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COME ON DOWN

The New Orleans Biennial beckons.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

New Orleans is smaller and poorer than it used to be, as I have confirmed on my first visit there since the floods attendant on Hurricane Katrina obliterated a large part of the city and left much of the rest a mud-gray mess, traces of which aren't hard to find, three years later. I went to review "Prospect.1," the inaugural New Orleans Biennial, which represents eighty-one artists from thirty-four countries in about thirty ad-hoc locations, and which took the whole of a three-day sojourn to explore in full. (A car is essential.) Some of the offerings are keenly rewarding, but the best thing about the show is the sprawl, which affords a wide and deep immersion in the city's complicated charms. Be it ever so small and poor, and despite catastrophic displacements, New Orleans can't help but remain New Orleans, which is to other cities what a poem is to prose. The phantasmagoria of high and vernacular architecture, polyglot flavors, omnipresent music, exuberant cemeteries, and geographical unlikelihood, of a seaport largely below sea level, stokes continual wonderment. Desire isn't only a street name there. A municipal tradition of giddy impulsiveness, shadowed by recent tragedy and chronic woes—including a high incidence of crime—has got to many of the invited artists in "Prospect.1." In the friskily hyperbolic words of a review by Walter Robinson, the editor of *Artnet Magazine*, the show "takes the reprobate scallywag nihilists of the contemporary avant-garde and converts them . . . into goody-two-shoes bleeding-heart believers in the nobility of humankind." You may disdain the frequent sentimentality in the show if you can suppress your own uprushes of sentiment. I could not.

Souped-up biennials and other manifestations of festivalist aesthetics have become routine. "Contextual" practice has proved, after sufficiently abundant experience, to be long on con and short on text. "Prospect.1" is unexceptional on this score, but with a pointed and refreshing candor. Featuring few big names and nary a masterpiece, it is my favorite biennial since the nineteen-eighties, when biennials ceased to be innocently serious roundups of recent art and became heavily engineered spectacles. The show's curator, Dan Cameron, a veteran in the field, put it to me flatly: "I'm a tourism promoter." Contemporary biennials are machines for bringing people to places, funded by parties with vested interests in the migration. In this case, the state of Louisiana contributed what little it could, amounting to about eight per cent of the $3.5-million budget. Corporations chipped in twelve per cent. The rest has come, or is confidently anticipated (Cameron says), from foundations and individuals, bucking the current global tide of financial contraction. The trick is to have a place that speaks, and seduces, for itself, and to select art and artists congenial to it—rather than, in the more common vein, to advertise the host city (São Paulo, Kwangju, Istanbul) as a cookie-cutter capital of new pep and future prominence.

In the vast meadow of shoulder-high grasses and volunteer saplings, curiously gridded with narrow streets, that is most of the Lower Ninth Ward today stands the intensely purplish brick shell of the Battle Ground Baptist Church, since 1964 the home of a congregation displaced from a razed neighborhood in St. Bernard Parish. Inside, there's a big, diamond-shaped, welded-steel basket filled with weight-lifting equipment, surrounded by freestanding walls that function as bulletin boards for community announcements and appeals. Loud-speakers broadcast a strident overlay of snatches of music and, among less identifiable elements, speeches by Martin Luther King, Jr. This installation, "Diamond Gym," is by Nari Ward, a regular participant in international exhibitions. Its jury-rigged, aggressive form and rather forced symbolism—body-building gear for an enfeebled populace—are familiar qualities of art in biennials, where artists, abetted by curators, strain for immediate impact among competing works in cavernous halls. But here the inchoate ambition to engage viewers succeeds. Those tacked-up,

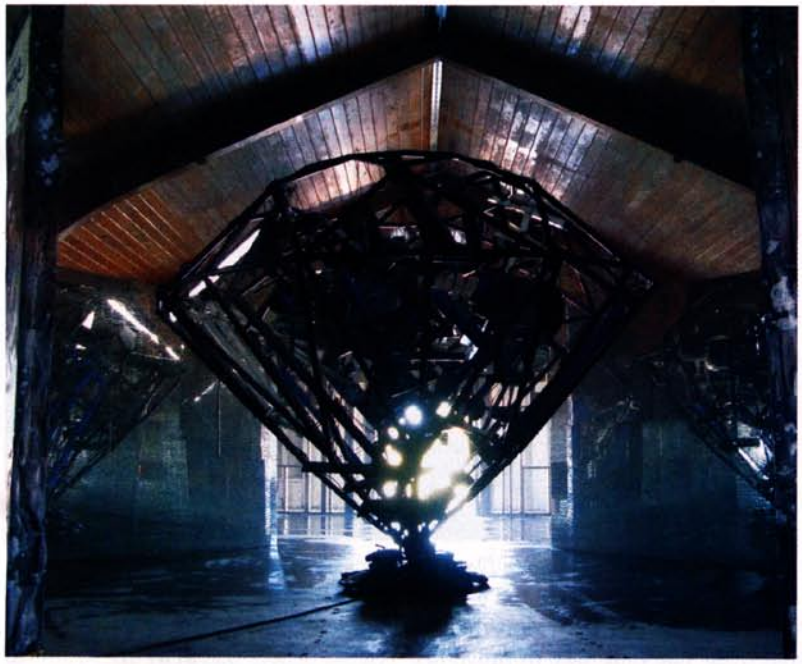
The shell of the Battle Ground Baptist Church, in the Lower Ninth Ward.

FRANK RELLE; COURTESY NARI WARD

mutely urgent signs and flyers, along with the soundtrack's arousing noise, project the once and future vitality of a culture temporarily paralyzed. Ward puts art in service to something that is, declaratively, more important than art. Emerging from the church into the surrounding desolation, you will be moved.

Nearby, in different directions, are two works that are perhaps the most and the least liked by local citizens. Mark Bradford, from Los Angeles, built the highly popular Noah's Ark from salvaged sheets of plywood hoarding partly covered with faded and tattered posters. The rugged, welcoming vessel stands three stories high in a sandy, weedy lot. (Speaking of Los Angeles, the Lower Ninth now boasts scattered, snazzily designed solar-panelled houses, financed by Brad Pitt, that introduce the spice of Southern California chic to the city's architectural gumbo; but their tasteful bland colors might be rethought, the city being New Orleans.) A mile and a half south, the Berliner Katharina Grosse spray-painted the front, sides, and grounds of a derelict house, on a relatively intact block, in reds and yellows that suggest an inferno. The gesture has offended many by seeming to pile an insult of fantasized fire onto the injury of only too real water. As a latecomer to the benumbing, deathly silent horrors of the area's ruin, I liked the work. The Expressionist note of hysteria freed up my feelings, which were unprimed for consoling manifestations like Bradford's ark. Green spears of grass—and shamrocks!—were starting to pierce the yard's crust of paint, stirring hope as wild as the city's despair must have been. But I understand that theatrical acting out by vicariously distraught outsiders is unlikely to beguile Katrina's victims.

Do you think you love Mardi Gras costumes? Until you see them in person, you have no idea. At the New Orleans Museum of Art, in City Park, feathered and beaded suits by Victor Harris, the Big Chief of the Fi-Yi-Yi group of Mardi Gras Indians, stagger comprehension. Their intricate and savage beauty integrates countless insights of aesthetic intelligence, refined over time. "Art" seems too effete a word for such glory. Other "Prospect.1" works with local relevance, at the Contemporary Arts Center, in the warehouse district, are conceptual and political. "The House That Herman Built," by Jackie Sumell, a New York artist transplanted to New Orleans, in collaboration with Herman Wallace, presents models of a dream house conceived by Wallace, a Black Panther who has spent thirty-four years in solitary confinement at the state prison in Angola (his cell is reproduced in wood) for a murder that he and many supporters insist that he didn't commit. A huge installation of refashioned period artifacts, "Remember the Upstairs Lounge," by Skylar Fein, memorializes a bohemian bar where a fire killed thirty-two people in 1973; the event occasioned a Stonewall-like collective coming out of gays in New Orleans. But the show largely endorses the recent decline of identity politics and conceptualism in new art, in favor of poetic and decorative impulses—which converge in the New Orleans-smitten Chicagoan Tony Fitzpatrick's "Chapel of Moths," a suite of dense, lyrical word-and-picture collages (one bears the phrase "Holy Twilight Lilac Water") that graces a lately closed, still telltale-odorous mortuary at the northern fringe of the French quarter.



"Diamond Gym," inside the church, an installation by the New York artist Nari Ward.

Another sinister, stronger smell assaulted me when Keith Calhoun and Chandra McCormick, photographers married to each other and living in the Ninth Ward, opened the refrigerator in which they keep waterlogged remains of prints and negatives. They said that that dank, complex stench—many sorts of things gone bad, each in its own way—pervaded New Orleans in Katrina's wake. I recalled the chemical acridity that hung on and on in New York's air, long after 9/11. Calhoun and McCormick have rebuilt their fine old cypress-wood house with funds raised by Mark Bradford from an auction of one of his paintings. (Impromptu philanthropy is an art in itself, in today's New Orleans.) They have mounted a show, not officially part of "Prospect.1," of water-damaged prints from a series they had made, "Seeing Our Music," to celebrate the song and dance of neighborhood cohorts, including one toothsomely named the Furious Five Social Aid and Pleasure Club. They selected the pictures, some of them barely legible, for their accidental beauties of liquid swirl and textured soil. Looking at them was like gazing through a scrim into a joyous and lost past. The smiling company of the photographers made it seem good to do. ♦

Headline in the Wall Street Journal.

INVESTORS FLOCK TO NUT FARMS

In their defense, it's been a rough year.