Art in America

Up Close: Narrative Painting

Cameron Shaw – September 29, 2016

Ladies Who Become Queens, 2015, charcoal and acrylic on paper, 42 by 28¼ inches.

THERE'S A CHAIR in artist Willie Birch's studio in New Orleans's Seventh Ward. I can't remember if he ever told me it was "his" chair but, in my many visits to his studio, I've never sat in it. I met Birch when I first moved to New Orleans six years ago, and over time he has served as mentor, friend, and, on occasion, burr. At age seventy-three, Birch is an energetic pedagogue, quick to jump up and grab a book from his shelves when making a point. It is in those moments, when the chair has been suddenly emptied of his presence, that it has looked to me its most strange. Once covered in rich, inky upholstery, the chair is now threadbare, with exposed stuffing and gaping holes such that you can see right through to the door. Even in the context of the unpretentious

shotgun house turned artist studio—cluttered with boxes, papers, works in progress, and xeroxed source images tacked to the walls—the chair is extreme, especially considering Birch is most likely to be seen on the streets of his native city sharply dressed in linen pants or sporting a crisp straw hat.

Last year, I stood in Arthur Roger Gallery, the prominent commercial venue on New Orleans's Julia Street where Birch has exhibited since 1993, observing his drawings of the Seventh Ward, acrylic-and-charcoal works on paper in velvety grisaille. I recognized familiar anti-monuments—a watering hose coiled against peeling clapboard, a forlorn pair of tennis shoes flung over an electric wire—from the artist's historically black, working-class neighborhood, located only five miles from the gallery, but seemingly a world away. Though the chair wasn't literally depicted in the gallery, I finally understood it. I appreciated its frankness and vulnerability, the way its material makeup is exposed to every visitor to Birch's studio, but I also had the alien sensation of "seeing through" a thing that should be solid. If the initial takeaway from Birch's recent works is his privileging of everyday objects—a toilet bowl, a door hinge, a bag of Camellia-brand black-eyed peas—as subjects, it is the "seeing through" that lends the works their visual and metaphoric depth. When Birch pictures five abandoned baby cribs behind a chain-link fence that encompasses the whole frame, the fence assumes a tactile realism, separating the viewer from the sad and perplexing scene on the other side. Similarly, when a barred window is left ajar, as in Morning Light on Urquhart Street (2015), the eye strains to make out what's within the dark interior.

The sense that there is more to see, that these snippets of banality are important details in an unfolding drama, was enhanced by Birch's conscious grouping of works in this solo exhibition, "Seen and Unseen: Coupling." Pairs of drawings were hung atop one another or side by side; others were arranged in clusters. The toilet bowl, complete with an upright plunger, found its mate in a neat roll of toilet paper. In an especially suggestive gathering of eight drawings of various sizes, two images of a single abandoned shoe (with a pronounced hole in its sole) met two dapper fedoras, two bags of black-eyed peas, and two darkly feathered chickens roaming the grass. (Feral chickens are not an uncommon sight in downtown New Orleans neighborhoods post-Katrina.)

HAVING WORKED in series for decades, Birch knows that these couplings and groupings have the power to broaden the meaning of his individual images. I frequently return to John Berger's book Ways of Seeing when I think of how images affect one another by proximity, but in the slim brochure that accompanied Birch's exhibition, the artist likened his associative mode of image creation to New Orleans's greatest cultural innovation: jazz. Birch explains, "an individual melody exists by itself, but within the orchestra its meaning expands." He continues, "The potential is infinite, but the core remains the same." And while this melodic potentiality is not unique to jazz, it's a telling referent, rooted both in local black life and collective work. Though it is not plainly stated in this brochure, I've learned through our conversations that Birch also relates this visual language—defined by attention to spacing, repetition, and scaling, among other qualities—to mathematician and author Ron Eglash's observations of fractal patterns in African design.

Eglash's African Fractals: Modern Computing and Indigenous Design is one of the many books Birch has jumped up to show me in our hours in his studio. Eglash examines how "patterns [of fractal geometry] are surprisingly common in traditional African designs, and some of its basic concepts are fundamental to African knowledge systems." 1 He writes:

"Fractals are characterized by the repetition of similar patterns at ever-diminishing scales. Traditional African settlements typically show this "self-similar" characteristic: circles of circles of circular dwellings, rectangular walls enclosing ever-smaller rectangles, and streets in which broad avenues branch down to tiny footpaths with striking geometric repetition."

While Eglash is clear to disavow theories of naturalism or primitivism that disregard the diversity and complexities of distinct African cultures, his argument roots fractals within a political and social commonality across the continent. "Pre-colonial African cultures," he remarks, "included many state societies, as well as an enormous number of smaller, decentralized social groups, with little political hierarchy—that is, societies that are organized 'bottom-up' rather than 'top-down.'"

Decentralized organization does not always result in fractal patterns, but Eglash's description and the potential for complex structures to develop from the bottom up resonate with Birch's work and many aspects of New Orleans's black social life, especially the city's Social Aid and Pleasure clubs. These mutual-assistance groups can be traced back to the nineteenth century, when they emerged to pool limited financial resources, providing burials and other forms of aid to their members. Over the years, the clubs developed into integral service networks and entertainment hubs with dinners, picnics, and, of course, the famous second-line parades, marked by brass bands and dancing in the streets, that have become synonymous with the city's visual performance culture.

While Birch is not a member of any club, he is no stranger to second lines and neighborhood gatherings. "I can be outside but be accepted as an insider because folks know my history and they know where I come from." 4 For Birch this position is central to his vision of the artist as observer and storyteller, one who gains and offers new perspectives by moving between worlds. Birch frequently references the fraternal and musical culture of Social Aid and Pleasure clubs indigenous to his Seventh Ward, among other neighborhoods. In Tuba (Setting Up), 2014, the gleaming titular instrument lies disassembled against gray asphalt—a moment of rest before coming to life. In the exhibition at Arthur Roger Gallery, the tuba's rounded body and protruding bell were echoed in nearby drawings of fedoras, part of the aforementioned grouping of shoes, peas, and chickens.

The chicken, pictured twice in this grouping, presents a wide range of associations for Birch and within many African diaspora contexts. The Adinkra symbol akoko nan (leg of the hen), from the Akan of West Africa, comes to mind, bearing with it the values of nurturing and discipline. You can see Adinkra symbols throughout the ironwork of New Orleans. The sankofa symbol, referenced in the title of one of Birch's chicken drawings here, Remembering a Bird Called Sankofa (2015), is likewise connected with the Akan, as well as New Orleans's historical Free

People of Color (those of African descent who were not enslaved in colonial and antebellum America). Appearing as a bird turning its head backward to take an egg off its back, or alternatively and more rudimentarily as a heartlike shape, the symbol suggests a need to reflect on the past when planning for the future.

Linked with the proverb “It is not wrong to go back for that which you have forgotten,” the sankofa symbol feels undeniably relevant today, as many natives and long-term residents struggle to make sense of and redefine their place within the rapidly changing city. And it is frequently invoked cross-generationally in post-Katrina New Orleans by activists and community leaders to signal black autonomy and resistance through collective action. For example, artist and advocate Rashida Ferdinand gave the name Sankofa Community Development Corporation to the initiative she started in the flood-ravaged Lower Ninth Ward in 2008. Part of a rebuilding effort focused on health, SCDC now includes a farmers’ market, a community garden, and youth programs. The symbol is also invoked through the character Madame Sankofa in Ecohybridity: Love Song for NOLA, a roving visual opera and movement-building project spearheaded by artist Kai Lumumba Barrow. Created for the tenth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina in August of last year, Ecohybridity unites intergenerational black queer feminists through verse, dance, song, and installation work designed to challenge narratives about the inevitability of black dislocation.

IN THINKING about these activist practices in present-day New Orleans and Birch’s visual language, it is interesting to consider another aspect of Eglash’s research: the lusona sand drawings of the Chokwe people of Angola. As Eglash explains, “The Chokwe made use of these figures to create group identity. The reports [from missionaries] indicate that the lusona were used in an age-grade initiation system; rituals that allowed each member to achieve the status of reaching the next, more senior level of identity.” 5 Many works in Birch’s “Seen and Unseen” exhibition have patterns of interconnected circular objects (fields of gravel, bags of black-eyed peas, chandelier beads, and wildflower stamens) that resemble the lusona’s arrays of dots surrounded by curving lines. Although the similarity is incidental—Birch did not intend to create the Chokwe’s forms, which require the uninterrupted motion of the drawing utensil around the dots—it is noteworthy. The fact that the Chokwe also used the sand drawings “to deflate the ego of overconfident European visitors, who found themselves unable to replicate the lusona of many children,” 6 as Eglash remarks, suggests an apropos emblem of pride and connection in post-Katrina New Orleans, where so many black residents have been displaced by largely white newcomers.

Through this lens, Birch’s tuba, black-eyed peas, and even fedoras take on the meaning embedded in the sankofa chicken, suggesting that the traditions of New Orleans must be preserved as both a mode of celebration and an avenue of resistance. Even when modest and ordinary, these traditions are important for the way they resist the homogenizing impulse in dominant American culture, and represent the rich history of black Americans in the city.

Often the desire to build upon traditions and share knowledge between generations and across peer networks seems to propel black political, social, and aesthetic movements in post-Katrina New Orleans. The place-based project “Exhibit BE” turned an abandoned housing project in the

West Bank (a suburb of New Orleans across the Mississippi River) into a five-story graffiti environment and community celebration through the collective action of forty artists. Its most salient feature was a tree-house-like structure painted with revolutionary figures from black history by local graffiti artist, muralist, and co-organizer Brandan Odums. The loosely defined artist-and-activist group Blights Out uses performance, education, and advocacy to address issues of displacement and affordable housing. Its members hope to purchase an abandoned home and convert it into a community resource center to empower potential homebuyers.

The self-organizing impulses of a new generation of black artists in New Orleans—who draw on Social Aid and Pleasure clubs, the DIY spirit engendered by Hurricane Katrina, and movements like Occupy Wall Street—connect to Birch's work and its formal and conceptual roots in diaspora experience. In a city where many black residents report themselves worse off than eleven years ago despite biased narratives of post-Katrina "progress," the "bottom up" approach remains the most viable option for moving forward.