

Big But Not Easy

RACHEL CHURNER ON "PROSPECT.1 NEW ORLEANS"



Victor Harris, Big Chief of the Fi Yi Yi Indians, during Mardi Gras, New Orleans, 2007. Photo: Jeffrey D. Ehrenreich.

AMONG THE MANY SPRAY-PAINTED slogans scrawled on abandoned buildings, washed-out pickup trucks, and makeshift plywood signs that appear in Spike Lee's documentary *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* (2006) is a singularly apt comment written on the side of a car: HOPE IS NOT A PLAN. Even now, after years of telethons, tax breaks, and official visits, the statement continues to express the frustration of a city in disrepair, caught in the unending fiasco that is the FEMA relief effort.

Only hope, or a plan? It is this difficult question that is posed by the first New Orleans biennial of contemporary art, a mega-exhibition advertised as a cross between the city's JazzFest and the Venice Biennale. The new biennial's curator, Dan Cameron, intends for it to help "reinvigorate" and "redevelop" the city. Opening on November 1, and on view until January 18, 2009, "Prospect.1 New Orleans" will be the largest biennial of contemporary art ever organized in the United States, with an estimated

hundred thousand square feet of exhibition space. Eighty-one artists from more than thirty countries are participating, and many of the names are blockbusters: Cai Guo-Qiang, Isaac Julien, William Kentridge, Yasumasa Morimura, Pierre et Gilles, et al. The biennial will occupy more than twenty venues throughout the city, including the Contemporary Arts Center New Orleans (where Cameron, for many years a senior curator at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, has been director of visual arts since May 2007), the Ashe Cultural Arts Center, the New Orleans African American Museum, and the US Mint Louisiana State Museum (where Croatian-born, New Orleans-based sculptor Srdjan Loncar plans to place a pile of faux bills, with briefcases for those who wish to take a bundled stack or two). The devastated Lower Ninth Ward will figure prominently as the location for several installations. Sculptor Nari Ward, for example, will work there on the site of an abandoned

church, and Paul Villinski will present a trailer like those supplied to homeless residents by FEMA (before being declared uninhabitable due to dangerous levels of formaldehyde fumes)--which he is converting into an off-the-grid, mobile artist's studio.

In the most optimistic light, "Prospect. 1" could be seen as a grand-scale version of Paul Chan's *Waiting for Godot* in New Orleans, staged last November in collaboration with the Classical Theatre of Harlem and local organizations. While Chan is not participating in the biennial, his project demonstrated that contemporary artists could bring something positive to the city: Despite apprehensions that this erudite artist's project would constitute a kind of carpetbagging, it ended up both working as an art project and being welcomed by residents. But a primary risk Chan faced effectively remains: that, despite best intentions, the city's devastation might function merely as a scenic backdrop for contemporary international work. In this

regard, the politically incisive work of Willie Birch, Skylar Fein, and Victor Harris and the Fi Yi Yi Indians will be both welcome and crucial in avoiding the impression of the regional culture's being usurped by the international art world. These local artists create work specific to New Orleans's vibrant music and performance scene, cultural heritage, and African-American demographic. Perhaps the complex task of--and daunting measure for--this biennial is encapsulated best by Cameron's statement that his exhibition "is a primarily humanitarian endeavor, but one that just happens to have incredibly high artistic standards." The intention of resuscitating a city in shambles by hosting a biennial inevitably verges on hubris: Characterized as they are by their get-in-get-out approach, biennials may bring in tourism money, but they will not rebuild a city's infrastructure or bring displaced citizens home. The most significant aspect of this exhibition, then, may be that it (perhaps unintentionally) raises critical questions about the potential of cultural rejuvenation: Can bringing an international art exhibition to New Orleans encourage a revitalization of the indigenous cultural heritage of the Paris of the South? Can it foster any connection to the homegrown culture that was ravaged in the storm's aftermath? Or is it more like bringing the circus to town? Despite the press release's pronouncement that "Prospect. 1" is "founded on the principle that art engenders social progress," the exhibition is poised productively to question that very principle--and the relationship

RACHEL CHURNER IS A NEW YORK-BASED ART HISTORIAN.

SEPTEMBER 2008 207

between art and activism in general--even if by its possible missteps.