

# FORT GANSEVOORT

**WILLIE BIRCH**

***Willie Birch: Paintings from  
1998-2019***

**May 24 – July 31, 2021**

**An online exhibition  
in conversation with  
Dr. Leslie King Hammond**



Willie Birch, *Sunday Morning*, 2004, Acrylic and charcoal on paper, 72 x 144 inches (triptych).

Beginning Monday, May 24th, Fort Gansevoort will present *Willie Birch: Paintings from 1998-2019*, the gallery's first exhibition with New Orleans-based artist Willie Birch. Born in 1942, Birch has dedicated his artistic practice to capturing the legendary spirit of his Louisiana community in works that depict the citizens and environments of his beloved hometown. This online exhibition will be accompanied by a conversation between the artist and Dr. Leslie King Hammond, the artist, curator and art historian who is Founding Director of the Center for Race and Culture at the Maryland Institute College of Art, where she is also Graduate Dean Emeritus.

The multiple realities of New Orleans take center stage in the painterly compositions of Willie Birch. His work is part of a profound lineage, linked to that of Jacob Lawrence, Romare Bearden, William Henry Johnson, Betye Saar, and other celebrated figures who have cultivated the tradition of African American narratives within the larger context of cultural history. In his monumental triptych *Sunday Morning* (2004), a centerpiece of this exhibition, Birch documents a service at his sister's church. Here, we see congregants caught in the midst of a spiritual exercise, holding space for one another within a domain that is integral to their community. At the heart of Birch's composition are two musicians, a drummer and a pianist, who provide the rhythm that animates their audience. With this work, Birch seeks to convey the power of these weekly gatherings to his community's wellbeing, stating, "We can express ourselves on that day in the manner that we choose and, you know, life just goes forward. We have been nurtured because we have just validated ourselves."

Specific subjects repeat throughout *Willie Birch: Paintings from 1998-2019*, and each one is consecrated by Birch's creative vision. *Dapper Young Man* (1999) and *Waiting for the Procession* (1999) exemplify the artist's meticulous approach to depicting the human form. Both of these environmental portraits feature well-dressed individuals whose confident self-possession confers a degree of authentic grandeur. The folds and grooves of the subjects' attire drape their bodies elegantly, suggesting the distinctive pride unique to New Orleans natives. Dr. Leslie King Hammond describes Birch's emphasis on the beauty of

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everyday people as a transcendental effort: “In the monumentality of Willie Birch’s imagery, the humanity and spirituality of these New World citizens...is revealed, a confirmation of majesty, cultural richness, and sense of personhood.”

Along with the people and traditions of New Orleans, Birch also captures the streets of the city, highlighting the architecture of the residences and everyday objects he sees as sacred devices. *An Altar for Villere Street* (2015) depicts a car parked outside of a home with its hood covered haphazardly by a tarp. This covering is secured with strings and a large rock, forming a layered, abstract composition that speaks to the process of creating an altar of one’s own. “I believe people make altars without even realizing they are making one because certain things are sacred to them,” Birch has remarked in reference to this painting. For the artist, such quotidian acts are divine in nature and can be understood as fundamental to the culture of New Orleans.

Birch conjures and shares the myriad forms of beauty present in his beloved hometown. Over the decades, he has chronicled its wealth of subjects with equal parts technical precision and emotional intellect, becoming an irreplaceable documentarian of New Orleans from his singular vantage point within its bedrock community. Birch is the embodiment of the late jazz patriarch Ellis Marsalis’ observation that “in New Orleans, culture doesn’t come down from on high, it bubbles up from the streets.”

*Willie Birch was born in New Orleans, Louisiana in 1942. He has received a BA from Southern University and an MFA from the Maryland Institute College of Art. His work has been exhibited at the Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans, LA; New Orleans Museum of Art, New Orleans, LA; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY; The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY; Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, Adams, MA; Tucson Museum of Art, Tucson, AZ; Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, Durham, NC; Speed Museum, Lexington, KY; Hilliard Art Museum, Lafayette, LA; Museum of Contemporary Art, Cleveland, OH; Museum of African American Art, Tampa, FL; and the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, Scottsdale, AZ among others. Birch’s work is included in the public collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY; New Orleans Museum of Art, New Orleans, LA; Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, AR; Ogden Museum of Southern Art, New Orleans, LA; and the Speed Museum, Louisville, KY among others.*