

FORT GANSEVOORT

ARTFORUM

WILLIE BIRCH

Willie Birch on making art a neighborhood affair

As told to Emily Wilkerson – November 23, 2021



Willie Birch, *Backyard View*, 2021, charcoal and acrylic on paper, 72 x 96".

Throughout his multifarious six-decade career, Willie Birch has mined creative traditions ranging from European painting to Yoruba spirituality to conjure visions of the rich culture of New Orleans, as in the series of charcoal-and-acrylic grisaille streetscapes on view through January 23, 2022, at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art as part of "Prospect.5: Yesterday We Said Tomorrow." Additionally, an exhibition devoted to new paintings and sculptures by the artist is on display at the New Orleans Academy of Fine Arts until January 7, 2022. In his Seventh Ward studio, Birch and I spoke about the importance of community in his practice and life, which he reflects on below.

IN THE LATE 1950s, my first cousin Nathaniel Dorsey organized demonstrations and boycotts in New Orleans to integrate public spaces and the transportation system. I was fifteen or sixteen at the time, and my mom wouldn't let me participate in the protests at the A&P. She thought I'd get hurt, and, based on the family she worked for, she knew she could lose her job. I don't remember if my cousin or I came up with the idea, but I agreed to make signs for the protestors to carry. Sitting on the curb across the street from the demonstration, looking at people I knew and didn't know carrying signs I had made—it

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was a beautiful sight. I felt so proud to be a part of that moment. A few years later, I met the Civil Rights activist Oretha Castle Haley and started participating in the sit-ins on Canal Street with the Congress of Racial Equality in New Orleans. From the start, Oretha helped me realize that my paintings were much more than just nice landscapes.

Form and content are equally important for me. One is the story you're seeing, and the other is the narrative of the process, which is a reflection of my life. My current exhibitions are loaded with social questions: Who lives in my neighborhood? Why are they here? How are our surroundings changing? What does this mean in terms of lifestyle? My work also recognizes and celebrates African influences on the city of New Orleans and its people. This city is the birthplace of the music called jazz and defines what it means to be democratic in its ability to operate as both an individual and as a group. This concept comes out of the Pan African religious ritual we in New Orleans call voodoo, and is one of the greatest cultural manifestations in the history of music and culture. I'm looking to create something similar in my work as an artist, but one working with many others. I often ask myself, If this place existed to create jazz, then what can I bring to the table that can rival that visually?

My grandmother's favorite saying was "flowers are for the living," so for the first element of the Old Prieur Street Project, in 2015, we planted a garden for our neighbors in "The Cut." The goal of this project is to use art as a tool in the transformation of a community, so I carefully thought about artists from diverse backgrounds in the city to contribute, such as Ron Bechet, Jennifer Odem, Louise Mouton-Johnson, and Rajko Radovanovic, and we began working with my neighbors to realize numerous art projects. After installing a few sculptures and a mural alongside the garden on the corner lot, we decided to put up a short, white picket fence. Some neighbors immediately objected, but a shift in trust became apparent when we lined the fence with plaques of neighborhood family names that artist Robin Levy collected during her project. The neighbors felt represented. On Mardi Gras Day, the Mardi Gras Indians came by and sang chants celebrating our ancestors at the garden. In 2019, Freddie "Junior" DeJean, one of our close neighbors who was involved in the project from the beginning, was killed by gun violence. His sister came and put flowers in front of their family name on the fence. Other people started coming on holidays like All Souls Day. And when people started bringing flowers, when care was demonstrated, people honored it even more. The garden became a sacred space.

To me, in terms of what is happening right now, we are in the third Civil Rights Movement. While my works on view at NOAFA like *The Activist*, *No Justice, No Peace*, 2021, speak more directly to this, it is of course at the forefront of my mind while creating each day. I come from the philosophy that change is subtle. Change is not some big thing. The more I played with that idea, it brought me to where I am now. I believe as long as this garden project is relevant, somebody will take care of it, just like they would a house, a painting, a family heirloom, because it defines our collective memory in terms of who we are and how we see ourselves, and it nurtures us. And you just don't throw away something that nurtures you.