

FORT GANSEVOORT



Willie Birch

Up on the Roof

Fort Gansevoort, 5 Ninth Avenue, New York, NY

Opening: Wednesday, September 10, 2025, 6-8PM

On View: September 11, 2025 – November 8, 2025

New York...Beginning September 10, 2025, Fort Gansevoort will present *Up on the Roof*, its second solo exhibition with noted Louisiana-based artist Willie Birch. The twelve large-scale paintings on view, all exhibited for the first time, feature the people, landscapes, and architectural structures Birch has observed in his New Orleans community. Beginning in the year 2000, Birch turned away from the vibrant colors characteristic of his oeuvre and began layering charcoal marks and smudges with white acrylic paint on paper. Since then, he has committed fully to this formal strategy, working exclusively in a monochrome palette to render poignant works that mingle references to current events with nuanced observation of the visible quotidian world—images that reflect Birch’s understanding of humanity in all its complex and contradictory truth.

The seemingly sundry objects that fill Birch’s frame accrue to more than the sum of their parts, manifesting as visual metaphors containing deep meaning and power. Close observation of his compositions reveals allusions to the African diaspora, global art history, American politics, and all facets of New Orleans culture. Constructed with an abundance of personal meaning, these works also reflect the collective truths of the community in which Birch has grounded his practice.

The exhibition at Fort Gansevoort provides a prelude to the artist’s touring museum retrospective *Willie Birch: Stories to Tell*. Co-organized by the New Orleans Museum of Art and American Federation of Arts, the exhibition will open in 2026 at the California African American Museum in Los Angeles and travel to New Orleans Museum of Art, and Museum of Contemporary Art, Jacksonville in Florida, with an accompanying catalog published by Yale University Press.

Melting Snow #3 (2025) documents the historic snowstorm that swept through New Orleans on January 21, 2025—an unexpected occurrence in a city that rarely experiences frigid winter weather. Birch’s depiction of his garden in the aftermath of the snowfall captures that fleeting moment, at once magical and mystifying. His rendering of the natural phenomenon acknowledges the catastrophic effects of global climate change while also alluding to the perseverance and adaptability of humanity. The melting snow reveals a triangular trellis construction suspended over a cross-shaped flower box out of which blades of grass re-emerge, a simple yet profound testament to the resilience of nature. Beyond the garden gate, the triangle motif repeats, appearing as cast shadows on the clapboard siding of a neighboring home. For Birch, these details teem with symbolic power: these triangular forms allude to

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the pyramids of Ancient Egypt and, by extension, acknowledge the African diasporic communities that have shaped the culture and physical appearance of New Orleans. The cross-shaped flower box represents a crossroads, a critical point when a decision must be made. The snow melting into water alludes to cleansing and renewal. With a foreboding dark sky overhead, Birch's composition acknowledges the simultaneous solemnity and joy of the unexpected snowstorm—an event which connected the New Orleans community in a collective experience while portending destructive environmental changes to come.

Occupying the entire second floor of the gallery, the sprawling twelve-part artwork *Procession for "Kidd" Jordan: A Fitting Farewell* (2023-2024), is an elegiac homage to a respected New Orleans musician and dear friend of the artist. This multi-panel installation follows Jordan's jazz funeral procession, depicting the unique New Orleans tradition in which a brass band and the family of the deceased form the "first line" of a lively parade, followed by a "second line" of revelers who join in dancing with handkerchiefs and umbrellas. Birch's narrative unfolds from right to left, in the opposite direction of the Western convention of reading and against the flow of traffic. Here, dramatic chromatic contrast and a hazy atmospheric effect materialize the artist's heightened emotional experience of Jordan's funeral. Repetitive frames form a visual rhythm that evokes the musical rhythm of the drum played in the second line. A deluge of rain surrounds the unwavering crowd who march on against the elements in grief and celebration, their defiant spirit and collectivism radiating from this loving portrait of the artist's New Orleans community.

Two Roofers and a Ladder (2022) honors the everyday achievements of the individuals who construct and maintain the built environment while their hard work goes unnoticed. Contrasting dark and light horizontal lines form the rungs of the ladder and siding of the house, echoing the repetitive rhythm of manual work: here again Birch conjures the musical cadences that pulse through the city of New Orleans. Though deeply rooted in place, this painting is also timeless in its rendering. Like the peasant laborers of Gustave Courbet's 1849 masterpiece *The Stone Breakers*, Birch's depiction of his subjects rings true to the tangible reality of their physical conditions. Wearing wide brimmed hats that conjure their art historical French counterparts, the crouched roofers, cautious and stoic, pause for a moment of rest and relief from the blistering Southern sun. Standing in for Birch himself, the roofers enjoy an elevated perspective and a higher level of perception won through long, hard experience. From the rooftop, they can see everything.

About the Artist

Willie Birch was born in New Orleans, Louisiana in 1942. Deeply engaged in social criticism, his artwork dismantles artificial constructs of race and class, pointing to commonalities between visual and cultural forms throughout the world. Birch received a BA from Southern University and an MFA from the Maryland Institute College of Art. His artwork 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 Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY; The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA; The Hammer Museum, UCLA, Los Angeles, CA; Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, North Adams, MA; Tucson Museum of Art, Tucson, AZ; Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, Durham, NC; Speed Art Museum, Lexington, KY; Hilliard Art Museum, Lafayette, LA; Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland, Cleveland, OH; Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, Scottsdale, AZ, and Fort Gansevoort, New York, NY, among others. Birch's work has been featured in the New Orleans Biennial, Prospect.1 (2008-09) and Prospect.5 (2021-22). His work is included in the public collections of the Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, VA; Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, AR; The Delaware Contemporary, Wilmington, DE; Flint Institute of Arts, Flint, MI; The Hammer Museum, UCLA, Los Angeles, CA; Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge, MA; The Legacy Museum, Equal Justice Initiative, Montgomery, AL; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY; Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis, MN; The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY; New Orleans Museum of Art, New Orleans, LA; Ogden Museum of Southern Art, New

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Orleans, LA; Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, PA; San José Museum of Art, San José, CA; Sheldon Museum of Art, Lincoln, NE; Speed Art Museum, Louisville, KY; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY, among other institutions.

Birch was recently awarded a 2025 Trellis Art Fund Milestone Grant in recognition of his creative excellence over the course of his career. Birch is also the recipient of numerous awards and grants including the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival and Foundation, Community Partnership Grant (2021); United States Artists Fellowship, James Baldwin Fellow (2014); National Conference of Artists (NCA) Lifetime Achievement Award Artist in Residence, RedLine Milwaukee, WI (2013); Joan Mitchell Foundation Grant (2006); The Pollock Krasner Foundation Award (2006); John Simon Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship in sculpture (1993); and the National Endowment for the Arts Visual Artist Fellowship Grant (1989-90 and 1984-85). He was the artist-in-residence at The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York from 1977-78. On the occasion of The Studio Museum in Harlem reopening in November 2025, Birch's work will be exhibited in an installation honoring the legacy of the museum's signature Artist in Residence program.

For sales inquiries please contact:

Ethan Chevalier, Fort Gansevoort, ethan@fortgansevoort.com, +1 917 639 3113

Caption and courtesy information:

Willie Birch

Two Roofers and a Ladder, 2022

Acrylic and charcoal on paper

72 x 48 inches

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