

FORT GANSEVOORT

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Review/Art; Social Commentary in Works by Willie Birch

By Roberta Smith – April 10, 1992

The long and illustrious influence of folk art on 20th-century American art has yet to be thoroughly chronicled. It stretches (at least) from Elie Nadelman and Florine Stetheimer, Marsden Hartley and William H. Johnson to postwar artists like William King and Red Grooms and, in more recent years, Jim Nutt, Roger Brown and Faith Ringgold. To this fragmentary list must be added the name of Willie Birch, a Brooklyn resident who is having a large and impressive solo exhibition of painting and sculpture at Exit Art in SoHo.

Mr. Birch, who was born in New Orleans in 1942, was educated in the ways and means of late modernism at the Maryland Institute in Baltimore. He began his career as an abstract painter in the Color Field manner, but in the late 1970's he shifted to a figurative style, inspired by folk art, that places equal stress on the documentary and the decorative.

The show at Exit Art includes brightly painted papier-mache figures and portrait busts, the best of them life-size, and large gouache-on-paper paintings that come with marvelous papier-mache frames. The show thoroughly lives up to its subtitle, "A Personal View of Urban America." Mr. Birch, who is black, casts an unflinching yet loving eye on black life in America. In general, his two main subjects might be said to be black pride and racial prejudice, with his goal being to entertain and inform while raising consciousness among all races.

Mr. Birch's work is, at heart, a storytelling art carried out with immense visual expertise. It can portray important figures and events, past and present, like Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement. It can also meticulously record the daily events of urban life, both mundane and tragic. "Reminiscing About Jackie Robinson" depicts the cozy ritual of the barber shop, and "In the Be-Bop Tradition," an elaborate nightclub scene, pays homage to black music. "The Last Goodbye" captures both the ceremonial pomp and the overwhelming sorrow of the funeral of a young black man in a big, beautiful church.

But none of these images would be engaging without the work's formal sophistication and visual power, which give even its grimmest scenes an undercurrent of optimism and celebration. In the paintings, nearly every social situation has inspired in the artist a different compositional and spatial approach, and often a different use of the surrounding frame.

In "Lunchtime in the Schoolyard," Mr. Birch spaces playing children across an asphalt-gray surface with calm, nearly symmetrical formality, while in "Racial Violence in Contemporary America," a riot scene, figures flail chaotically and close up, filling the paper from edge to edge. "Chants for Freedom," from

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1988, shows a peaceful anti-apartheid demonstration in front of a voluptuous curtain of trees that echoes Matisse. In each case we are confronted with an image that "scans" even before we understand its story.

In "A Young Woman Was Beaten and Raped Here," we see another dense patch of green -- lushly pastoral except for the orange line of a police cordon threading through the bushes. Here the main drama is pushed to the edges: the bas-relief forms on the picture's frame include bouquets of flowers, black people holding lighted candles and, across the top edge, a police car and a white woman in jogging clothes.



Willie Birch, "The Priestess", 1991, A Gouache on Paper

When Mr. Birch's figures are three-dimensional they lose some of their narrative complexity, but they are more fully realized both as individual portraits and as art objects. Beneath the white turban of "The Priestess," for example, we confront a visage of living, breathing intensity: a proud, knowing, somewhat weary woman who emits great strength but also considerable awe for the supernatural powers she seems about to invoke. The enterprising young boy of "The Bird Catcher" gives his full concentration to trapping a pigeon under a cardboard box, a scene of nearly Egyptian stasis that also evokes the famous Greek "Charioteer."

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The implacable human presence of Mr. Birch's full-size figures has much in common with the sculpture of Duane Hanson and John Ahearn, but being less ploddingly realistic, they also have greater formal force. This is due to his distinctive handling of papier-mache, which, always painted in flat bright colors, resembles a lightweight, gently articulated metal. The resulting angularity of surface gives Mr. Birch's figures a subtle geometry that makes their flesh seem more than flesh. As an outer manifestation of the inner strength and richness Mr. Birch means to convey, this surface is an inspired invention. It dignifies his subjects and is full of sculptural possibility.