

NEW ORLEANS REPORT

DELIVERANCE: THE BIENNIAL

BY LILLY WEI

Billed as the largest international biennial in the U.S., "Prospect.1," the first in a series headed by veteran curator Dan Cameron, brought scores of artists and myriad recovery projects to the still-battered town.



House on Dauphine Street spray painted by Katharina Grosse. Photos this article, unless otherwise noted, John d'Addario.

"PROSPECT.1" WAS DIFFERENT in spirit from other biennials, as Dan Cameron, its artistic director, rightly pointed out at the press conference that preceded its November opening. Buoyed by an urgent, utopian sense of mission--which also kept it more on-message than most events of this magnitude--the spectacle was conceived for the sake of a traumatized city. Cameron called New Orleans our Venice, but it might also be compared to flood-ravaged Florence, where in 1966 the world rushed in to help rescue countless historical treasures. Three years after Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans could still use similar aid. Enter Cameron, who has long been infatuated with the fabled Creole

city, marshaling a host of local, national and international artists--a New Orleans version of the Florentine "mud angels." Some 100,000 viewers were expected to attend the biennial over the 11 weeks of its run, from Nov. 1, 2008, through Jan. 18, 2009, making a sizable impact on the city's shaky economy. [As we go to press, a final tally is not yet available, although the 20,000-plus visitors for the first month clearly fell short of projections.] Indeed, "Prospect.1" was conceived as a stimulus package--art as a gesture of compassion, bringing fresh tourist dollars. Toward that end, a number of artists declined payment for production costs, enabling the

organizers, with a modest \$3.5-million budget, to mount a surprisingly ambitious multivenue exhibition. Legions of volunteers provided assistance at all levels, creating a community-based, cooperative venture. A veteran curator of international exhibitions, formerly at New York's New Museum, Cameron is also the director of visual arts at the Contemporary Arts Center (CAC) in New Orleans and a founder of U.S. Biennial, Inc., a nonprofit whose sole function is to produce New Orleans biennials. Cameron, who describes "Prospect.1" as the largest international biennial in the U.S., is already planning "Prospect.2" and has personally committed to at least five edi-

tions of the show, hoping to make the biennial as great a draw as the city's beloved Jazz Fest. The first installment featured 81 artists and collectives from 34 countries, with 10 participants (among them Willie Birch, Luis Cruz Azaceta and Roy Ferdinand, Jr.)--a very respectable 12 percent--hailing from Louisiana. Many of the artists, rather than making one more signature piece, produced site-specific works inspired by the special circumstances of New Orleans. The majority of the international artists were born outside the U.S. and Western Europe. Some are marquee names, such as William Kentridge (South Africa), Cai Guo-Qiang, Xu Bing (both China), Shirin Neshat (Iran),

Ghada Amer (Egypt) and El Anatsui (Ghana). But most, although fairly well-known, are not yet ubiquitous on the global circuit--and therefore all the more interesting. The event's 31 venues included museums, community art centers and alternative art spaces as well as churches, schools, abandoned lots and houses, warehouses, a furniture store (ideal for the large, hand-painted, homoerotic photographs of Paris-based Pierre et Gilles), a garage (sheltering New Orleans-born, New York-based Jacqueline Humphries's lovely abstract paintings, interspersed with black rectangles she painted directly on the brick walls) and even a funeral parlor that had become a perform-

ance center just a few days before the opening. One highlight, a collaboration between Thai artist Navin Rawanchaikul and Canadian artist Tyler Russell, developed from Rawanchaikul's Navin Party, an interactive website for anyone named Navin. Using work commissioned from Thai illustrators, the pair festooned the mortuary with posters commemorating the life of local favorite Narvin Kimball (whose first name sounds like Naahvin when said with a southern drawl), a New Orleans Preservation Hall Jazz Band musician who was evacuated after the flood and died in 2006 in South Carolina. The piece tied in with a raucous, massively attended jazz-funeral



Partial view of Mark Bradford's *Mithra*, 2008, salvaged plywood panels, 20 by 70 by 25 feet overall.

THE CITYWIDE SCATTER OF WORKS MOTIVATED TREKKERS TO SEE NOT ONLY THE ART BUT ALSO THE VARIOUSLY AFFECTED NEIGHBORHOODS.



Nari Ward: *Diamond Gym: Action Network*, 2008, steel frame, gym equipment and mixed mediums.

march held on Nov. 1.

While other biennials might prompt one to question the advisability of scattering work throughout a city, "Prospect.1" motivated trekkers to see not only the art but also the still recovering New Orleans, from neighborhoods more or less restored or never greatly damaged to districts that remain haunting in their near vacancy. The crippled Lower Ninth Ward, the area most devastated by Katrina, became ground zero for the biennial. There artists focused primarily on the loss and long-delayed reclamation of shelter, and on the complex history of the neighborhood. New Yorker Nari Ward planted his Diamond Gym: Action Network (2008) inside the newly restored Battle Ground Baptist Church on the presciently named Flood Street. Shaped

like a brilliant-cut diamond, the work's freestanding steel frame was filled with athletic equipment flanked by two walls, one mirrored, the other pinned with local announcements. These life-goes-on elements, presented within a jewel-shaped structure, constituted a symbol of self-reliance and strength, emphasizing the function of church and gym alike as sites of great community value. Nearby on Andry Street, Argentinian artist Leandro Erlich erected a window framed by a broken wall of fiberglass bricks thrust high, like a protest sign, on a slanted metal ladder. A surreal image of the storm's damages, the piece echoed the detached state of the smashed house next to it, offering an edgy contrast to the spanking new, beautifully designed, pastel-colored houses of Brad Pitt's

Make It Right project visible across the fields.

In the vicinity was New York artist Paul Villinski's FEMA-style trailer--more handsome, spacious and light-filled than the government models, minus the formaldehyde fumes that made them toxic. The dwelling has a geodesic skylight, a large window, an exterior wall that drops down as a platform, and a neatly compact bedroom and bathroom. Powered by solar panels, it generated enough energy to also light the house next to it. Villinski, who has spent much time in New Orleans throughout his life, conceived the mobile live/work studio in response to the displacement of New Orleans artists after Katrina. A sort of downsized, transportable Usonian house for the 21st century, it recalls other inventive shelter projects



View of Leandro Erlich's *Window and Ladder—Too Late for Help*, 2008, metal ladder, fiberglass brick wall and mixed mediums.



Above, Paul Villinski: *Emergency Response Studio*, 2008, trailer, solar- and wind-power systems, mixed mediums, approx. 37 by 25 by 19 feet. Photo courtesy Socrates Sculpture Park, Long Island City.

Left, Wangechi Mutu: *Mrs. Sarah's House*, 2008, wooden beams, lights and mixed mediums.



View of McCallum & Tarry's "The Evidence of Things Not Seen," 2008, installation of photo transfers on silk scrims over oils on canvas.

by Krzysztof Wodiczko, Andrea Zittel and Samuel Mockbee.

South African-born Robin Rhode refreshed an abandoned concrete public toilet, turning it into a meditation space by inserting into its floor a short stainless-steel pipe that spewed water up in a column, an activated Duchamp or a low-budget Olafur Eliasson. The L.A. artist Mark Bradford contributed one of the poster works of the biennial, a looming--but obviously unseaworthy--three-story ark made from plywood panels salvaged from the storm's debris. With shredded, faded notices still clinging to its surface, the craft was beached on Coffin Avenue (New Orleans street names have a fatalistic poetics of their own), going nowhere fast, like the Bush administration's rebuilding efforts.

New Orleans photographers Keith Calhoun and Chandra McCormick founded the nearby L9 Center for the Arts, an artist-sponsored community exhibition space, where they installed their own storm-salvaged photos documenting everyday life--punctuated by smiles and music--in the Lower

Ninth before the flood. They credit Bradford with discovering their work and helping to fund the center, one of several spontaneous collaborations that occurred during the course of this biennial, from the planning stage forward.

Across from the L9 Center, Nairobi-born, New York-based artist Wangechi Mutu constructed a house frame out of wooden beams. Strung with lights, it glimmered at night like an apparition. The work was erected on a recently laid foundation, the only part of a home-replacement project completed before the contractor vanished with the owner's money. Mutu, sympathetic to the plight of the exploited woman, Mrs. Sarah (the elderly widow of a celebrated New Orleans drummer), made a print edition to raise the \$120,000 needed to build her a new house.

Elsewhere, an exuberantly spray-painted real house glowed jubilantly yellow and bright orange in the sunlight on Dauphine Street, as did the bushes, grass and fence in front. Some viewers parsed German abstract painter Katharina Grosse's

flamelike palette as incendiary in intent, symbolically setting fire to one of the few intact houses in the area. Given the upbeat nature of Grosse's previous work, a more likely reading infers a purifying and illuminating motive, the bright paint serving as an agent of restoration.

Text-based works included Ghada Amer's circular metal armature at Common Ground Relief, a community-based organization for Katrina victims. Happily Ever After (2005) functioned as a trellis for honeysuckle and roses, with thin rods spelling out the title--which was criticized for unseemly optimism by those who missed the irony. On the corner of St. Claude Street and McShane Place stood Indiana-based Kay Rosen's bold red-and-yellow billboard, New Orleans (2005). Its large block type spelled out OHNOAH, southern, perhaps, for "oh no" and a shout-out to Noah, an earlier flood survivor whose name is echoed by NOAA (the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration), a vital source of storm advisories for coastal residents. Berlin-based Monica Bonvicini's huge

stainless-steel letters forming the word "DESIRE," a term associated with New Orleans in myriad ways, gleamed beckoningly from the roof of the New Orleans Museum of Art (NOMA).

At the New Orleans African American Museum--which occupies a lovely 1828-29 villa located in Treme, the oldest surviving African-American community in the country--artists examined galvanizing events that expose racial prejudice. Georgia-born, New York-based Rico Gatson's *Spirit, Myth, Ritual and Liberation* (2008), a DVD installation about the symbolic power of pop-cultural events, features footage (excerpted from the Maysles brothers' 1970 film *Gimme Shelter*) of Meredith Hunter--who remembers his name?--a young black man killed by Hell's Angels "security" guards at the Rolling

Stones' 1969 concert at Altamont. William Kentridge's eerily beautiful anamorphic film *What Will Come (has already come)*, 2007, critiques colonialism in Ethiopia. McCallum & Tarry, a husband-and-wife team from New York, installed 106 mug shots of protestors (including Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr.) arrested during the historic Montgomery, Ala., bus boycotts in 1955-56. Hung salon style and formally framed, the pictures--printed on silk scrim over matching oil-on-canvas portraits--grant due dignity to these pioneers of the Civil Rights movement.

The Lower Ninth Ward Village, another post-Katrina community organization, hosted Freeport-born, New York-based Janine Antoni, Superflex (a Danish artist collective) and the Portuguese artist Miguel Palma.

Palma's stylized version of a Higgins landing craft filled the cavernous main room, where a hydraulically created wave regularly washed over the boat in a simulated sea surge. The Higgins boat, conceived and built in great numbers in New Orleans, was used extensively in World War II. Because it was designed to transfer soldiers and



Sanford Biggers: *Blossom*, 2007, player piano, steel, resin, paint, silk leaves, earth.

equipment from sea to land and vice versa, Palma told reporters, he considers the Higgins a rescue vessel. One could see it as another updated ark.

The rambling Charles J. Colton School on St. Claude Avenue, a former middle school closed after Katrina--one chalkboard has a homework assignment dated 08.26.2005, the Friday before Katrina struck--housed works by Cai Guo-Qiang, Tatsuo Miyajima and Jose Damasceno as well as studios and workshops for collaborations, still

ongoing, between New Orleans artists and students. Colton plans to reopen in 2010 as a high school. At the massive, partially constructed Louisiana ArtWorks, a resident artists' facility slated for completion in 2009, biennial artists included Spain's Perejaume as well as New York-based Venezuelan artist Arturo Herrera, who painted



Above, partial view of Jackie Sumell and Herman Wallace's multipart installation *The House That Herman Built*, showing balsa wood model, 2007.

Right, Mardi Gras Indian suits, 1990-2008, created by Victor Harris.





View of Anne Deleporte's installation *Wall Painting: Editorial Blue*, 2008, newspapers and paint.

an enormous exterior mural showing two bent, elongated loops. The New Orleans Center for Creative Arts, a magnet high school, offered Bulgarian artist Nedko Solakov's classroom installation, a multimedia shaggy-dog story with an unwieldy title and much handwritten text scribbled on the walls. *A Recent Story with Ghosts, a Pair of High-Heeled Shoes, (a couple of floods) and Some Other Mischievous Acts* (2008) relates the fateful clash between two 13th-century rulers, one Bulgarian and one from Constantinople, whose angry ghosts cause both Katrina and a flood in Bulgaria. Also heavy on story were four ravishing videos from 2004-08 by

Shirin Neshat, shown at the Newcomb Art Gallery of Tulane University. The works are part of her series "Women without Men," based on the Shahrnush Parsipur novel, banned in Iran, with its linked narratives championing women.

AT THE MUSEUMS

The New Orleans Museum of Art presented several standout artists, including Victor Harris, founder and Big Chief of the FiYi-Yi, a tribe of Mardi Gras Indians, who created unique, dazzlingly colored, intricately patterned Mardi Gras suits and masks--replete with feathers, beads, sequins and rhinestones--that pay homage to the regalia's African

antecedents. New York-based video and performance artist Kalup Linzy, having delivered two electrifying biennial-opening vocal performances at Sweet Lorraine's, a well-known jazz club, was represented at NOMA by a kitschy, riveting send-up of a soap opera, *Keys to Our Hearts* (2008), a retro black-and-white video about race, gender and love's twists and turns.

The Old U.S. Mint's 12 installations were particularly satisfying. South African artist Zwelethu Mthethwa's large format, beautifully composed photographs from his ongoing "Common Ground" series depict the poverty of both Cape Town and New Orleans, with one location indistinguishable from the other. New York-based Sanford Biggers's *Blossom* (2007), a grand player piano pierced by a tree, tinkles out a version of Billie Holiday's signature ballad "Strange Fruit." In Corsica-born, New York-based Anne Deleporte's luminously blue-vaulted room, the color had been painted over newspapers in which pictures, often of artworks, tiny in relationship to the scale of the room, were left exposed. Louisiana artist Stephen G. Rhodes's timely, extravagantly disheveled multimedia installation conjured a post-election campaign headquarters, satirizing presidential politics and Disney World's Hall of Presidents. At the Contemporary Arts Center, Louisiana artist Shawne Major showed palatially scaled, sumptuously patterned, obsessively figured wall hangings that are influenced by the region's traditional arts. Referencing the elaborate suits of Victor Harris, the metallic weavings of El Anatsui, the plate paintings of Julian Schnabel and the Haitian-influenced beadings of fellow Louisianan Tina Girouard, Major transforms her tapestries' cheap, mass-produced decorations, small toys and other gewgaws into

dazzling elements of art.

Amsterdam-based Fiona Tan's slow, thoughtful video, *Island* (2008), about the vulnerability of the low-lying Netherlands, is an austere beautiful reminder of that country's physical kinship with New Orleans. London-based Isaac Julien was represented by his widely exhibited video *Baltimore, 2003* [see A.i.A., Mar. '04], although the more daring *Paradise Omeros, 2002* (probing bias against immigrants and gays), might have been a better choice. German-born, New York-based Josephine Meckseper showed her curiously appealing, homemade-looking documentary video *March for Peace, Justice and Democracy, 04/29/06, NYC (2006)*, filled with anti-Iraq-War protestors reminiscent of Vietnam-era marchers.



New Orleans-based Jackie Sumell and New Orleans-born Herman Wallace's special collaboration began with a question Sumell asked Wallace in a 2002 letter: "What kind of a house does a man who lives in a 6-

foot-by-9-foot cell for over 30 years dream of?" Wallace, a Black Panther, answered from Angola, the Louisiana State Penitentiary, where he has been confined--many think unjustly--for the past 34 years. The resulting multi-medium project comprises a replica of his cell and a model of

his dream house, its swimming pool graced by a lithe black panther blocked out in tile. New Orleans-based sculptor Skylar Fein's *Remember the UpStairs Lounge (2008)* was a sobering re-creation of a gay bar believed to have been deliberately set on fire in 1973, killing half of the customers. One might ask whether these--and several other projects in "Prospect.1"--meet a strict definition of art, but they are certainly germane to the racism and homophobia that continue to plague New Orleans and many other locales. On a more positive, even exhilarating note, South African-born, Berlin-based Candice Breitz set up a lively wall of 30 monitors, each with a Jamaican happily singing--against a royal blue backdrop--songs from Bob Marley's *Legend* album.

SATELLITE EVENTS

What would a biennial be without ancillary shows? "Prospect.1" spawned many, including two exhibitions at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art. One was a macabre but compelling series of photographs by Lexington, Va.-based Sally Mann, focusing on the decomposition of animal and human remains in nature. Meanwhile, New Orleans-born, New York-based Margaret Evangeline upped the wattage of a mini-retro-



Above and right, views of Mel Chin's fundraising endeavor *Operation Paydirt: Safehouse, 2008*. Photos this page, unless otherwise noted, Endotherm Labs. Right, photo KK Projects.

Top, Peter Nadin's installation *The First Mark, 2005*, pool of honey, ceramic sculptures, wall works of beeswax, animal fur and other natural materials.

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spective with several beguiling new abstractions done in glitter paint. Sally Heller, a New Orleans artist, was part of an outdoor sculpture show on Convention Center Boulevard, sponsored by the Joan Mitchell Foundation. Heller's *Scraphouse* (2008), an artificial tree with a house caught in its branches, utilized a patchwork of drum barrels and boards taken from old shotgun houses to recall the logic-defying hybrids created by the storm (cars under houses, boats in trees). Local galleries such as Jonathan Ferrara, Heriard-Cimino and Arthur Roger, all on Julia Street, opened shows by gallery artists to coincide with the biennial's launch. In addition, Arthur Roger's project space was devoted to a group exhibition called "Katrina: Catastrophe and Catharsis." The St. Claude and St. Roch area welcomed several alternative initiatives, including one from KK Projects, named for Kirsha Kaechele, its founder, and widely considered to be the most exciting gallery in New Orleans for its all-night events and smartly chosen exhibitions. Kaechele acquired several dilapidated shotgun houses along North Villere Street and has opened them up for site-specific installations and architectural interventions by local and international artists. A new video work by New York's Tony Oursler, featuring New Orleans inhabitants chanting, rapping and playing a harp, could be viewed through small peepholes drilled into the wall of a derelict store. Peter Nadin, also from New York, placed his ceramic sculptures in a shallow 220-gallon pool of dark honey. New Orleans sculptor and designer Robert Tannen was responsible for a garden in which various weeds and toxic plants were lovingly encouraged to grow, and Dawn DeDeaux, also of New Orleans, installed an evocative broken-glass floor piece in one of the

KK Projects houses. Another area house accommodated Mel Chin's "Operation Paydirt," an ongoing venture that helps support the rebuilding of New Orleans from the ground up by sealing lead and other contaminants in the soil. Chin (based in North Carolina) turned the house into a vault, its entrance fitted with a semblance of a giant circular safe door. The structure is papered inside with thousands of "fundreds," facsimile \$100 bills drawn by New Orleans schoolchildren and visitors. The bills will ultimately be collected by a Brinks truck and brought to Washington, D.C., where they will be presented to Congress in an effort to exchange the fake money for real. Chin is hoping to raise \$300 million this go-round, the estimated cost for treating approximately 86,000 New Orleans properties with perilously high lead readings in their soil. "Prospect.1" was itself an artful public-service event, deftly skirting the sentimentality that sometimes threatened to swamp it. Nothing, of course, is perfect. Why, for example, weren't prominent Louisianans such as Keith Sonnier and Lynda Benglis included? Cameron responded to an e-mail query about the number of local participants by observing that of the 81 artists, not only were 10 (nine living and one deceased) long-term Louisiana residents but another two were raised there, two more studied in the state and several others had strong local ties before "Prospect.1," such as Portuguese-born Francis Cape, who helped physically salvage the U.S. Mint's collection (where his work was shown during the biennial). Cameron added that, while he thought the percentage was standard, he is committed to increasing their numbers for "Prospect.2." Dedicated to the belief that art can make a difference and seems to have already done so in individual ways,

"Prospect.1" remains hard to fault. Did this place-sensitive combination of art and altruism, ardor and context, signal a curatorial paradigm shift? Might biennials become WPAs for a new century, a new community-oriented era? Could they harbinger change we can believe in? "Prospect. 1 New Orleans" was on view at 28 venues with performances and itinerant shows at three additional sites in New Orleans, Nov. 1, 200-Jan. 18, 2009. LILLY WEI is a New York based writer and independent curator.