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T The New York Times Style Magazine

In New Orleans, A White Picket Fence That's Seen Better Days

Having come upon a broken-down partition on a walk, Willie Birch decided to paint what he saw: a fitting metaphor for his city and the country as a whole.

By Alwa Cooper – January 21, 2022



Willie Birch's "Broken Dreams (Tattered White Picket Fence)" (2020-21). Photo credit ©Willie Birch, courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York

In each installment of The Artists, T highlights a recent or little-seen work by a Black artist, along with a few words from that artist putting the work in context. This week, we're looking at a painting by Willie Birch, whose next show, at Fort Gansevoort Gallery in New York City, opens March 3.

Name: Willie Birch

Age: 79

Based in: New Orleans

Originally from: New Orleans

5 Ninth Avenue, New York, NY 10014 | gallery@fortgansevoort.com | (917) 639 - 3113

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Where and when did you make this work? The piece was made in 2020 and 2021 in a section of New Orleans called the 7th Ward. I just happened to walk down my block one day and see this fence, which I'd never seen before. Nobody was on the street; it was a sunny day, and when you think of New Orleans, you think of people on the street, but during that particular time-frame, it was like a ghost city.

Can you describe what is going on in the work? It's an image depicting a battered white picket fence, and there's a ghostlike quality to it; as a matter of fact, the fence, given the broken pieces within it, seems to me to feel like a skeleton. The white picket fence is supposed to be a symbol of prosperity, but this fence I was looking at said the exact opposite. It spoke to where we are as a city and as a country. The image is also life-size — it's 60-by-90-inches, I believe — so standing in front of it, you can feel the monumental impact of what it's depicting. I'm a storyteller, as far as I'm concerned, and the piece just seemed to say everything I wanted to say about this time in history.

What inspired you to make it? New Orleans is to me the most culturally relevant city in America and a communal city, too. At the time I was working on this piece, it seemed like the idea of America was coming apart. It was like a double disaster: not just the pandemic but also the insurrection, the coup, call it what you want — the overthrow of what we know as America. I think we're still feeling the effects of that, in terms of where are we, who are we and how we put this thing back together, if that's possible. The image is also in black and white — I happened to get a major grant when I was living in New York to come back to New Orleans and do a body of work dealing with growing up here, and when I returned, I realized that the New Orleans I had grown up in was very different than what I had thought it was. New Orleans is known for its color, but I came back with the deliberate intention of finding another way to speak to what the city was about. It's my attempt to look at the place through another lens.

What's a work of art in any medium that changed your life? Maybe my answer harks back to the idea of looking at things from a communal point of view, rather than from an individual one; since my work is autobiographical, there's no one piece of art that I can point to. And New Orleans *is* music, so I don't think I can point to a specific musical form, either. That seems too limiting. You can come to New Orleans and stay for a very long time and never really understand it, but I always tell people to visit on a weekend, because on Sundays there are these things called second lines that really encapsulate the city's identity. It's everyday people following a band down the street, driven by the beat of the drum, which is the heartbeat of all of us. That communal ritual takes over and creates a revelry; there's no way you could be at a second line and not feel the full impact of where you are. It gives us a united cause. Everybody participates, but it is foundational to Black communities. So it's hard for me to define how I arrived at what I do in terms of my image-making, but the idea of a collective culture offers me the opportunity to draw from different sources. Everything I do is layered.