

INCLUDING
WHAT'S ON



THE ART NEWSPAPERTM

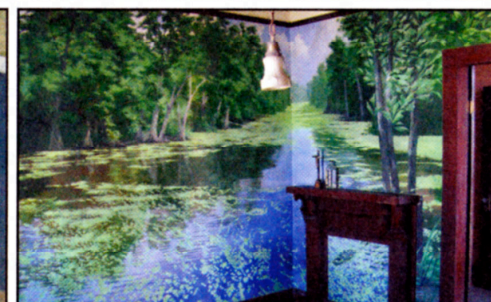
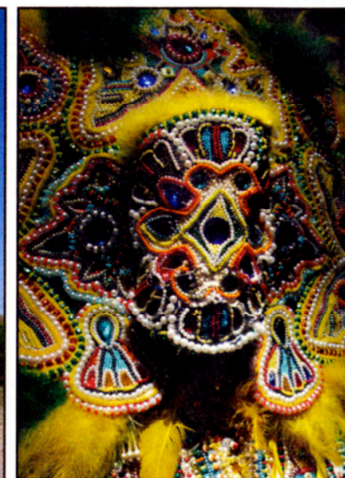
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Prospect.1

Can New Orleans reinvent itself as a fine art destination?

"Bleeding heart" biennial surprises with a vast range of exciting art projects

NEW ORLEANS. The work that has come to represent Prospect.1, the newly-fledged biennial of contemporary art taking place in New Orleans, is a colossal Noah's Ark built of plywood salvaged in the aftermath of floods caused by Hurricane Katrina. Created by Los Angeles-based artist Mark Bradford, the vessel rests on a sandy lot in the port city's devastated and depopulated Lower Ninth Ward (L9), its prow facing a levee that ruptured in the catastrophic storm of August 2005. Though not particularly elegant in form or construction, the makeshift ship symbolizes New Orleans's struggle for survival and potential for renewal, expressing the spirit of both Prospect.1 and



Clockwise: Mark Bradford's ark, *Mithra*, 2008; mask by Big Chief Victor Harris, worn at the city's annual Mardi Gras Indian parade; Adam Cvijanovic's, *The Bayou*, 2008; Banksy has made his mark on a New Orleans levee; and *Blossom*, 2007, by Sanford Biggers

the city itself. Conceived and organised by Dan Cameron, director of the New Orleans Contemporary Art Centre (CAC), the biennial (until 18 January) aspires to revitalise New Orleans by enlisting people interested in contemporary art to visit the city and lend support to its recovery. Artnet's Walter Robinson dubbed it the "bleeding heart biennial", but at the opening last month collectors and museum groups from around the country seemed genuinely pleased to be contributing to a worthy cause. The quality of the art, by 81 artists from 38 countries, instantly places Prospect.1 among the world's major international surveys. Many of the participants are well-known figures such as Allora and Calzadilla, Monica Bonvicini, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, Tatsuo Miyajima, Shirin Neshat, Fiona Tan, Fred Tomaselli and Cai Guo-Qiang. Also included are local artists such as John Barnes Jr, Willie Birch and others. But the biennial is as much about New Orleans as it is about contemporary art. The exhibition is

distributed among two dozen venues, from leafy Tulane University to the gritty Warehouse District and the weed-choked desolation of L9. Visitors ride shuttles taking in the historic architecture, and are likely to sample regional cuisine and listen to Dixieland and jazz music during their stay. Steve Perry, president of the Convention and Visitors Bureau, hopes the experience will shatter the city's reputation as a post-disaster wasteland. "They will see a New Orleans that breaks the stereotypes of the storm," he says. He and the organisers project that over 11 weeks the show will attract 100,000 visitors, half from outside Louisiana, generating economic impact of \$20m to \$30m. The cash infusion is crucial to repair a city that remains a symbol of the federal government's neglect of the poor and the less widely-reported middle class. When the waters of the Gulf of Mexico breached the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers' levees and submerged much of the city of which

lies below sea level-the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) took five days to respond, leaving thousands of citizens-primarily the city's poor, black population-stranded without food, water, shelter, health care and sanitary facilities. More than 1,830 people died either in the initial flood or its aftermath and nearly the entire city was evacuated. Property damage topped \$80bn, entire wards were destroyed, industry slowed, the housing supply was decimated, the school system shut down and tourists stayed away in droves. Some questioned whether the city, which had been in decline for half a century, could rise again. Enter Mr Cameron. The former curator at the New Museum in misnamed New York (1995-2005) proposed creating a large-scale biennial that would stimulate the arts community, tourism and economy (fending off misnamed ideas of a fine art fair). He had already curated biennials in Istanbul (2003) and Taipei (2006), cities that, like New

Orleans, lack powerful dealers and wealthy collectors. Last year he established US Biennial Inc., a New York-based non-profit Organization that would funnel money to Prospect.1, and became director of the CAC, which would serve as the exhibition's main hall. Then he began selling the idea to his contacts in New York, securing seed money from Toby Devan Lewis, a trustee of the New Museum, and her billionaire ex-husband Peter Lewis, the former chairman of the Guggenheim Foundation. The Annenberg, Getty, Warhol and Rockefeller foundations signed on, as did the State of Louisiana's Department of Cultural Recreation and Tourism (the City did not contribute). Four other trustees of the New Museum became sponsors, as did six trustees of the Whitney Museum and the Museum of Modern Art's president emerita Agnes Gund. By last month, Mr Cameron had raised \$3.5m, all but 10% from outside Louisiana. Artists were selected and invited to visit the city. Some created

site-specific pieces and others brought existing work they felt would have a resonance. The majority responded thoughtfully to the flooding, the plight of the displaced and the city's history and character. The result is both a meditation on tragedy and a celebration of New Orleans's unique cultural milieu. Some of the works—such as Bradford's ark—are woven into the fabric of the devastated L9 district where all that remains are stone stoops, derelict houses and a few new model homes whose design was underwritten by American actor Brad Pitt. In an abandoned house, Adam Cvijanovic covered the walls with painted murals of the bayou, lushly beautiful reminders of the ominous proximity of nature. On a nearby lot, Leandro Erlich placed a ladder that leans against a window in a disembodied fragment of a brick building, like the mirage of an escape route. Nari Ward converted a disused Baptist church into a community services bulletin board, and Paul Villinski transformed a FEMA-style

trailer into a solar-powered artist studio that would allow artists to "embed" in post-disaster settings and "contribute creatively". Wangechi Mutu was compelled to try to repair the disrupted life of Sarah Latsie who lost her home in L9 and was swindled out of insurance money by contractors. The artist erected a framework skeleton of a house with a single inviting chair in its centre, and plans to sell prints to raise the money needed to realise the home. Ghada Amer installed a circle of waist-high wrought-iron letters that spell "Happily Ever After", which will be covered by climbing rose and honeysuckle to create a kind of prayer arbour for the neighbourhood's recovery. Racism and African-American heritage are a dominant theme (New Orleans was once the largest slave market in America). At the Old US Mint, part of the Louisiana State Museum, Sanford Biggers's sculpture Blossom, 2007, consists of a tree growing through a piano emitting Billie Holiday singing

"Strange Fruit", a blues lament about lynching. An installation at the African American Museum by husband and wife team McCallum & Tarry presents scores of police mug shots of demonstrators-including Martin Luther King-arrested at the 1956 Montgomery march in support of Rosa Parks, the black woman who refused to give up her seat on a segregated bus. The city's gay culture is the subject of Skylar Fein's walk-in memorial to a French Quarter leather bar that was the scene of a deadly arson attack in the 1970s. Navin Rawanchaikul orchestrated a funeral procession, replete with Preservation Jazz Band, for a local musician who died while a refugee from Katrina and was never accorded a proper funeral in his hometown. And the New Orleans Museum of Art shows bead-andfeather body suits made by Big Chief Victor Harris, leader of the African-themed Fi Yi Yi tribe of Mardi Gras Indians. Louisiana's lieutenant governor Mitchell Landrieu has supported Prospect.1 from its outset.

"In our state, culture means business-and a lot of it," he writes in a foreword to the catalogue, noting that culture and tourism, along with healthcare, are the state's primary employers. He established a public-private foundation to funnel private money to "culture workers" and organisations, and recently created 27 cultural product districts-I7 in New Orleans, including the Julia Street and Frenchman Street gallery areas in which sale of original works of art is exempt from the state 8.75% sales tax. He and city officials believe the biennial will become an integral part of New Orleans's cultural life, a visual art counterpart to the annual Jazz Fest that attracts nearly half a million visitors every spring. They anticipate that attendance will double for the next edition and by 2012 the biennial will be established as the US's biggest contemporary art exhibition. They may be right. Mr Cameron has committed up to Prospect.5, and has proposed emulating Venice by mounting an architecture biennial in

the interim years. Meanwhile, three years after Katrina only about half of the population of 450,000 has returned, and while tourism is climbing towards pre-storm levels, it remains to be seen if the biennial can rebrand a city with a reputation for crime, poverty, dissipation and a disastrous flood, perhaps luring visitors from nearby Art Basel Miami Beach in early December. "Drunken people throwing up on Bourbon Street is over. It's time for New Orleans to sell itself responsibly," says MrCameron. Jason Edward Kaufman