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FLOWERSM THROUGH THE CRACKS:

How Hurricane Katrina led to a golden era of art in New Orleans

Doug Maccash – June 27 2025



Photo by Brett Duke

Artist Willie Birch sits in a chair that once belonged to his mother, near an unfinished drawing, in his studio in New Orleans on Wednesday, November 29, 2023

It was just 30 days after Hurricane Katrina marauded across New Orleans when artist Jeffrey Holmes and his then-wife Andrea Garland hauled the waterlogged furniture out of their art gallery on lower St. Claude Avenue. They piled the moldy debris on the neutral ground, webbed it with yellow caution tape and sprayed it with graffiti, including the inscription “RIP Lower Ninth Ward.”

Here and there, the couple placed mirrors in the debris so onlookers would see themselves in the devastation. Though there was little audience in the evacuated city to appreciate the exhibit, the media discovered the display and it appeared everywhere from The New York Times to CNN to Al Jazeera.

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Holmes said he had the urge to create something in reaction to the cataclysm, because “that’s what artists do when they’re suffering.”

Today, he looks back on the installation, which he dubbed "Toxic Art," as an early sign of the golden era of creativity that was to come.

“The flowers were already coming through the cracks,” he said.

Art capital

Nobody could have guessed that the destruction wrought by the 2005 hurricane would lead to one of the most significant periods of artistic expression in New Orleans' history, one that still reverberates, 20 years later.

But that’s what happened.

The nation was acutely conscious of its southernmost city on the Mississippi after the disaster. And for a time, New Orleans became an art capital.

Truth is, if you add up the ever-evolving music scene, the long-entrenched community of bohemian painters, poets, writers and actors, plus the artistry of Carnival, New Orleans had always been an art capital.

But starting in 2007, a wave of Katrina-related works surged forth, capturing the city's anguish and fueling its drive to rebuild.

“New Orleans is the most important city in America — this poor place,” said local visual artist Willie Birch. “There ain’t no place like this.”

Legendary filmmaker Spike Lee would create a 4-hour HBO documentary about the storm's aftermath, titled "When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts," and enlist frequent collaborator and composer Terence Blanchard to create a deeply personal score. The New Orleans-born trumpet player would go on to create a Grammy-winning jazz album based on that work.

Another famous local, Wendell Pierce, would star in a haunting outdoor production of Samuel Beckett's "Waiting for Godot," staged in the flooded wasteland near the collapse of the Industrial Canal floodwall.

Even Hollywood leading man Brad Pitt got in the act. Pitt set out to do nothing less than rebuild an entire neighborhood by enticing some of the world’s best architects, including Frank Gehry, Thom Mayne and Shigeru Ban, to design earth-friendly, affordable houses for residents of the obliterated Lower 9th Ward. Eventually, Pitt’s nonprofit organization, known as Make It Right, built 109 strikingly modernistic dwellings, though not without some controversy.

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Visual arts blossom

All artistic endeavors seemed to take on a new energy and importance. But nowhere was the creative explosion more powerful than in the visual arts, where sculpture, painting and performance particularly signaled the city's struggle.

"Artists were pushing themselves to make radical, bold work," largely because the very survival of the city was at stake, said Miranda Lash, who at 24, was serving as the New Orleans Museum of Art's curator of contemporary art.

It was "a moment to make a case for self-preservation," she said. "There was a lot of momentum for artists to play a role in the community," and "there was a deep sense of purpose."

In the first two years after the storm and flood, New Orleans artists addressed the tragedy head-on.

NOMA lined the walls of a gallery with hundreds of photos of the destruction by local photographers.

Artist Eden Gass created a black American flag, embroidered with black stars and bars, which she ceremonially burned in protest of the federal government's slow response to the crisis.

Other artists produced installations inside of formerly flooded homes, built sculpture from debris, recorded scenes of the ruin in paintings, and likewise used their creativity as catharsis.

And that was just the beginning.

'New frontier'

On the third anniversary of Katrina, as another monster storm named Gustav barreled toward south Louisiana, one of the most famous artists in the world stalked the streets of New Orleans.

The British graffiti artist known as [Banksy had made the walls of the city his canvas](#), secretly creating a suite of small murals devoted to the population's seemingly endless recovery struggle. His wistful artworks captured the mood of the moment.

The best of Banksy's works depicted a young girl holding an umbrella over her head in an unsuccessful attempt to stay dry. As a coy reference to the failed levee system, Banksy had equipped her with an umbrella that not only leaked, but it seemed to be the source of the deluge.

Ogden Museum of Art curator Bradley Sumrall said, "the larger art world" may have been more interested in the superstar's visit than the resident population, which was otherwise engaged. There also was some resistance to the intrusion.

"Locals were a little tender to another outsider coming into their city and interpreting their stories," he said.

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Still, the out-of-town artists kept coming, said New Orleans artist Terrence Sanders-Smith, who founded Artvoices magazine to document the post-catastrophe art scene.

“Artists saw this place as the new frontier,” he said.

Prospect is born

By 2008, the city was aboil with art.

California-born curator Kirsha Kaechele transformed a handful of unoccupied houses in the St. Roch neighborhood into an experimental art laboratory.

Energetic sculptors Michael Manjarris and Peter Lundberg installed scores of modern sculptures along the roadways.

New galleries popped up on St. Claude Avenue, and established galleries and museums seemed more precious and popular than ever.

Then there was the dawning of a new art festival, which promised to become the visual art equivalent of the Jazz Fest.

Dan Cameron, the former curator of the New Museum in New York and a longtime Jazz Fest fan, founded an ambitious, multi-million-dollar art festival called Prospect.1, which featured works by a cast of 80 international stars in 24 scattered locations across the city. The contemporary art triennial continues to be held in New Orleans.

The centerpiece was a three-story Noah’s Ark, fashioned by Los Angeles artist Mark Bradford in the Lower 9th Ward. The landlocked boat, which was built from recycled plywood and coated in tattered movie posters, was an ironic symbol of the uncertainty of survival.

As the L.A. Times art critic sardonically wrote at the time: “If only FEMA had been this prepared.”

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Photo by Micheal Democker Art Patron Stoll through the Willie Birch exhibit, "Home Sweet Home," at the Arthur Roger Gallery on Julia Street on October 6, 2007

Birch was also featured in the festival at the New Orleans Museum of Art. His huge, black-and-white cityscape drawings depicted churches, homes and street corners in various stages of rebuilding, as well as the realities of everyday life after the storm.

The artist contends that the greatest form of creativity is culture, which is why the city, in particular, ignited with so many inspired works. All forms of New Orleans expression were part of the mix, he said, from papier mâché Mardi Gras masks, to yard art sculpture, to second-line parades and blues, jazz and rap music.

"The culture, that's our enrichment, that's our food," Birch said. "That's what nurtures us."

Last traces

Today, evidence of post-Katrina artworks are almost as scarce as the aerosol X's left behind on houses by first responders.

Erica Larkin, a metal sculptor and meticulous welder, began conceiving of her minimalist response to Katrina shortly after the storm.

It would simply be a series of uniform, 10-foot-tall poles, with glass rings — made by Larkin's husband Mitchel Gaudet — to mark the height of the 2005 flood. Elysian Fields Avenue, which bisects the city from Lake Pontchartrain to the Mississippi River, seemed the ideal place to install a series of the telltale markers.

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Larkin feared that even in the wild west atmosphere of 2008, no one was going to permit her to erect an art project on a public neutral ground. So, she and her husband decided “it was guerrilla art time.”

As they made plans to produce and install the poles on the sly, a generous art funder, the Joan Mitchell Foundation, offered to sponsor and manage the project.

In the end, 12 “Watermarks” rose on Elysian Fields as one of the most effective documentary artworks inspired by the disaster. It stood for 17 years, becoming one of the very last public artworks devoted to storm.

But this spring, the poles were gone. They’d been removed for renovation by Arts New Orleans, a nonprofit that supports arts and culture in the city.

The “Watermarks” are expected to be back in place by Aug. 25 to mark the 20th anniversary of Hurricane Katrina.

“I’m proud we did them,” Larkin said.