To Speak What Has No Words

PROSPECT.4 // NEW ORLEANS
By Ruslana Lichtzier

In New Orleans, I found myself wandering in a sultry haze, in an obnoxiously cute city. A condition that is not good for the senses. You cannot keep it cool when you are melting. And yet, when I arrived for the preview events of Prospect.4 and was welcomed by the exhibitions’ clumsy title, The Lotus in Spite of the Swamp, my senses quickly cooled. The title quotes the master saxophonist, Archie Shepp, who used the lotus-swamp metaphor in the early 1970s to describe jazz as “a symbol of the triumph of the human spirit, not of its degradation.” While it may have had a sexy-spiritual appeal during the Flower Power era, the metaphoric trope is completely dried out in 2017.

Spread between multiple venues, Prospect.4 encourages visitors to explore a city that can barely hold its complex history under the surface. Not surprisingly, considering the title, water and jazz are central themes in the exhibition, driving the exploration of New Orleans’ past and present relationship to the world and its history of slavery and colonialization. A nucleus of both themes was carried onto the show’s investigation of Creolization. Unfortunately, this complex term is reduced to the repeated use of transnational identities, done with the aid of wall labels: “artist born in X, resides in X…”

In terms of exhibition design, Prospect.4 suffered from an uneven display. Often times individual works battled each other, such as the case of two different sounds from separate works that slipped from one space to another, dismantling the possibility of experiencing a work on its own terms.

During the preview weekend, artists’ audible gasps of frustration were heard—miscommunication, a shortage of professional technical staff on sites, and last-minute changes in the exhibition’s design left many artists whisper-screaming at their own openings. While Kara Walker has the status to voice her disappointment in public, many artists, invested in maintaining an appearance of professionalism, ended up lowering their heads and sucking it up.

Yet, many lilies shined despite the swamp. No. Allow me to start over—horrible metaphor...

And yet, many works resisted—with intellectual strength and astute aesthetics—the exhibition’s redundant frame. While only three artists are mentioned for the purpose of this text, many others stood out, their works calmly claiming a space that lured the curious viewers, with beautifully idiosyncratic languages.

On the upper floor of the Ogden Museum of Southern Art, the London-based artist, John Akomfrah presented a video installation, Precarity (2017). The forty-seven-minute film traces, through an engrossing sonic and visual experience, the life of the forgotten legend Charles “Buddy” Bolden, who was also known “King 

“Here, water and jazz intersect in the most poignant way—abandoning grand metaphors, but not grand emotions, this arresting video installation utters and speaks what has no words.”
Watching the performance after days of wandering through the city, witnessing the empty plinths of the recently removed Confederate statues, gave the performance a particularly acute gravitas. Borden, and is considered by some the father of jazz. Incredibly popular in the early 1900s New Orleans music scene, Buddy Bolden was committed in 1907 to the Louisiana’s insane asylum with Dementia Praecox (a disputed psychiatric diagnosis that was later relabeled as Schizophrenia). He died there twenty-four years later, at the age of fifty-four, leaving behind no psychiatric diagnosis that was later relabeled as Schizophrenia. He died there twenty-four years later, at the age of fifty-four, leaving behind no surviving recordings and only a few photographs. While his music rippled into what became known as jazz, King Bolden was almost completely forgotten. Trevor Schoonmaker, the Creative Director of Prospect 4, who commissioned the work, defines it as “a crossroads, or intersection, of genres: namely, of the film essay, the historical work, and the music of genres: namely, of the film essay, the historical work, and the music of jazz.” Curiously, Dylan received his hands in the hands of Neil Young, as a gift from “a good friend of his,” Bob Dylan. Curiously, Dylan is the conduit of Robleto’s second installation.

— American Sadball (2014) is displayed in a vitrine of fossilized prehistoric whale ear bones, salvaged from the sea (one to ten million years old). Each bone is paired with a dried butterfly, a vestige of a sub-aquatic landscape. Here, the butterflies have new antennae, made of a magnetic tape, which carries a recording of Dylan’s “Desolation Row.” The work provides for us a riddle: one part of it points to the past—to the sound waves that never disappeared—as vibrations that can be traced today in ear bones. The other part, leads us towards the outside of time, where butterflies transmit the music, “nobody is escaping to Avoidance.”

— “What we owe to each other is a wonderful question to keep asking oursevles, not only in the context of sonic explorations, but also in our ways of living and working. At its best, Prospect 4 exhibited works that practiced attention and compassion, without the use of didactics—featuring works that speak for themselves in their own wonderfully disyllabic language, and we were able to listen.

Prospect 4: The Lotus in Spite of the Swamp ran from November 19, 2017—February 25, 2018. We owe to each other’s memories, hopes and fears, and what right do we have to forget them?”


It is important to note that these labels did not follow a singular template, and were at times repetitive, the reason remaining unclear.
3 As quoted in the text accompanying the work in the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University.