

FORT GANSEVOORT

BROOKLYN RAIL

Willie Birch: Chronicling Our Lives: 1987-2021

Amanda Millet-Sorsa – May 3, 2022



Willie Birch, *Lotto Dreams*, 1995, Painted papier-mâché and mixed media, 57 × 18 × 15 inches. ©Willie Birch. Courtesy the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York.

Willie Birch has exhibited his work in New York for the first time since 2000 at the Fort Gansevoort Gallery located in the Meatpacking District. Originally from New Orleans, Birch is no stranger to New York City. Aside from *Broken Dreams (Tattered White Picket Fence)* (2020–21), the exhibition centers on Birch's New York period (1983–1997). Three floors of this historic Greek Revival row house (built in 1849) light up with Birch's probing practice that deploys four styles: painted papier-mâché sculpture, sartorial reliefs, works on paper with bold paint and text, and narrative watercolors with adorned frames highlighting scenes from African American life.

On the ground floor are two papier-mâché houses: *Lotto Dreams* (1995) is an allegorical house, open like a dollhouse, while *Old Matthews Murkland Presbyterian Church* (1996) is a house of worship. New Orleans celebrates Carnival with masks and floats made with papier mâché, a lightweight and resourceful medium, also often used in theater scenography; Birch uses it here to similar effect. The sight of *Lotto Dreams*, a building balancing vertically on top of a man's head, is fantastical, nonsensical, and humorous. His thoughts are housed as a chapeau, obscuring his

FORT GANSEVOORT

face and the somber word “Reality” painted on his nape. As one moves around the sculpture, one observes a bedroom interior and a couple making love on a mattress. Another façade features a couple in stereotypical tourist gear traveling and at the beach, while another shows people lining up to buy lottery tickets outside a booth. Different tiers for different attainments suggest the hope and chance that a win could afford. The church is closed off to the outsider, its Western exterior architecture adorned with broken glass and sea shells as *nkisicharms*, painted copper bells to call on descendants, and hammered rusted nails, recalling Congolese *nkondi* figures, all pointing to the African spirits inhabiting this building. *In Search of Warriors (For David Diskell)* (1996), a shirt also invoking *nkisi* charms, includes a chest cavity for protection, symbolic of the person’s spirit. Death is part of a transition from the material to the immaterial; here, it is celebrated in this relief work.



Willie Birch, *Broken Dreams*, 2020-2021, Charcoal and Acrylic on Paper, 60 × 90 inches. ©Willie Birch. Courtesy the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York.

Two painted works on paper in different styles address gun violence: *Remington Ball and Cap 1840* (1993) with fragmented text making historical references, and the representational framed work *Ritual of Inevitable Violence* (1989) depicting a group of boys playing with guns in an urban yard, the painted frame decorated with symbols of skeletons and skulls. *A Prayer for Latin America* (1987) extends the artist’s empathy to other communities suffering from loss and death through violence. Birch is at home with the honesty and sincerity found in the styles of self-taught artists, while also acting as a documentarian within his community. Text is present in this show both in painting and sculpture, key names and phrases recounting real-life narratives as if browsing through TV or radio channels, as in *Terror at the Towers* (1993–94).

FORT GANSEVOORT

As we climb to the second floor, we're faced with *Cherokee (Indian Nation)* (1994), a tall, totemic, textured text painting on paper where the words reveal the close ties between African Americans and Indigenous Nations, both oppressed by America's social system. There is a compassion felt for hardships endured by minority communities in the text piece *Korean Women (We are Americans)* (1994). The colors are bold green, red, yellow, black, fresh from the paint tube and urgent, and its words, written in a mélange of capital letters, blocks, cursive, highlights, and handwriting, reflect spontaneity and freedom in arrangement, an approach close to jazz rhythms referencing Birch's deep roots in New Orleans music. The framed *Johnny Makes the Nightly News* (1988) presents a moment of spectacle with gun violence, death, and police in New York City and the sorrow expressed by bystanders on the sidewalk, a scene still common today, highlighted by Black Lives Matter movements. The images of pills, syringes, and skulls on the handmade frame in addition to the small white face on the TV screen recount a story of terror and loss in African American communities. *The Last Goodbye* (1988) portrays a Christian church funeral in Brooklyn, the front row wearing white in the Yoruba tradition. An African presence is accentuated by the bejeweled charcoal-black frame with profiles of African sculptures. *O.J. (Guilty or Not Guilty)* (1996), a white-collar suit in papier mâché, symbol of the American working man with a bright red tie, is peppered with vertical letters in relief spelling out "Guilty," "DNA," "Not Guilty," and "Race" among other key words that obsessed American mass culture with this trial. Eyes of differently colored irises watch us.

On the third floor of the building, one comes across a life-sized, papier-mâché floor sculpture, *Bird Catcher* (1991), and three busts. The bright orange of the pigeon's feet is stark in contrast to the gray of the littered city sidewalk, its plinth includes a frieze indicating the passing time of buildings, clouds, taxis, and children. The reliefs on the birdcage are ancient-Egyptian-style paintings of bird catchers evoking Africa's old cultures and the freedom of a bird in flight. The bird-catching boy carries a chest cavity of personal charms; the whole scene is a cycle of life as the boy seeks out his ambitions in ornithology proudly wearing an Audubon t-shirt, but also death, as a bird trapped in a cage conveys freedom restrained. The scale of this polychrome sculpture memorializes a moment in urban childhood much like the busts memorialize everyday people with *The Couple* (1993–94) and *Woman with Ruby Red Lips and Dreadlocks* (1990–2003). One recalls painted classical Greek sculptures and busts made from precious stones in the European tradition. Birch, however, uses papier mâché, both fragile and strong, to celebrate the African American man and woman, breathing life into these glorified portraits with ruby red lips, dreadlocks, and brown-black skin. *Boy with Kite* (1987), hung near to the sculptures, has its title written in relief letters on the frame. One can observe a helicopter's surveillance from afar marking a somber tone to this dilapidated place where a boy finds joy in flying a kite, memorializing this ordinary instance as a moment of freedom as the artist obsessively filled every red brick in the distant buildings.

FORT GANSEVOORT



Installation view of "Chronicling Our Lives: 1987 to 2021." Photography copyright Willie Birch, courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York.

The works on textured paper and painted text in this room speak loudly, with a laughing mouth agape in *Black Humor* (1994), bringing attention to the names Whoopi Goldberg and Bill Cosby, icons of comedy, and separately, the inclusive text in *Violence is More Today (Than it was in the '40s, '50s, & '60s)* (1994) with “progressive white person” and “Sally” at the center, a white woman talking on the phone. These works have undulating surfaces, eye-grabbing words, and reference difficult topics within American culture such as “diversity”—what did it mean then and how has it evolved today? *Sweet Honey in the Rock* (1987–89) is a framed, colorful narrative work: Civil Rights activist Ella Baker’s words are written out in the background while an a cappella group of women at Carnegie Hall is enjoyed by an audience whose backs are only visible to us. A moment of solace, hope, and unity, a different urgency to the violence alluded to in other works. In the same pictorial style, we witness a routine domestic moment, a woman at home while watching the news in *Keeping Up With the Iran Contra hearings* (1987). Both works connect to reality and everyday moments of the Black experience.

In his village, a griot tells his people stories. Birch has been the storyteller all along, recording the life he sees within his community through these handmade objects of different original styles unique to his eye and hand. Let’s listen to these chronicles.