

ARTFORUM

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Prospect.2 New Orleans

VARIOUS VENUES

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From left: R. Luke DuBois, *The Marigny Parade*, 2011. Performance view, Eleanor McMain Secondary School, New Orleans, October 22, 2011. Photo: Scott Saltzman. Dawn DeDeaux, *The Goddess Fortuna and Her Dunces in an Effort to Make Sense of It All (Part One: Mysteries avere la fortuna di)* (details), 2011, mixed media, dimensions variable. Photos: Michael Smith. William Pope.L, *Blink*, 2011, mixed media. Installation view, New Orleans.



WHEN CURATOR DAN CAMERON inaugurated Prospect New Orleans in 2008, billed as the largest international biennial in the United States, it was an act not merely of post-Hurricane Katrina revitalization but of civic reinvention. Though it received virtually no funding from depleted state or city coffers, Prospect.1 generated a great deal of curiosity, goodwill, and private patronage and brought contemporary art to the city in an unprecedented way. Due to cost overruns for the first show and reduced corporate funding since the recession, Prospect.2 was postponed one year and was a significantly smaller venture: It featured only twenty-seven artists, few of whom produced newly commissioned works. Thus the powerful site-specific emphasis of the first biennial was no longer as dominant, and the kinds of engagements with the city's history of racial and economic inequality that made Prospect.1 so strong were barely evident. The majority of works in Prospect.2 were displayed in institutional settings such as the New Orleans Museum of Art (NOMA), the Louisiana State Museum, and the Contemporary Arts Center. Contributions by relatively well-known artists from outside the city (Sophie Calle, Ragnar Kjartansson, Ivan Navarro, Alexis Rockman, Karl Haendel, and An-My Lê) mixed with those of New Orleans artists (Bruce Davenport Jr., Robert Duncan, and Dawn DeDeaux); yet it fell to satellite venues such as Good Children, Antenna, Barrister's, New Orleans Airlift, Parse, T-Lot, and more to bring substantial numbers of NOLA artists to the attention of those who came to town for the biennial.

The strongest pieces in Prospect.2 were primarily to be found outside the main venues' walls and took the form of performance-based events that drew on local traditions and histories. In R. Luke DuBois's *The Marigny Parade*, 2011, presented on the biennial's opening morning, five groups from three junior high and high school marching bands made their way to Washington Park in the Faubourg Marigny neighborhood while playing a composition by the artist. Despite an attempt to synchronize the performances, giddy chaos and cacophony reigned as spectators found themselves hemmed in by the converging drummers and brass musicians. (One of the best object-based works in the show—Davenport's intricate hand-colored diagrams at NOMA of area marching bands and their spectators interspersed with facts and wry commentary about the dissolution of many of these bands post-Katrina—also dealt with NOLA's history of processional performance.) The street was also the stage for William Pope.L's roving project *Blink*, 2011. In this work, a cast of some sixty-five volunteers, eight at a time, pulled a black-painted ice-cream truck ten miles from the Lower Ninth Ward to Mid City using a specially designed harness. Pope.L's van functioned as a mobile rear-projection screen: The back gate displayed snapshots, solicited by the artist from New Orleans residents, that touched in some way on the idea of dreaming and then waking up in the city. The luminous, flickering images emitted by the ghostly truck, conveyed through the city by human toil alone, brought to mind rescuers and evacuees pushing boats to safety in Katrina's aftermath.

Prospect.2's most elaborate installation was DeDeaux's *Goddess Fortuna and Her Dunces in an Effort to Make Sense of It All (Part One: Mysteries avere la fortuna di)*, 2011, based in part on John Kennedy Toole's posthumously published New Orleans romp *A Confederacy of Dunces* (1980). Set in a rarely used historic courtyard in the French Quarter, DeDeaux's work opened to the public at nightfall, revealing a troupe of sculpted dummies in peaked witch hats—the dunces—illuminated by eerie lights throughout the adjacent rooms and stairways. The work's tour de force was DeDeaux's casting of local sissy-bounce rapper Katey Red as its eponymous goddess character. A haunting, dirgelike sound track accompanied a large, circular projection of slowed-down footage of Red twirling batons in an outfit that evoked eighteenth-

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century French court costume: a white mask, a powdered wig, and metal hoop panniers. Periodically, the film returned to real time and a bounce beat took over, which in fact felt massively sped-up, given the hyperactive, rolling ass shaking performed by Red's silver-lamé-hot-pants-wearing dancers.

New Orleans's place in the American cultural imaginary—its status as a site where the richly creolized culture of the Caribbean littoral lives on with singular vibrancy but is too often subsumed under the sign of exoticism, and where the unvarnished reality of the present is too often obscured by a gothic nostalgia—was embodied by DeDeaux's work in all its complexity. The city's past was granted its haunting seductiveness, but power was shown to reside in the here and now, in the living persona of Red—a representative of one of the city's more recent cultural innovations. Sissy bounce, as yet, cannot be comfortably added to the list of stock signifiers that already includes beignets, gumbo, carnival masquerade, second-line parades, jazz funerals, and, via a formal logic of opposition, poverty, violence, racial inequality, and corruption. Indeed, the entrenched fetishization of such beloved things as gumbo and carnival masquerade is what allows poverty, violence, and racial inequality to ossify, to acquire an aesthetic and immense quality. DeDeaux's work suggests that the wayward hybridities of the moment are as necessary to New Orleans's forward movement as are its traditions, and that the former may in fact be a necessary counterweight to the latter. Art, of course, is a principal channel through which these amalgamations take shape and express themselves. It is for this reason that the strength of the Prospect idea resides in an engagement with New Orleans's spaces and communities. Hopefully, Prospect.3, which Franklin Sirmans has been tapped to curate, will re-emphasize artists' commissions in sites throughout the city and foster collaborations with residents, putting the culture of New Orleans at the forefront in its time of regeneration.

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