

The New York Times

In Prospect New Orleans, a Curator Guides 73 Artists Toward Higher Ground

Trevor Schoonmaker turns the Big Easy into a giant gallery, with Rashid Johnson, Njideka Akunyili Crosby, Mark Dion and more across 17 venues.

By Ted Loos
November 23, 2017

NEW ORLEANS — Trevor Schoonmaker was hopping in and out of Uber cars recently as he raced around this soulful Southern city helping artists finalize works for the fourth edition of [Prospect New Orleans](#), which has turned the entire city into a giant multicultural gallery.

“The installation is the best part — you’ve been talking about the work for so long, and you’re finally seeing it in person,” said Mr. Schoonmaker, the sneaker-clad artistic director of the exhibition, titled “Prospect.4: The Lotus in Spite of the Swamp,” on view through Feb. 25.

He has been commuting from his day job — that of chief curator at the [Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University](#), in Durham, N.C.

At one stop, Mr. Schoonmaker was helping hang some of [Genevieve Gaignard’s](#) photographic self-portraits at the [Ace Hotel New Orleans](#), where she is presenting work that meditates on race, beauty and cultural identity.

The curator held up one image to the wall, featuring the artist confronting the viewer with her gaze, turned to Ms. Gaignard and lifted his eyebrows to say, “How about here?”

“It’s a watery show,” he said of his concept for “Prospect.4,” which spreads the work of 73 artists across 17 venues and includes [Rashid Johnson](#), [Hank Willis Thomas](#), [Njideka Akunyili Crosby](#) and even the jazz legend Louis Armstrong (represented by his [collages](#)). Most of Prospect’s \$3.8 million budget comes from local and national foundations, and it’s expected to draw more than 100,000 visitors.

New Orleans, which will mark its 300th anniversary in 2018, has thrived from its location where the Mississippi River meets the Gulf of Mexico, but is [also battered by hurricanes and floods and breaking levees](#). The same waters that have fed commerce also brought slave ships from Africa.

moniquemeloche

451 N Paulina Street, Chicago 60622
312 243 2129 moniquemeloche.com



Genevieve Gagnard with her installation “Grassroots” at the Ace Hotel in the Warehouse District of New Orleans.
William Widmer for The New York Times

So Mr. Schoonmaker’s focus is Atlantic-centric, looking at New Orleans as a nexus of cultures, with work primarily from the United States, Europe, Africa, the Caribbean and Latin America.



Photographs are part of Ms. Gagnard’s meditation on race and beauty.
William Widmer for The New York Times

“The crux of it is the lotus that grows from a fetid, yucky swamp that is also nutrient rich,” Mr. Schoonmaker said. “You can’t have the good without the bad.”

“It’s such a great metaphor for being able to rise above trying circumstances,” he added.

Having lost overall population and remaining mired in economic inequality along racial lines, New Orleans [still grapples with the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.](#)

Prospect, too, has faced trying times. Its lauded debut in 2008 — organized by the curator [Dan Cameron](#) to buoy the city — and the long-delayed “Prospect.2” in 2011 ended up in the red financially.

With “Prospect.3” in 2014, the event stabilized and morphed from a biennial to a triennial, but it does not have a permanent executive director at present.

“I still think they struggle for resources, but they are on a lot firmer ground than they ever have been,” said Amy Mackie, who runs [Parse NOLA](#), a nonprofit curatorial residency here.

Then there was a last-minute hiccup earlier this month, when [Kara Walker](#), one of the biggest names in “Prospect.4,” had to postpone her piece, “[Kataswof Karavan](#),” until the closing weekend of the show because of the work’s complexity and scale.

Not that viewers will lack for art to see. Mr. Schoonmaker presents dense concentrations of work in four locations: the [New Orleans Museum of Art](#) within City Park; the [Ogden Museum of Southern Art](#) and the Contemporary Arts Center New Orleans, both in the Warehouse District; and the New Orleans Jazz Museum at the Old U.S. Mint, in the historic French Quarter.

At the Contemporary Arts Center, the artistic duo Ellen Gallagher and Edgar Cleijne were puzzling out exactly how to present “Highway Gothic,” which encompasses a series of cyanotype banners printed on 70 millimeter film — with images of crayfish and catfish — and a movie. (The title refers to an official typeface on road signs.)

“I want to drink in this color!” Ms. Gallagher exclaimed as she laid out some of the bright blue banners on the floor. She and Mr. Cleijne set about to explore the displacement of both people and animals caused by the construction of [Interstate 10](#), the cross-country freeway that slices through New Orleans and the Atchafalaya Swamp, an enormous wetland, to the west.

Ms. Gallagher called the work an example of magic realism, a story about the highway “as a sick child,” she said. “It registers all the characters that move across it, from the swamp to the city.”

The duo — based in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, and Red Hook, Brooklyn — lived on a houseboat in a swamp for a few weeks as they filmed, and Mr. Cleijne had a short take on the experience: “It was a bit scary.”

There are two projects right on the banks of the Mississippi itself: [Jennifer Odem’s “Rising Tables”](#) in Crescent Park and, across the river at Algiers Point, [Mark Dion’s “Field Station for the Melancholy Marine Biologist.”](#)

Ms. Odem’s piece is a series of antique tables stacked from biggest to smallest at the top.

“It’s about reaching higher ground and stacking for survival,” Ms. Odem, a New Orleans native, said as she looked out at the tankers passing behind her tables. As the water rises seasonally, she added, “The river completes the piece.” Reactions have varied: Passers-by have thought she was selling the tables or drying them out after a refinishing.

Across the way, Mr. Dion, whose art installations have scientific premises, was painting the inside of a cabin, a temporary structure meant to look venerable, clad in weathered boards and placed on an existing concrete foundation. Its location is the batture, the area between the river and the levee.

“Locals know that no sane person would build here,” Mr. Dion said. “So it must be an artwork. They’re probably hoping it’s a new barbecue joint.”

The artwork’s imagined resident, a scientist, is melancholy because he is “watching the Gulf disappear in front of us, as we all are,” Mr. Dion said. “We have this spectacle of ecosystem collapse. It’s like watching a train wreck in slow motion.” As if on cue, a mournful ship’s horn sounded.

Race is one of the crucial fault lines for the work in “Prospect.4,” as it is in the larger contemporary art scene.

Ms. Gagnard, who lives and works in Los Angeles, talked about how she stars in her own photographs, as she installed the show, titled “Grassroots,” in the Ace Hotel.

“My mom is white, and my dad is black — I can pass as white, but it’s not my full story,” she said, noting that her father was from New Orleans. Her installation transforms two adjacent gallery spaces, one with 19th-century furniture and old-fashioned wallpaper and another with church pews. The photographs include [“Trailblazer \(A Dream Deferred\),”](#) with Ms. Gagnard dressed in an antebellum-era bustle dress.

Mr. Schoonmaker said that Ms. Gagnard was among the artists who could break out to larger fame based on her Prospect work. “Much like Cindy Sherman, she’s a shape shifter,” he said. “Except that she’s a race shifter.”

But is a white curator like Mr. Schoonmaker the right person to tackle such issues, especially in New Orleans, where the population is some [60 percent](#) black?

“It’s a fair question,” said Mr. Schoonmaker, who specialized in African art in graduate school and has organized several shows on colonialism and race. He was the curator of [“Wangechi Mutu: A Fantastic Journey,”](#) the African-born artist’s first American survey, which traveled to the Brooklyn Museum in 2013; and [“Barkley L. Hendricks: Birth of the Cool”](#) (2008). He also edited the book “Fela: From West Africa to West Broadway.”

“I bring voices to the table,” he added.

Mr. Schoonmaker noted that the water theme may have come from a personal wellspring:

his North Carolina childhood. “Maybe some of that is just me pouring out my love for the water, growing up around it and fishing and boating,” he said.

The Berlin-based artist Satch Hoyt, whose art addresses how African sounds change as they spread, has worked with Mr. Schoonmaker on three shows previously.

“Trevor is the type of curator who does a massive amount of research — he doesn’t come into town and plunk something down,” Mr. Hoyt said.

His sculpture “Splash, Ride, Crash” is made from 216 cymbals, each representing a musician of the African diaspora. That work is on view at the New Orleans Jazz Museum, as is “Fiend,” a piece by the New York-based artist Rashid Johnson. “Fiend” looks like a large, blocky piece of furniture but is in fact an interactive sound piece.

“It’s a microphone,” Mr. Johnson said. “The performer has to perform to the monolith, to the object. Imagine if you were singing to a Sol LeWitt and it could amplify your voice.” The metaphor, Mr. Johnson said, was that of speaking out: “Through social media and protest, you see people trying to make sure their voices are heard.”

Curators have to sift through many voices to create international exhibitions. It can be cacophonous at times. Even Mr. Hoyt, who is featured in such shows, said, “Every time I hear of a new biennial I think, ‘Not another one!’” So the leadership of such exhibitions matters to ensure that they remain distinct and necessary.

“I think Trevor can see the forest through the trees, and he’s not subject to what’s popular,” Mr. Johnson said.

“Art has the ability to heal,” he added. But he didn’t think the speaking-up metaphor of “Fiend,” or the rest of Mr. Schoonmaker’s lineup, was going to heal the city’s wounds tomorrow.

“It’s not a social service,” Mr. Johnson said. “My practice has a more philosophical ambition. And over time those ideas may inform practical outcomes.”