“THE LOTUS IN SPITE OF THE SWAMP”

INTERNATIONAL CONTEMPORARY ART COMES TO NEW ORLEANS

BY JOHN R. KEMP
“PHOTO BLOKE,” 2016, BY BARKLEY HENDRICKS OF NEW LONDON, CT
ew Orleans is a city that celebrates creative souls and its place in the American psyche. It revels in its own history, real and imagined, and thinks of itself as a place like none other in North America. The existentialist novelist Walker Percy once described the city, his adopted hometown, as an island “cut adrift not only from the South but from the rest of Louisiana, somewhat like Mont Saint-Michel awash at high tide.”

Percy’s New Orleans, with its graceful patina of age, cultural history, architecture and almost smothering humid floral landscape, is a natural open-air art gallery. With that in mind, Prospect New Orleans has launched this year’s international contemporary art triennial “Prospect.4: The Lotus in Spite of the Swamp.”

The citywide art show, which runs November 18 to February 25 and is free to the public, explores the city’s creative spirit in the visual and performing arts and its historical connections to Africa, the Caribbean and Europe. Billied as one the nation’s largest triennial art exhibitions, Prospect.4 features artwork by 73 local, national and international artists from 25 countries in North America, Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa, Asia, and Europe. New Orleans-area artists included in the Prospect.4 line up are Wayne Gonzales, Darryl Montana, Jennifer Odem, Quintron and Miss Pussycat, John T. Scott, Michel Varisco, Monique Verdin, and jazz legend Louis Armstrong. Yes, in addition to blowing a mean horn, Armstrong was also a talented visual artist.

The guiding intellectual force and artistic director behind P.4, as it is generally called, is Trevor Schoonmaker, chief curator of the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, and a member of the board of directors for the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts in New York. Schoonmaker’s credentials in contemporary art in the South are solid. In 2016, he co-curated an exhibition called “Southern Accent: Seeking the American South in Contemporary Art” at Duke University with Miranda Lash, the contemporary art curator at the Speed Art Museum in Louisville, Kentucky, and former curator of contemporary and modern art at the New Orleans Museum of Art. Lash along with six other international artists and curators served on Schoonmaker’s council that helped recommend artists for P.4.

Schoonmaker could not have chosen a more appropriate concept for an art show in a city surrounded by swamps and still recovering from Hurricane Katrina. Despite the obvious implications and imagery of the lotus and the swamp, he says the underlying theme is more complex.

LOTUS AS A SYMBOL

“The lotus in spite of the swamp is evocative of the natural landscape of New Orleans, but it isn’t intended to be a direct metaphor for the city,” he says. “Rather, it speaks more broadly to the tumultuous state of the world today, rife with cultural, social and political tensions. The lotus is viewed as a symbol of spiritual enlightenment in Buddhism and Hinduism. As its beautiful bloom flourishes above the nutrient-rich, but fetid, muddy water, the lotus flower suggests the possibility of rising above trying circumstances, both as individuals and as a society.”

The “lotus” subtitle is based on a 1970 quote from famed jazz saxophonist and composer Archie Shepp who described jazz as “a symbol of the triumph of the human spirit, not its degradation. It is a lily in spite of the swamp.”

That brought the metaphor home. “The triennial’s title provides the primary connective tissue for Prospect 4,” says Schoonmaker.
“ACT OF RECOVERY (PART 1), NOUAKCHOTT, MAURITANIA,” 2016, BY DEWITT PETROS OF NEW YORK
“CATHEDRAL,” 2003, WOODCUT PRINT BY JOHN SCOTT, COURTESY OF ARTHUR ROGER GALLERY
“Some specific themes and subjects that individual artists investigate are the environment, specifically marine or river ecology, social justice, cultural hybridity, identity, displacement, colonialism and music.”

Understanding New Orleans, Schoonmaker says, is like peeling away the layers of an onion. “I am referring to the cultural complexity of the city of New Orleans itself,” he says. “It has such a diverse and complicated history, with rich, esoteric cultural traditions that only insiders specific to those social groups know the details of. That makes for very fertile soil for artists to mine.” He goes on to say that the “tropical, wetlands ecology, colonial history and racial and economic inequity are realities of New Orleans that connect it to the Global South.”

That layered, cultural complexity has inspired a triennial unlike any other. “In most biennials and triennials,” the North Carolina curator says, “the connection between the exhibition and the city is far more tenuous and the artistic director spends much less time on the ground. But New Orleans is a special place and Prospect was conceived and created differently than most triennials. In this particular case, I have been coming to New Orleans since 1994, so I have some prior familiarity that is helpful. Perhaps even more importantly, my professional and personal interests and experience happen to be well aligned with the city. I have lived in West Africa and Europe and I am also a southerner.”

SPECIAL EXHIBITS
In addition to the 73 artists featured in this year’s triennial, P.4 is also working with the local art community to organize special exhibitions and events to run concurrently with the 14-week triennial. Grouped under the title of “P.S. Satellites,” 50-plus local photographers, painters, sculptors and others have signed up to show their work in locations that run the gamut from traditional art galleries and art collectives to almost every conceivable alternative space. The same was done in all three previous Prospect New Orleans biennials and to great success. Gallery-goers got to see some of the best contemporary art being created in the region.

P.4 and P.S. Satellites are great opportunities for local artists to show their work to an international audience, says New Orleans photographer Michel Varisco, whose work is included in P.4. “It’s an honor to be included in this international triennial,” she says. “It not only heightens the visibility of the work with curators and institutions from around the globe, but more importantly it allows our stories of place to be taken further – stories about an endangered land and culture that are vital stories in these times. I think what’s resonating with Schoonmaker are works that touch on social and environmental consequence, and this makes for an interesting and compelling show, and perhaps even more if it moves viewers deeply enough.”

Prospect New Orleans is all about showcasing New Orleans to the world as an important center for contemporary art. The concept began back in 2006 when the internationally acclaimed art curator Dan Cameron, a veteran of international biennials in Taipei and Istanbul and later a member of the New Orleans Contemporary Art Center’s staff, made one of his many visits to New Orleans and saw that a citywide contemporary art biennial was just the morale booster the city needed to help recover from Hurricane Katrina. With financial backing from philanthropist Toby Devan Lewis, Cameron launched Prospect New Orleans in 2007. Prospect.1 opened the following year to rave national reviews.

According to Prospect New Orleans reports, Prospect.1
attracted approximately 88,000 visitors to the city and infused over $23 million into the local economy. It also gave New Orleans much needed positive international press coverage. With that success under its belt, Prospect New Orleans opened offices in New York and New Orleans. At the end of P.3 in early 2015, however, Prospect officials closed the New York location and consolidated all operations in New Orleans. They also changed the biennial to a triennial to give organizers more time to plan. P.4 officials now hope the turnout for this year’s event will exceed P.1 numbers as well as the estimated 72,000 local and international visitors for P.2 in 2011 and the 100,000 for P.3 in 2014.

Numbers aside, stalwart visitors to P.4 will see not only remarkable intellectually charged and often challenging contemporary art from around the globe but also visually rich and often surreal venues in the city’s earliest neighborhoods. Unlike earlier Prospect biennial sites that were spread across the city from the Lower 9th Ward to Audubon Park, P.4 has concentrated locations to make them more convenient and easier to find. The 17 sites are located mainly in the French Quarter, Central City, Algiers Point, and in the Marigny and Bywater neighborhoods.

**PRAYER WHEELS**

Examples of works along the P.4 trail are Varisco’s Tibetan-inspired “Prayer Wheels for the Mississippi River” located on the Lafitte Greenway, and the late New Orleans artist John Scott’s remarkable woodcut print “Cathedral” at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art on Camp St. Others include Brooklyn-artist Derrick Adams’s multi-media installation on the Riverfront Streetcar and the Nigeria-born Philadelphia artist Odili Donald Odita’s installation on the Algiers Ferry. According to P.4 organizers, Odita’s work is part of a citywide project that includes custom flags that work “the theme of stars and stripes, while using his trademark sense of form, color, and space to investigate cultural differences and ideas of exclusion and inclusivity within America.” Located at Algiers Point is New York artist Mark Dion’s “Field Station for a Melancholy Marine Biologist,” an art installation that explores the ecology of the Mississippi River and delta. Others not to miss are Louis Armstrong’s collages along with artworks by artist and jazz musician Satch Hoyt, and Big Chief Darryl Montana. All three are located at the New Orleans Jazz Museum in the Old U.S. Mint on Esplanade Avenue. When the show ends in February, all of the art will be returned to the artists, galleries and owners. Prospect New Orleans biennials and triennials also give locals an opportunity to see what social, cultural and environmental issues are driving contemporary artists in New Orleans and in other parts of the world. P.4 media-relations coordinator Andrew Freeman says almost half of the art was created specifically for the triennial. Thirty-two of the 73 artists came to New Orleans to examine the sites where their artworks will be shown. Other artists in the triennial were already creating work that complemented the subtitle of this year’s theme – “The Lotus in spite of the Swamp.”

Though much of the artwork was created specifically for the triennial and some inspired by New Orleans, not all are about the city. “Neither I nor the artists of P.4 desire or intend to speak for the city and people of New Orleans,” Schoonmaker says. “The artists draw on their own experiences to enhance connections and parallels between New Orleans and the rest of the world. These may be visual, conceptual, social, historical or cultural. To that extent, I have selected artists from around the world whose work I feel will resonate within the city of New Orleans by way of their artistic process, subject matter or materials. New Orleans has such a unique cultural hybridity that is evidenced in its customs, food, music, architecture, language, and spirituality. I want artists’ work to feel at home in that context, regardless of its origin. The artists I have selected possess a sensibility and sensitivity that hopefully lends itself to that. Their connections to other regions and cultures around the world may enable people to see themselves in someone or someplace else.”

Prospect 4 is also Schoonmaker’s nod to the city’s upcoming Tricentennial celebrations, marking the founding of New Orleans in 1718 by the French. He also kept that in mind while selecting artists. “To help enhance historical and cultural connections to New Orleans and the Tricentennial,” he says, “I’ve invited artists primarily from the Americas, Africa and Europe. Some of them are mining New Orleans culture specifically, but more are drawing parallels to other cultures around the world.”

In preparing himself for Prospect.4, Schoonmaker spent months immersing himself in everything New Orleans. He read books and articles, listened to music, watched documentaries and visited the city’s various neighborhoods, talking with residents and soaking up New Orleans’ rich cultural traditions. Curating Prospect 4, he says, “has given me the opportunity to explore New Orleans and the surrounding area in remarkable ways that I probably could or would not have otherwise. For instance, I spent Fat Tuesday with the Yellow Pocahontas Mardi Gras Indians and the Skull and Bones Gang. And I took an all-day tour of the wetlands down around Venice with a local fisherman turned environmentalist. That is just two examples, of which there are many.”

As a result, two other New Orleans traditions – music and food – play into Prospect.4’s overall theme. “Music and food are such visceral and frequently communal experiences,” Schoonmaker says. “They really get right to the heart of a culture, revealing its temperament and influences. Perhaps nothing defines New Orleans more than its food and music, so I invited several artists who have worked with music and food in their prior work.”

As Schoonmaker learned while organizing P.4, New Orleans is indeed culturally and spiritually very much like Archie Shepp’s description of jazz. New Orleans is “a symbol of the triumph of the human spirit” and a “a lily in spite of the swamp.” It is Percy’s “Mont Saint-Michel.”

For more information visit ProspectNewOrleans.org.