



# ICONS

## Big Easy Scales Back Its Biennial Ambitions

The latest art movement is the biennial. In recent years, such shows have popped up in cities from Amherst, Mass., to Tel Aviv, and even the digital and performing arts have their own. They draw tourists and collectors and raise a city's cultural profile. The trouble is: Inaugurating a biennial means having to stage one every two years—and paying for it.

Such was the problem the city of New Orleans ran into this year after launching its first biennial, Prospect.1. When the time came to put on Prospect.2, grants had fallen through and the rough economy made fund-raising possibilities bleak. The solution is Prospect.1.5, a scaled-down, more recession-friendly version of the original, opening Nov. 6.

The 15-week show, featuring 50 artists in a dozen venues across the city, is “really on the cheap,” said Dan Cameron, the exhibition's founding director. The show won't even have a catalog and will cost “between \$15,000 and \$20,000” to put on, he said.

Last year, 80% of the artists were from outside Louisiana. This year, that same percentage have New Orleans ties. “Fresh off the Turnip Truck,” for example, an exhibition in the French Quarter, will exclusively feature artists who recently moved to New Orleans.

Among them is Justin Faunce. His paintings critique American consumerism and celebrity obsession. “There's

an undercurrent of malevolence,” said Elizabeth Balogh, director of Leo Koenig in Manhattan, the gallery representing Mr. Faunce. In 2007, his “Pictophilia” sold for \$275,000.

“The Angola Project” will feature works by prisoners from Angola State Penitentiary next to those of artists such as Deborah Luster, who began photographing prisoners throughout Louisiana as a means of coping with her mother's murder.

In the St. Claude art district, conceptual artist Stephen Collier will display several collages, and New York multimedia artist Rashaad Newsome, who showed two videos at the 2010 Whitney Biennial based on the dance practice of voguing, will present “Shade Compositions, 2009.” The artist says “Shade,” a 21-minute video involving a Wii remote, aims to take the sassy gesticulations associated with black and Latino women and turn them into “a contemporary piece of music.”

Beth Dary, who created an installation of glass bubbles in a lily pool at Manhattan's Battery Park City, will show an indoor installation of tiny porcelain sculptures. Daphne Loney, a New Orleans-based sculptor inspired by fairy tales, will display a realistic, 6½-foot representation of a stuffed grizzly bear (complete with fake fur and plastic claws) hovering over a unicorn it has just killed.

—Katherine Bindley



A DETAIL, top left, of 'One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana,' by Deborah Luster; top right, Stephen Collier's 'Untitled (Pink and Green Army),' Above, 'Equilibrium,' by a third Prospect.1.5 artist, Beth Dary.

most important element began in all. In the 10 years before we came into office, the district had gone through six school chiefs.

At Susan Middle School, in one of the most impoverished wards of the city, fewer than 10% of the students could read and do math at grade level. The lights were broken, and graffiti covered the walls. Kids ran through the hallways and skipped classes with impunity. The federal government had flagged it as a failing school in the highest state of alert under No Child Left Behind, in need of a complete overhaul.

For years, elected officials had prom-

ised we were better pointing our fingers. It wasn't that our predecessors were incompetent, or that we were the smart ones who had all the answers. Far from it.

But the political structure wasn't set up for a mayor and a school chancellor even to make the kinds of decisions that were necessary. Once that new structure of governance was in place (D.C. instituted mayoral control of the public schools in 2007), we were able to chart a new course to make all of the politically unpopular choices that had been put off for decades. With student achievement almost as low as it could go,

we began to see the problem differently. The great tragedy of the education debate in America is that most people know at least the basics of how to turn around our urban school systems. It does not take a rocket scientist to figure out that underperforming teachers will not produce a new generation of rocket scientists. Or that you're not setting up hard-working teachers for success when you don't pay them on time or give the kids a functioning air conditioner when it's 100 degrees inside and they are expected to focus on physics. It's also no secret that some principals perform brilliantly while others lack the

talent to do the job, let alone the benefit of the kids.

In September 2008, for example, we faced a significant challenge after a budget cut. To deal with the shortfall, the City Council had recommended that we cancel our summer school program. We knew, however, that getting rid of summer school would mean lower graduation rates and fewer students being on track academically. We looked at the numbers, and the school district was overstaffed for the number of students we served, with a teacher to student ratio of about 16-to-1. It is never easy when people lose their jobs, of course,

to not. Reenlisten,” across a set of empty and silent hearing. Hundreds of school districts across the country were laying off teachers at the time, but the union establishment protected its cause only in D.C., where for the first time someone dared to question an entrenched practice that had only served the interests of adults.

But the longest and most difficult of our fights was the effort to rebadge the district's teachers' contract. As in many other cities, D.C.'s contract tied the hands of principals, administrators and, yes, even teachers. Staff reductions at

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