

FORT GANSEVOORT



Willie Birch Chronicling Our Lives: 1987-2021 exhibition at Fort Gansevoort

March 14, 2022



Installation image from the exhibition *Chronicling Our Lives: 1987-2021*, a solo exhibition of the artist Willie Birch.
Courtesy of Fort Gansevoort.

The presentation features large paintings on paper and painted papier-mâché sculptures created between 1987 and 1996, complemented by a new monumental, mural-like work executed in black and white. Together, the twenty-four works on view reflect Birch's perspective on the beauty and complexities of the human experience.

As a social critic, Birch dismantles the artificial construct of race and points to commonalities between visual and cultural forms throughout the world. While both the artist and his work are closely identified with his native New Orleans, the works on view at Fort Gansevoort were made predominantly while Birch lived in Brooklyn, New York, in the 1980s and early 1990s.

The colorful, narrative paintings from his Folkloric series and text-driven paintings from his Dialogue series depict his impressions of city life and current events in crisp forms and vibrant hues. The figurative papier-mâché sculptures on view, likewise created during this period,

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metabolize material culture and historical references into three-dimensional expressions of human resilience in the face of hardship.

Through these works in juxtaposition, the exhibition serves as a chronicle of one visionary artist's keen observations of the world around him.

Inspired by the visual vernacular of Folk Art, Birch's expressive Folkloric paintings render irrelevant the long-assumed boundaries between "high" and "low" art. Recording contemporary urban life with immediacy and humanity, these paintings are presented in hand-crafted papier-mâché frames decorated with text and symbolic imagery that echoes the subject matter on his picture plane. Numerous works from this series depict the impact of violence in American communities. In *Ritual of Inevitable Violence* (1989), a group of children casually play with candy guns, even placing the imitation weapons in their mouths.

The viewer is implored to imagine how the allure of such toys might impact the young boys' futures. Painted in the same year and featuring a colorful storefront window display, *Martin Luther King, McDonald's and Miami's Burning* pays homage to the victims of the infamous 1989 Miami police shooting and subsequent race riots on Martin Luther King Jr. day.

With its arrangement of TV monitors broadcasting various news footage, the composition isolates examples of racism separated by geography and time, yet unifies the array of individually framed events within the larger handcrafted frame. Layered visually, and teeming with symbolic references, this complex work makes clear that racism and marginalization are universal human experiences not unique to one specific group of people. In contrast, the domestic interior scene *Keeping in Touch* (1987) showcases the private home as a safe domain in which Birch's subject finds comfort in the everyday activity of talking on a telephone.

The unknown content of the conversation is immaterial as the composition focuses on the basic act of communication.

In the politically engaged *Dialogue* series, graphic paintings on paper are filled with fragments of text sourced from radio, television and newspapers. With articulated divisions of space and dense accumulations of language, these dynamic compositions employ the eye-catching visual strategies of commercial billboard advertising. Many of these works herald the messages of influential politicians and thought leaders, while others record the scourges of colonialism and terrorism in American History.

Alongside the paintings on view, Birch's papier-mâché sculptures resonate with equal immediacy and clarity. Beguiled in the mid-1980s by a crucifix made of the deceptively humble medium (an amalgam of paper pieces bound with an adhesive) that he saw in St. Louis Cathedral in New Orleans, the artist began using it in his own practice. With its tactile quality and affordability, papier-mâché allowed not only inexpensive production and transport of the works Birch made with it, but also another means to explore complex and oftentimes loaded assumptions about value and cultural heritage.

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Each sculpture on view at Fort Gansevoort is constructed from an armature of foam core or wood covered with papier-mâché and paint. Many of Birch's sculptures contain near-to-life-size human figures, asserting their physical presence in relationship to a viewer's own body. Other sculptural objects relate to themes of slavery, hate crimes and the cycle of poverty. Stylistically, they all draw upon artistic influences from various cultures across history. The painted figure of a boy featured in *Bird Catcher* (1991) recalls the Ancient Egyptian tradition of painted polychrome sculptures. The influence of Egyptian art is also seen in the vignette painted on the cage on top of which the boy sits. Through the shared activity of catching birds, the painted and sculptural imagery forge connections between the ancient and the contemporary. The nails protruding from the roof of Old Matthews Murkland Presbyterian Church (1996) evoke the Nkisi figures of the Congo. Tracing the influence of global artistic production and spiritual practices on American material culture, Birch establishes with this body of work a fluid narrative of history that is transcontinental and cyclical.

A coda and climax to the exhibition, the monumental black and white work *Broken Dreams* (*Tattered White Picket Fence*), created by Birch in 2020-21 and on view for the first time, presents a dilapidated white picket fence the artist encountered on a deserted street in New Orleans. This single image, silent and powerful, subverts the beloved American symbol of domestic security, prosperity and tranquility. It resonates with the themes that course through Birch's earlier works while pointing to the future direction of his art.

In the artist's words:

"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... 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."