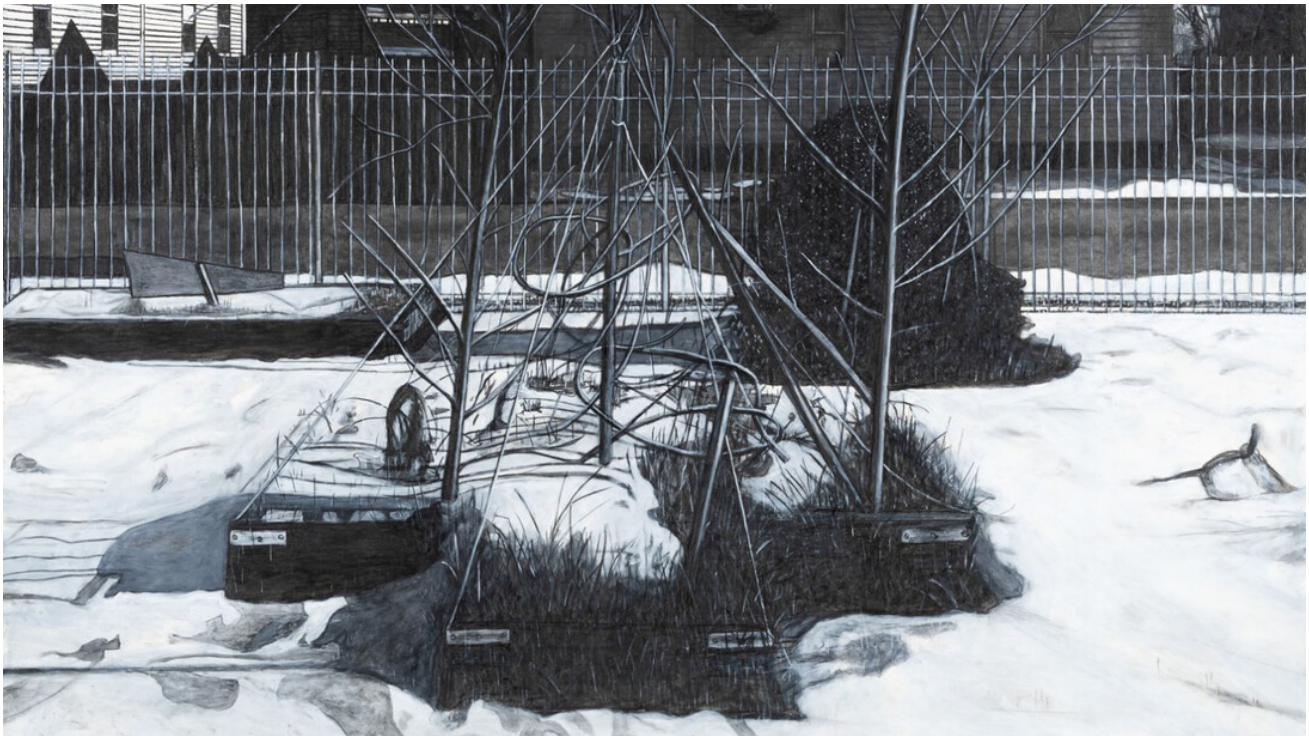


FORT GANSEVOORT



Up on the Roof

Meer Art – September 1, 2025



Willie Birch, *Melting Snow #3*, 2025, acrylic and charcoal on paper, 60 x 90 inches

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.

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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 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.