



Dan Cameron at the "Prospect.1 New Orleans" press conference in 2008



Dan Tague
Night Boogie
2010
Jonathan Ferrara Gallery



Dan Tague
Limbo
2010
Jonathan Ferrara Gallery



Brian Borrello's *New Orleans Skyline*, a digital print made with "BP Deepwater Horizon oil"
Courtesy Jonathan Ferrara Gallery

BEATING HEART NEW ORLEANS by Ben Davis

This week marks the fifth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina's breach of the levees in New Orleans. As the region continues to struggle to recover from one of the most devastating storms in United States' history, it has been hit earlier this year by the "Deepwater Horizon" oil spill, widely believed to be one of the worst environmental disasters of all time.

Two years ago, curator Dan Cameron launched the Prospect.1. New Orleans Biennial with the specific goal of using art to help with recovery and redevelopment of the city [see "Bleeding-Heart Biennale," Nov. 10, 2008]. After some funding delays, Prospect.2. New Orleans is now scheduled for 2011. In the wake of the BP catastrophe, Cameron penned an [open letter](#) declaring his belief in the continued importance of art and creativity to the city's economic future. He has also continued to comment on the situation on the [Prospect. New Orleans blog](#).

Artnet Magazine recently asked Cameron for some further reflections on the ways that artists were responding to the tragedy, and how it would affect his own curatorial project.

Ben Davis: How do you think the oil disaster will affect the upcoming New Orleans biennial? It seems like it would inevitably become a centerpiece, the way Katrina became an important reference for the first biennial. Does it influence the way you organize the show?

Dan Cameron: I actually see the two chapters quite differently. With Katrina, the monumental loss of life set the stage for something that art has always been very good at: memorials and tributes. That's a little different than artists taking aim at BP for its responsibility for the catastrophe. There, they need to have a topical political focus and a conceptually based practice, which not that many artists have.

As to your second question, it was never my intention for artists to make art about Katrina -- they took that upon themselves, and I think the 20 or so projects that referenced the disaster each had a distinct point of view. That makes my job easier, not harder.

BD: Are any artistic responses to the current spill exemplary? How are artists coping? How does the spill affect the art scene in New Orleans -- I presume that galleries and other businesses are suffering from the drop in tourism? On the other hand, it does also put the spotlight on the region once again.

DC: The current situation impacts everyone in



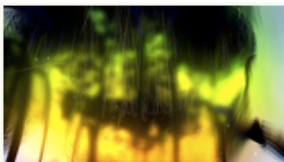
Brian Borrello
Marsh Grass
2010
Jonathan Ferrara Gallery



Ralph Bourque
Cobra and the Mongoose
2009
Jonathan Ferrara Gallery



David Sullivan
Sunset Refinery [still]
2008



David Sullivan
Sunset Refinery [still]
2008

New Orleans, and in that sense it does have an unsettling resemblance to Katrina. It has also been agony for the artists, who struggle everywhere for some stability, but even more so in New Orleans.

New Orleans artists are responding, of course. Dan Tague, whose work is more political, is going full force at BP and big oil as a target, while Brian Borrello has made a series of drawings using crude oil instead of ink. Especially interesting to me is the work of Ralph Bourque, whose 2007 "Dark Animals" drawings now look oil-soaked. Another example is **David Sullivan's** 2008 video *Sunset Refinery*, which examines the role of petroleum-based pollution in providing south Louisiana with its beautiful sunsets.

Galleries in New Orleans tend not to be tourist-dependent, so there's not such a big dent there, but I think everybody would gladly trade all this newfound visibility for a clean coastline

BD: You have written eloquently about what draws you to New Orleans. Do you have any personal thoughts about the meaning for the city of the spill?

DC: My ongoing thoughts have to do with the fragility of the city. Five years ago the world was jolted by the twin revelations that levee maintenance for New Orleans was shoddy beyond belief, and that FEMA had been so gutted by the Bush administration as to be totally ineffectual, which led to a disaster of incomprehensible proportions.

Today, in the wake of the worst oil spill in the nation's history, we look at government safeguards for deepwater drilling, and realize that for many years the U.S. Department of Interior was rubber-stamping every request and ignoring all safety violations, and that as a result the coast has now been fouled, and the shellfish market decimated (shrimp and oysters are, of course, two staples of the unique New Orleans cuisine).

As a result, I'm somewhat hopeful that, in people's minds, the immense cultural value of New Orleans is now permanently linked with its precariousness and the need to protect it, in a way that's not applicable to any other city in the U.S.

BEN DAVIS is associate editor of *Artnet Magazine*.