

New Orleans' art scene recovers

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Photo By Cheryl Gerber/For the Chronicle

In this photo taken through the window of one of New Orleans' shotgun houses, KK Projects' Katherine Bray stands where Alton du Laney and Andre Da Costa's 1,000 Bags: A Shopping Bag Tribute to Andy Warhol and Installation of OCD Dimensions is being exhibited. It's an example of the recovery of New Orleans' art scene. Photo: Cheryl Gerber, For The Chronicle

NEW ORLEANS -- Cars are no longer stuck in trees, and houses aren't smashed together anymore, but nearly three years after Hurricane Katrina, people still refer to the drive around the Lower Ninth Ward as "the devastation tour."

Passing through seemingly endless blocks of gutted, dilapidated houses, it's easy to see why.

But there is evidence of renewal, too, perhaps nowhere more so than at the corner of Caffin Avenue and Chartres Street, where a sign in the window of a modest, newly renovated house announces that it isn't just another rebuilt residence but the L9 Center for the Arts.

Inside, Keith Calhoun and Chandra McCormick's photographs of the neighborhood and its residents as they looked before Katrina adorn the walls. They're printed from what negatives the couple, who are the center's founders and executive directors, were able to salvage from the storm.

"This time, once we restore, we'll be much more organized in preserving (our photographs)," Calhoun says. "You have to have a real big loss to really appreciate things that you took for granted."

Calhoun and McCormick have lived in Spring, Texas, with their two children since the hurricane destroyed their home and studio, just a stone's throw from L9. They came back intending to make the L9 site their new home. They decided to turn it into an arts center instead, because, Calhoun says, "the kids in this community especially, they need nourishment. And art will change a community."

New Orleans is counting on that - and proving it. All over town, from the institutional level to the grass roots to the underground, people speak of newfound energy and vitality igniting the city's cultural recovery. Calhoun and McCormick are just two of many Houston-area connections to the art scene's rejuvenation.

conceptual artist Mel Chin, a Houston native who's spearheading what's billed as a "collective creative action" to support rebuilding New Orleans. "I feel I'm just part of that. There are people coming in from all over the country and different parts of the world."

At this point, however, artists are responding not only to the tragedy but also to the sense that this is where the action is.

"Everybody's excited and busy, and the wet blanket's off," says sculptor Michael Manjarris, a New Orleans native and former Houstonian. Manjarris is the project director of Sculpture for New Orleans, an initiative to secure two-year loans of outdoor works by the likes of Louise Bourgeois, Alexander Calder and James Surls -- along with top local artists -- to be placed around the city.

Contemporary galleries on Julia Street, the focal point of the city's main art district, are booming, even expanding in some cases, says Doug MacCash, art critic for the Times-Picayune.

"I would have lost that bet," says MacCash, who wrote Katrina stories in lieu of an art beat for a couple of months after the storm. "I just figured it was a matter of time before they faded, and the opposite was true."

Much of the art scene's excitement is focused around Prospect.1 New Orleans, a biennial of international contemporary art set to run Nov. 1-Jan. 18 at venues around the city, including not just museums and university galleries but also L9 and other sites in hard-hit, low-income neighborhoods.

Hometown heroes like Willie Birch and Robert Tannen, whose retrospective at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art in the Warehouse District is on view through Sept. 28, are on the biennial's roster of 81 artists, which includes Cai Guo-Qiang, William Kentridge, Julie Mehretu and Mark Bradford, who will take up residency and present work at L9.

"People forget, but the Impressionists did a show in the United States, and it was here, because in the 1870s and in the 1880s, baby, this was where it was happening," says Dan Cameron, the director and curator of Prospect.1 and the Contemporary Arts Center visual arts curator.

Since those days, New Orleans' reputation for great music, architecture and food - not to mention drive-through daiquiris and the ability to throw a great party - has relegated the visual arts to what some call "stepchild" status. Cameron and others predict Prospect.1's hoped-for 100,000 visitors will adjust that perception.

"No one really sees New Orleans as an arts destination or an arts place, but it always has been," says artist Ron Bechet, a professor at Xavier University of Louisiana who spent four months teaching at Houston Community College after the storm. "Even if no one was looking, New Orleans artists would still be making art."

While Katrina's toll on the Lower Ninth Ward remains obvious, a first-time visitor to the New Orleans Museum of Art might find it hard to believe the city's oldest fine-arts institution ever weathered a storm.

The Neoclassical building, home to a collection of more than 40,000 objects that include strong holdings in French and American art, photography, glass and African and Japanese works, looks great.

Wandering the footpaths of the museum's five-acre Sydney and Walda Besthoff Sculpture Garden, you'll stroll past an enviable collection of works by 20th-century powerhouses like Henry Moore, Robert Indiana, George Segal, Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen. Incredibly, only one outdoor sculpture suffered serious damage during the storm.

The only noticeable trace of Katrina is the absence of the oak-tree canopy that once lined the promenade leading up to the museum's entrance. Saltwater poisoning forced the trees' removal.

But Jacquelyn L. Sullivan, NOMA's deputy director, can tell you all about returning to the museum -- in a motorboat with armed guards -- six days after Katrina hit on Aug. 29, 2005, and seeing bodies floating in the water nearby.

And being forced to play "the bad guy," laying off 85 percent of the museum's staff.

And how flooding in the basement, where NOMA's offices and library are -- and where artworks not on display were stored, pre-Katrina -- meant the museum had to delay reopening until March 1, 2006, more than four months after the Ogden began welcoming visitors again.

Still, things could have been worse. Flooding in 1910 prompted the trustees of the newly formed Isaac Delgado Museum of Art, as NOMA was then called, to allocate an additional \$700 to raise the building 2.5 feet in 1911.

Sullivan found the minutes of the 1911 meeting while searching for documentation to provide to Federal Emergency Management Administration officials.

"Can you believe that, to be with FEMA officials, and saying it flooded, to find that?" she asks, pointing to the minutes in a tattered book. "It just tells you that you need to look back at the past and look back quickly and act immediately."

During Katrina, heroic efforts by eight employees -- who, along with their families, stayed in the museum during the storm -- saved the artworks from damage. But the pieces are no longer being stored in the basement.

"We've closed some galleries and the whole education wing, because that's where all the art is now," Sullivan says. "We are on notice that we can't let anything happen to the art."

While NOMA, like the Ogden, is back up to only about 60 percent of its original staff, it's doing things it never did before the storm, including staying open late on Wednesdays, allowing public access to its library, presenting bilingual materials for Spanish speakers and hiring Miranda Lash, a former curatorial assistant at Houston's Menil Collection, as its first curator of modern and contemporary art.

Fortunately for Lash, NOMA is now digitizing its collection, bringing to light treasures that had faded from institutional memory.

"For me, (every day) is like Christmas, because I'm literally looking through the shelves (saying), 'What is this doing here?' " Lash says, citing *Spanish Main*, a 1963 sculpture by minimalist Anne Truitt, which arrived at NOMA a few years after its creation.

"It's lived in a crate for four decades - never been on view in the museum," Lash says.

It is now.

"Growing up in New Orleans, it was always assumed that you were going to leave - it was just a question of when," says Jim Mulvihill, Lash's husband and NOMA's director of communications and marketing, describing a "brain drain" he says plagued the Crescent City long before Katrina hit.

Mulvihill, who most recently held a similar position at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, followed Lash to his hometown in the spring. He says the NOMA job is the first one he's had as an adult in New Orleans, which he left after graduating from high school.

In the post-Katrina era, young creative professionals have been among the new faces reversing that trend, although the city's population is still far below pre-storm levels.

The locals appreciate the influx and often thank new arrivals for their presence, say Lash and Jess Garz, program specialist for Transforma Projects, a collective of artists and creative professionals formed after the storm.

"Professionally, I've heard from so many people: 'Thank God you're here; don't leave; don't leave; don't leave!' " says Garz, a Philadelphia native who studied architecture and urban planning at Washington University in St. Louis.

Transforma started after artist Robert Ruello, a former Glassell School Core Fellow who divides his time between New Orleans and Houston, got in touch with Rick Lowe, founder of Project Row Houses. Lowe, in turn, contacted Los Angeles-based artist Sam Durant and Jessica Cusick, cultural affairs manager of

The goal wasn't to launch a specific project but rather "to facilitate support for projects that were going to happen (in New Orleans) naturally," Lowe says. "I felt the need was much broader than what any one individual artist would do. Another side of it was to also use this as an opportunity to fulfill an interest that I have in how valuable is the role that the arts play in community development."

In addition to running a Creative Recovery Mini-Grant Program and using its Web site, transformaprojects.org, as a social networking site for community groups, Transforma funds and provides support to three pilot projects, including Chin's Fundred Dollar Bill Project.

Addressing environmental conditions in New Orleans, the Fundred project recruits schoolchildren nationwide, especially those displaced by Katrina, to create millions of drawings based on the hundred-dollar bill. According to fundred.org, the project's Web site, once 300 million "Fundred" dollars have been collected at schools nationwide, an armored truck designed to run on cooking oil will make a 12,000-mile drive around the country to collect the bills and deliver them to Washington, D.C. Fundred organizers will then request that the art "money" be exchanged for actual dollars to fund citywide solutions to environmental and health issues facing post-Katrina New Orleans.

"It is a way of linking all the kids (from New Orleans) that have been scattered all over the country and allowing them to make a small contribution that will mean a lot," Chin says.

That's the performance-art side of the project. Chin is also working with landscape architects, community groups, government agencies and what Garz calls "a whole slew of scientists" to address scientific and funding issues related to environmental conditions in New Orleans.

Once those issues have been worked out, Chin plans a press conference during the biennial to bring greater attention to the project. He'll also present an installation at KK Projects, an art space in six previously abandoned structures in New Orleans' St. Roch neighborhood, although he's not a biennial participant.

KK Projects and a host of new artist-run spaces popping up in the St. Claude Arts District -- which Ruello describes as "a little bit scrappier, a little edgier, maybe in some cases a little less professional" than the high-end galleries on Julia Street -- aren't official Prospect.1 venues, but Cameron is listing them on biennial maps free.

By doing that, he hopes to convince visitors to make their biennial excursions more than "just a drive-by," Cameron says. "Really, you could stay in New Orleans for a week and just keep looking at contemporary art every day and just not get enough."

In terms of wow factor, KK Projects may top the list of art spaces visitors talk about. Most of its structures, including four shotgun houses, have been allowed to remain close to the dilapidated state in which Katrina left them. Founder Kirsha Kaechele invites both local and international artists to do installations in them, allowing their art to interact with the elements -- both natural and social, she says.

In a room in one of the houses, Los Angeles-based artist Jeffrey Forsythe found a way to coat every inch of the rotting ceiling, floor and walls with gold leaf. He then placed an ordinary chain -- the kind you find at a hardware store -- across the door, leaving it up to the viewer to decide whether or not to "trespass." Outside the room, he wrote on a wall, "You never know when you're living in the golden age," a message with special resonance in the new New Orleans, where, Cameron says, people "can use the words 'cultural renaissance' without feeling like there's any irony attached to it."

Another installation, *Hot Pink Cape Sale or The Mallard*, by local artists Kim, Scott and Benjamin Pterodactyl + Homemade Parachute is in a constant state of evolution. Its many elements include 625,000 plastic bottle caps, which Scott Pterodactyl says came from glass bottles that were donated to the Tulane University art department, which only wanted the glass.

The installation also includes tarps left over from the Pink Project, an outdoor project in the Lower Ninth Ward by Brad Pitt's Make It Right Foundation that consisted of "houses" wrapped in pink fabric that signified eco-friendly homes the foundation wants to build.

rooming house on Esplanade Avenue, has achieved near-legendary status among locals and visitors.

"Be careful, is all I can say," Chin says. "I feel like a grandfather walking around in that tree house."

There may be no atheists in foxholes or the third story of the Pterodactyl treehouse, but if you're part of the small club that has scaled its heights and lived to tell about it, you've got bragging rights in an art scene where everybody seems to know everybody.

You'll also have a bird's-eye view of piles of post-Katrina debris that the Pterodactyls, like many artists, use in their installations. Three years after the storm, such material is still easy to come by. Getting it around town is another story, says Scott Pterodactyl, who often hitches a trailer with "a ridiculous load" to the back of a motorcycle.

To avoid "being pulled over in a heartbeat" last time he hauled materials to KK Projects, he came up with an only-in-New-Orleans disguise, covering the trailer with a painted tarp and attaching a flag that read "Mardi Gras." In a town where committees work on floats in year-round secrecy, nobody gave him a hard time.

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