimino was the gallery's own show. Turning to the working river, Shannon presented 10 sculptures that incorporate salvaged hardwood "patterns," carved molds for the molds once used to cast machine parts. The sculptures-cum-design-objects have an abstract poise that evokes African carvings as well as works by the early modernists who admired them. Shannon, whose roots go back to her family's 19th-century hardware and marine-supply store in nearby Morgan City, offered a bittersweet tribute, both estheticization and memorialization, to a region where local manufacturing is in steep decline. Five cyanotypes, still lifes built around antiquated tools, deepened the mood indigo.



Left, Kourtney M. Keller: *DRIVE IN EVITABLE*, 2009-10, digital video, 16-minute loop. Courtesy the artist.

Below, Elizabeth Shannon: *Narrow Table with Square Bowl*, 2010, wood and lemons, 22 by 36 by 9 inches. Courtesy Heriard-Cimino Gallery, New Orleans.

**KELLER'S SILHOUETTES
APPEAR TO MOVE ACROSS
THE TRAIN CARS, JUMP
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AS IF MUYBRIDGE'S
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Coinciding with Prospect.1.5 at the New Orleans Museum of Art [through Feb. 13] is a trim survey of works by the duo Generic Art Solutions (G.A.S.), Tony Campbell and Matt Vis (New Orleans-based, from London and Quantico, Virginia, respectively). Shifting uneasily in tone, their performance videos range from the disciplined (very good) to the slapstick (superfluous). The show's centerpiece is a monumental reproduction of Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa*, which Campbell and Vis repopulated by assuming every pose (including that of the ghastly head-under-water corpse) and Photoshopping themselves into the tableau. The blowup is accompanied by small-scale photographs of the sea, not Sugimoto-sublime but impassive views of the Gulf at the site of the Deepwater Horizon explosion. The piece transcends its own self-referentiality (G.A.S. routinely inhabit travesties of old master paintings) to connect the 19th-century disaster with the 21st-century one, succeeding with a big assist from a wall text that lists the names of the 11 men killed on the rig. What a difference a caption makes.



I remembered Shannon's work trading more in bayou atmospherics and popular imagery, so it was good to be brought up to speed, good to see one of the city's veteran artists thriving along with the newcomers. I'm a skeptical lover of biennials: in 20 years of making the pilgrimage to Venice (like New Orleans, environmentally fragile and dependent on the kindness of strangers), I've seen a wealth of international art on temporary display, and I've seen a city both supported and abused by the arterati who come and go. I'd like to believe that New Orleans stands a chance of escaping the fate of Venice. In that spirit, I wish Prospect.2 every success. But I really can't wait to see Prospect.2.5. ◦