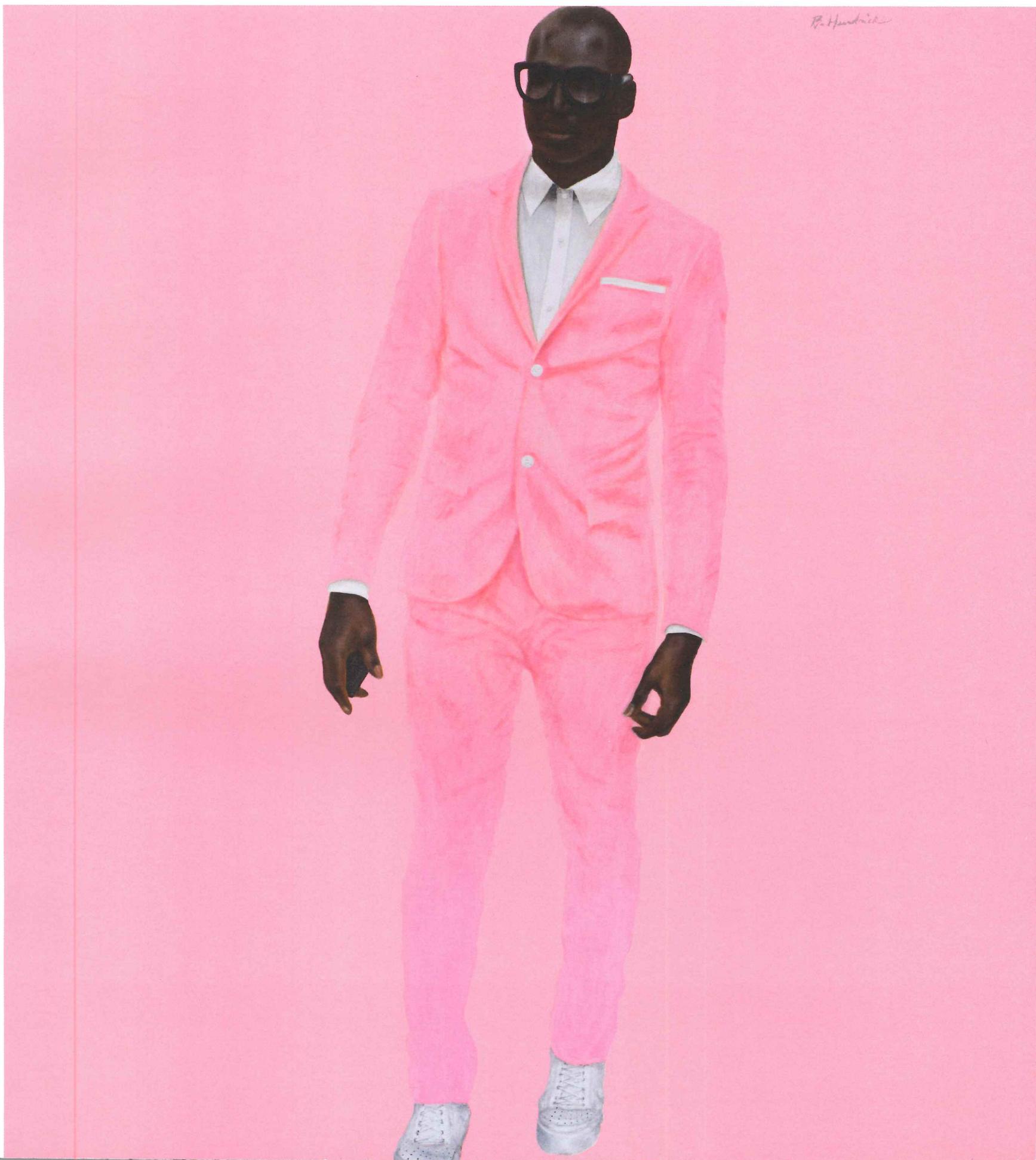


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The Persistent Vision and

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.

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Back 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 enlightenment 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-reaching 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 artists 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 eerie soundtrack (developed with MacArthur Fellowship-winning jazz pianist Jason Moran) as it coasts past Algiers Point, the site where slaves were held after they first arrived in New Orleans.

New work has been commissioned from artist John Akomfrah, who presents a three-channel installation that relies on archival footage and actors to investigate the idea of New Orleans as a Creole city. Akomfrah is reimagining the story of Buddy Bolden, one of the originators of jazz in the early years of the 20th century, and the ways in which the cultures of Africans, Europeans, Native Americans, South Americans and Caribbeans have shaped the city. Prospect.4 also includes a tribute to the artist Barkley L. Hendricks, who passed away earlier this year, with 12 of his rarely seen portraits (created between 1970 and 2016) memorializing everyday black men and women in the ornate manner of old masters.

The artists of Prospect.4 use a wide range of materials to articulate their various views on art-making and the state of the world. Some are straightforward in their message, while others take a more subtle approach in engaging ideas such as transculturalism, internationalism, racial tension, culture, poverty and power. Half the message here is conveyed by who the artists themselves are: The vast majority are people of color. "Changing the demographic of representation directly affects the presentation, and herein we are already making an impact," Schoonmaker states. One could say that this critical objective, which has been an integral part of Schoonmaker's practice over the past two and a half decades, also offers many more points of entry for the diverse audience members who will see and live with the art over the course of Prospect.4's three months. And with this comes the possibility of shifting many of our perspectives on art, life and the world around us. prospectneworleans.org •

Some of the works on view as part of Prospect.4: "The Lotus in Spite of the Swamp." Previous page: Barkley L. Hendricks, *Photo Bloke*, 2016. This page: Louis Armstrong, *Gems from Buenos*, c. 1960. Opposite page, top row: Jon-Sesrie Goff, *Site of Reckoning: Battlefield*, 2016; Sonia Boyce, *Stilt Walker, Harewood House, England*, 2007. Second row: Yoko Ono, *Have You Seen the Horizon Lately?*, 1967/1997; Tita Salina, *1001st Island - The Most Sustainable Island in Archipelago*, 2015; Kiluanji Kia Henda, *Redefining the Power*

(with Didi Fernandes), 2011. Third row: Kara Walker, *Maquette for The Katastwóf Karavan*, 2017; Cauleen Smith, *EGUNGUN*, 2017; Katherine Bradford, *Five Moons*, 2012-2014. Fourth row: Genevieve Gaignard, *White Rain*, 2017; Maria Berrio, *Wildflowers*, 2017; Njideka Akunyili Crosby, "The Beautiful Ones" Series #1c, 2014. Fifth row: Dawit Petros, *Act of Recovery (Part I)*, *Nouakchott, Mauritania from The Stranger's Notebook*, 2016; John Akomfrah, *Precarity*, 2017.

