The Persistent Vision and
Voices of Artists

Given the upheaval of 2017, it comes as no surprise that the dominant themes to emerge from this year's Prospect New Orleans are compassion, resistance and activism. Isolde Brielmaier investigates the genesis of the vast exhibition and its transformative messages.
Sack in early 2016, when Trevor Schoonmaker, artistic director of Prospect.4, began to consider themes for the fourth iteration of the citywide exhibition Prospect New Orleans (which opened on November 18 and runs through February 25, 2018), there were a plethora to choose from. At the time, the United States was in the midst of primary elections, with multiple candidates waging increasingly bitter, divisive campaigns. The devastating violence in Syria was full blown, and the violence against people of color in U.S. cities like Ferguson and Charleston was erupting with what seemed like regularity. There was a sense that our vision of life and humanity was blurred, if not lost. Many felt that there was no way out.

Times then were tense, painful, and urgent, and as Schoonmaker took in the state of things both locally and globally, he very much believed that amidst all the chaos, people could be and were remarkable at self-preservation and at working toward the preservation of others. It was in this moment of reflection that he recalled jazz saxophonist Archie Shepp’s poignant reference to jazz as a lily that persists “in spite of the swamp” that often surrounds it, suggesting that we might overcome difficult circumstances. Schoonmaker then adapted this idea to encompass a global perspective by replacing the lily with the lotus—a similarly beautiful flower that possesses the amazing ability to flourish in a seemingly inhospitable environment, but also a symbol of spiritual enlightened in much of the world.

A concept and title for Prospect.4 was born—“The Lotus in Spite of the Swamp”—and from there Schoonmaker compiled a broad-evolving list of artists from around the world it is worth noting that this may be the most diverse Prospect New Orleans yet, artists whom he believed had not only connections and relevance to the city, but also a gift for envisioning for us a world that is calmer, kinder and more caring. “Artists see the world differently,” he explains. “They don’t accept the status quo, and we need their voices and vision right at this moment to help us find a way out, to try and find an avenue out of this mess.” With this in mind, the curator has struck an important balance, for while many of the exhibition’s artists have chosen to present works that convey an abundance of compassion, others offer art that is more hard-hitting and expresses resistance as well as critique.

A year after Schoonmaker sketched out his ideas for Prospect.4, the state of the world feels (frighteningly) much the same. Yet he might also point out that we are still here and carrying on despite the difficulties faced by so many. Accordingly, the artist he has selected challenge us not only to confront our past and engage our present, but also to find a way in which each of us can positively impact the future. Have You Seen the Horizon Lately?, Yoko Ono’s late-’60s piece featuring black text on a white background, delivers a sublime message about finding serenity and calm in the midst of chaos. Kara Walker, whose art often has a biting and satirical tone, has created a new kind of work: a riverboat calliope playing an entire soundtrack (developed with MacArthur Fellowship-winning text pianist Jason Moran) as it coasts past Algiers Point, the site where slaves were held after they first arrived in New Orleans.
The video is created from artist三方的 three-channel footage and surveys New Orleans as a site of jazz innovation and the ways in which music, Native American, and Caribbean culture coexist. It also includes the work of a young Trinidadian artist, who has been described as a "new" in his country's history. The video offers a wide range of perspectives and points of view on the city. Some are positive, while others take a darker view. The message here is clear: musical innovation can come from anywhere.

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For example, the young Trinidadian artist, who has been described as a "new" in his country's history, offers a fresh perspective on the city. His work has been described as "radical" and "influential," and it has been shown in several major exhibitions. The video offers a wide range of perspectives and points of view on the city. Some are positive, while others take a darker view. The message here is clear: musical innovation can come from anywhere.

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