

EBONY G PATTERSON

Miranda Lash, Ebony G Patterson & Terence Trouillot, Prospect.6: Redefining New Orleans in a Global Context, Frieze, 28 October 2024



Portrait of Ebony G. Patterson, Photo by Frank Ishman

Terence Trouillot At the public announcement of Prospect.6 in New York last winter, you discussed envisioning this edition of the triennial as an opportunity to foreground New Orleans – and, by extension, the American South – within a more global context. Could you elaborate on this approach and how it came to fruition?

Miranda Lash Our goal is to honour New Orleans, its deep histories and culture. However, from the beginning, we also wanted to decentre the narrative around the city’s uniqueness, which has both negative and positive impacts. For instance, when you hear people say, ‘There’s no place like New Orleans,’ they’re celebrating of the city’s cultural specificity. But for too long, the problems associated with New Orleans have been framed by the idea that it’s an outlier, making the city prone to dismissal when considering systemic solutions. From day one, Ebony and I were committed to situating New Orleans within a global context to show how much it has in common with the rest of the world.

Ebony G. Patterson It was also crucial for us to decentralize the conversation around New Orleans being anchored solely within a national context. We asked ourselves: What does it mean to pull New Orleans into an international discourse with the rest of the globe? We could just as

easily have looked in the US’s own backyard and focused solely on the diasporas that already exist in this country. But what does it mean when we don’t acknowledge the communities from which these diasporas come? What does it say about the work being made in those places? Do we only see it as having value when it’s acknowledged by the US gaze? For these reasons, it was crucial for us to broaden the reach of those conversations.

TT What inspired the show’s title, ‘The Future Is Present, the Harbinger Is Home’? In his preview of the exhibition for The New York Times, Siddhartha Mitter suggests that the show implies ‘New Orleans is already living our impending future and can offer lessons for negotiating it in a community celebration.’ Does this assessment align with your vision?

ML We had a lot of fun working on the title together. I appreciate and agree with Mitter’s interpretation, although, of course, we see more layers. Upending the narrative of New Orleans as a place mired in the past, we envision New Orleans as a city where the future has already arrived. We talked about the word ‘harbinger’ in the sense of carrying the future, signalling, pointing. We leaned into the military connotation of the term, which describes a scout that goes ahead to prepare a place for

others to stay. How are we moving as a global population through these incredibly complex issues of trying to preserve this earth and each other? Someone has to go first and prepare the way. And certain places, for better or worse, are playing that role.

TT This year's edition of Prospect marks the first time the triennial has paired a curator with an artist to organize the exhibition. Could you speak to this collaboration? How it has differed from your usual working methods? How did you first get to know each other? What insights have you gained from this experience?

EGP Miranda and I met in Kentucky. We already knew of each other's practices but, in 2017, my work was featured in a show that Miranda co-curated with museum director Trevor Schoonmaker, at the Speed Art Museum in Louisville, called 'Southern Accent: Seeking the American South in Contemporary Art'. Miranda was responsible for acquiring my work for the institution and, later, we both served on Trevor's curatorial council for Prospect.4 in 2017.

Our practices have always, in many ways, focused on underrepresented or marginalized people. That has continued for each of us in terms of thinking about Prospect.6. I believe that no matter what, a curator organizing an exhibition always brings their community with them.

Miranda was onboarded first for Prospect.6 and she asked to share the role with someone. She could have chosen another curatorial colleague but she said to the board, 'Actually, I'd like to do something different. I would like to bring an artist into this conversation.'

I see her forward-thinking in this regard as an act of harbingering, of making space to work with someone outside of your comfort zone. The first thing I said to Miranda was, 'This is one and done for me.' I came to this project because I was interested in how it would make me a better artist. The second thing I said to her was, 'There's no way we can do this if there isn't an understanding that, beyond all of this, we have to become friends, sisters out of this process.'

ML I couldn't imagine doing this without Ebony. She was the only person I wanted to do it with. Not just because of her incredible practice, but because I had seen her communicate with artists and work with them. Her skills in understanding, on a very profound level, where an artist is in their practice are astounding. I feel so grateful for, and impressed by, her willingness to mentor and support other artists in a way that only an artist could.

A common theme we pursued, regardless of where an artist was in their career, was how they were committed to growing and experimenting. It's not about what you've done, but where you want to go. We worked with 43 artists on new commissions, which we believe signals a full-throated commitment to supporting artists' practices.

TT How did you navigate Prospect's established history as a triennial while bringing in fresh ideas? Can you speak to the challenges of tackling such a large-scale event, especially in terms of incorporating more artist-driven perspectives within the institutional framework?

EGP I'm going to start with a statement that I've been saying from the very beginning to Miranda and that I've repeated throughout this process: We will fail.

ML It's not my favourite statement! [laughter]

EGP But recognizing from the outset that you will fail sets up a particular set of questions that you then start asking in a bid to help you tackle all of those potential issues. One of the things we recognized early on is that we're building on an existing body of work. There could be a lot of ego that comes with this process – we're human; we're not entirely devoid of that – but we're certainly mindful of everything that has gone before; it's an institution.

We had to consider the arc of Prospect's history, from 2008 to date, and what conversations we're adding to it. And, when you have these multi-year shows that are often huge group projects, there's always public critique of your approach. It's often about the things that are missing or the things that didn't go right.

Early on, we also asked ourselves: What does it mean to host versus to hold? We thought about the helicopter narrative of these shows. They're like a big tent: everybody comes to the circus, the circus leaves, and that's it for another three years. How do we help affirm that Prospect is not simply intended for those coming in? Prospect belongs first to its longest audience: New Orleanians.

TT Are there any projects in this year's edition that stand out for you?

EGP I'll leave Miranda to decide if she wants to pick her babies, but I can't. However, I will say that we both invited artists whose work we'd been following for a while but, as time went on, our list grew. This was partly down to our advisory council, whose members reflect the historical demographics of New Orleans, and who each shared artists with us. And partly because, every time someone suggested we look at an artist, we took their suggestion seriously.

We were also guided by looking at emerging themes, commonalities and conversations. The one thing we were not interested in telling artists was: ‘We want you to come to New Orleans and make work about New Orleans.’ I believe that every work, regardless of where it is exhibited, carries with it the context in which it exists. When the doors of Prospect.6 open on 2 November, the show that everyone comes to consume – to look at and pull apart, to be pushed by and push back against – will recognize these efforts invariably.

ML The American South is in a transformative period. Since we opened ‘Southern Accent’, we’ve seen Confederate monuments removed and spaces renamed across the region. This shift prompted excitement about how cities might reimagine public memory.

Prospect intentionally engages with this dialogue. While our three-month triennial isn’t the final word on public memory, we aim to open new possibilities. We’re very proud of projects like Raúl de Nieves’s sculptures at Harmony Circle and Joiri Minaya’s installation at the Meilleur-Goldthwaite House [New Orleans African American Museum].

We’re exploring how architecture itself can embody historical memory. Ashley Teamer’s public work, produced in partnership with the city’s Percent for Art committee, will remain in situ for at least seven years.

Beyond grand public projects, we cherish the triennial’s intimate moments. Ada M. Patterson’s ethereal silk paintings, Blas Isasi’s sculptures and Brooke Pickett’s paintings are standouts, but I could go on and on. We’re thrilled with all our artists’ contributions, from Clarissa Tossin’s starscapes to Eddie Aparicio’s sculptures to Cathy Lu’s goddess of creation to the collaborative installation by Zalika Azim, Rafa Esparza and Dewey Tafoya.

We’ve selected artists based on both their recent work and their long-term practices. It’s fulfilling to showcase artists like Ewan Atkinson and Mel Chin, whose careers we’ve followed for years. Their ambitious projects influenced our venue choices, leading us to seek larger spaces like the Ford Motor Plant. There are also artists like Tuan Mami and Tuan Andrew Nguyen, whose dedication to getting to know the New Orleans community has been truly gratifying to witness.

TT How do you envision the exhibition’s role with regards to the changing landscape of the American South and the upcoming US election? Considering your mission to create a show for New Orleanians, how does it speak to local and global audiences amidst current events?

ML It’s a big question. In New Orleans, public celebration is such a big part of the city that it felt appropriate – not just because we were excited, but because that is how the city absorbs things – to have a very layered, joyful opening weekend. We did talk about security concerns, acknowledging that we’re living in a highly charged time and that some of these sites are very charged. Yet, we decided we did not want to allow fear to dictate our approach. We’ve come this far. We want to continue to be led by the sentiments grounding both the artists’ practices and our own.

EGP Isn’t that what art is supposed to do? Artists have been seen as dangerous throughout history because they represent possibilities. This is why art is so important: it creates spaces in which people can imagine something else. The real power and resonance occur when audience members engage with this conversation and take it back to their communities. We’ve carefully considered what it means to bring all of this together within a discourse that could propel us forward.

Prospect.6 New Orleans *‘The Future Is Present, the Harbinger Is Home’* opens on 2 November 2024 and runs until 2 February 2025.