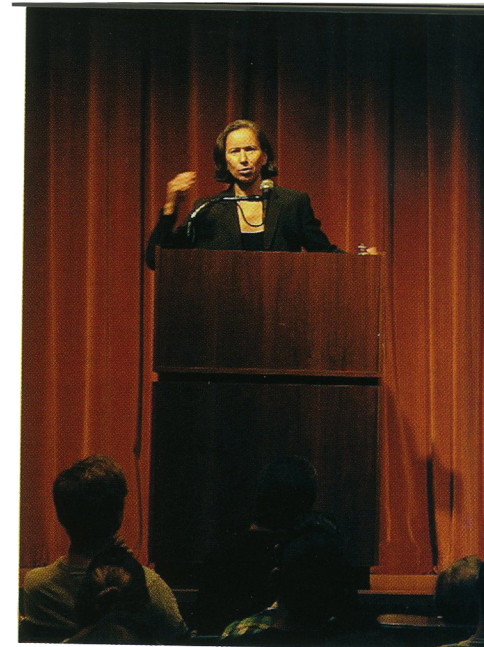




From left: Akosua Adoma Owusu, *Kwaku Ananse*, 2013, 35 mm transferred to HD digital video, color, sound, 25 minutes. Tameka Norris and Garrett Bradley, *Meka Jean: How She Got Good*, 2014, four-channel video projection, color, sound, approx. 120 minutes. Andrea Fraser, *Not Just a Few of Us*, 2014. Performance view, New Orleans Museum of Art, October 25, 2014.



## Prospect.3

VARIOUS VENUES, NEW ORLEANS

Nick Stillman

“PROSPECT.3: NOTES FOR NOW” was the third iteration of Prospect New Orleans, the city-spanning exhibition that calls itself a biennial although it has never occurred at biannual intervals—after the 2008 financial crash marred the inauguration, Prospect.2 didn’t open until 2011. In spite of these delays, Prospect occupies a definitive node within the city’s art ecosystem, symbolizing for some the hope for recognition of New Orleans as a major contemporary art destination and, for others, the dread that so much outside influence might water down the city’s quixotic localism. (My own inextricability from the people and machinations behind Prospect.3 necessitates disclosure: The Prospect headquarters is located inside the office where I work, my wife and I are acknowledged in the catalogue, and artistic director Franklin Sirmans is a former colleague.) Doubtless, New Orleans has changed since Prospect.1, which memorably justified its existence as an economic boost for a traumatized, post-Katrina city. While economic inequality within the city remains a disturbing and highly visible reality, New Orleans has also become a tech and entrepreneurial hub since 2008, perpetually appearing on top-ten lists ranking such characteristics as industry growth and “livability.” Without the economic-benefit rhetoric to define it, the precise answers to the questions “Why Prospect? Why New Orleans?” have become opaque.

Sirmans’s gambit this year was to construct a curatorial through line juxtaposing exoticization with the simultaneously disruptive, painful, and transcendent theme of searching to belong, for which he drew inspiration from the

work of writer Walker Percy (particularly *The Moviegoer*’s pregnant theme of “the search”) and artists Paul Gauguin, Tarsila do Amaral, and Jean-Michel Basquiat. It was baffling, then, to encounter an exhibition layout that required one to struggle simply to find the two Gauguins in a New Orleans Museum of Art gallery otherwise unpopulated by Prospect work. “The search,” so to speak, for Gauguin was emblematic of a sometimes muddled spatial logic. For instance, Akosua Adoma Owusu’s hypnotic video *Kwaku Ananse*, 2013, in which a woman travels to Ghana for her father’s funeral, felt central to the exhibition’s wrangling with ideas of otherness, home, and the quest for self-awareness, yet I’d venture that most visitors missed it at the Joan Mitchell Center Studios, where it had been hidden much too effectively in a side hall behind a black curtain. At sites such as this one, NOMA, and the George and Leah McKenna Museum of African American Art, it was often difficult to differentiate between Prospect and non-Prospect shows; collapsing this hierarchy is theoretically interesting, but here it came off as unintentional and confusing.

Still, a selection of early 1970s paintings by Huguette Caland at NOMA looked great, exuding cool, funny eroticism. These qualities also lurked in New Orleans-based Tameka Norris and Garrett Bradley’s feature-length film at May Gallery, *Meka Jean: How She Got Good*, 2014, a surreal, semifictitious autobiography in which Norris’s character negotiates mental, sexual, and professional obstacles in a city at once profoundly transformed and staunchly traditional. Another New Orleanean, Zarouhie Abdalian, created a compelling meditation on site with her *Chanson du ricochet*, 2014, at the New Orleans African American Museum. From inside five houses in the courtyard boomed a recording of a man with an unforgettable baritone listing tools. Ostensibly, this inventory was meant to evoke the accomplished craftspeople of color who have long lived in the neighborhood, yet terms such as *C-clamp*, *ax*, and *cotton gin* were not neutral at this museum, where haunted objects from the history of slavery lie inside. When traffic flowed nearby, forcing the visitor to pin an ear to these ravaged old buildings, the physical intimacy of Abdalian’s ephemeral piece was disarming and powerful.

The theme of slavery and its contemporary corollary, incarceration, also drove affecting installations by Antonio

Vega Macotela at the Longue Vue House and Gardens and the duo of Keith Calhoun and Chandra McCormick at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art; the pair’s haunting, morbid black-and-white photos made at Angola and Orleans Parish Prisons between 1981 and 2013 collapsed the time and space of the prison-industrial complex, showing it as the de facto extension of slavery.

Andrea Fraser’s opening-day performance at NOMA most acutely stamped this exhibition. In *Not Just a Few of Us*, 2014, Fraser acted out nineteen different roles captured in a recording of an infamous 1991 New Orleans City Council hearing on a proposed ordinance to dissolve the de facto segregation of Mardi Gras krewe (it passed, unanimously). Using an impeccably accented

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delivery that highlighted class, race, and neighborhood differences, Fraser revealed the complexities of this city like no other. Listening to these arguments that human decency should yield to tradition, I was shaken by how often similarly euphemistic rhetoric is now used by natives of all colors and classes to describe the deleterious effect of “outsiders” on the city, and how exceptionally complicated that traditionalism and insularity are given New Orleans’s histories of subjugation, tolerance, ravage, and rebirth. Why Prospect and why New Orleans? Because the questions—“Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?” (taken from the title of Gauguin’s famous allegorical painting)—that Sirmans invokes in his catalogue essay couldn’t possibly feel as loaded elsewhere. This was an imperfect biennial. Artists rightfully feel a need to respond to the city’s unknowable contours, and while some results were penetrating, others were glib. New Orleans, too, is an imperfect city. Hopefully it and its biennial will go on evolving, messily, together, in real time. □

NICK STILLMAN IS A WRITER AND CRITIC LIVING IN NEW ORLEANS.