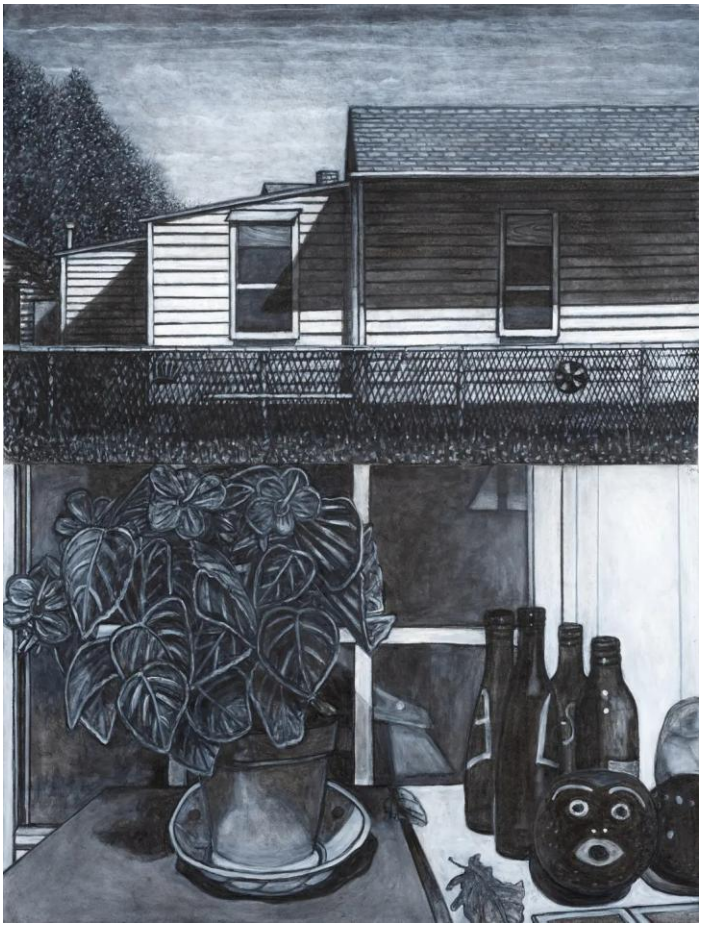
THE BROOKLYN RAIL

Willie Birch: Up on the Roof

Allison K. Young – October 1, 2025



Willie Birch, Remembering, 2024. Acrylic and charcoal on paper, 48 x 36 ¼ inches.

The title of Willie Birch's solo exhibition at Fort Gansevoort, *Up on the Roof*, is partly descriptive of the artist's 2022 work, *Two Roofers and a Ladder*, which positions the viewer below a pair of workers flanking a ridge on the asphalt roof of a "shotgun" house. As is typical across his practice, Birch tightly crops the image such that most of the house and the straight wooden ladder are cut off at the picture's edges, which instead contain an abstract rhythm of architectural elements and rogue electrical wires rendered in a gradient of charcoal and chalky acrylic. I found myself squinting as I glanced upwards towards the workers' wide-brimmed hats, which cast their faces in shadow. Here, the artist honors the dignity of physical labor, elevating those who toil to maintain our built environment to near-heroic heights. Yet, for me, *Two Roofers and a Ladder* also speaks to the patchiness of New Orleans, where Birch lives and works—to the ways its houses bear the residues of cycles of destruction and repair that result

from its climate, its politics, its history. When I first saw this piece, I initially thought of my drive home after a weeks-long evacuation following Hurricane Ida in 2021. Somewhere between the Twin Span and the High Rise bridge, I looked out from the highway across a sea of blue tarps that seemed to drape the entirety of New Orleans East, a sign of widespread wind damage and of the slow roll-out of FEMA funds to low-income residents beleaguered by corrupt home insurance, if they could afford it to begin with. The destruction took months, sometimes longer, to fix up, but New Orleanians are always improvising—it's a matter of survival, to be sure, but this impulse is also part of the city's visual and sonic accent.

Birch offers many scenes of detritus, litter, and junk, but these are not to be misread as romantic meditations on the "resilience" of those communities most harmed by systemic poverty. His compositions convey a critique of civic mismanagement and broken democracy, and of American dreams that are centuries deferred. Barricades—wrought iron, wooden, barbed-wire, and brick—that speak to conditions of division and inequity are ubiquitous. But we also see the breaks—subtle shifts and diversions of pattern and line—that reflect the existence of ways out, across, or around this mess. In the visual cadence of Birch's art, you can sense his respect for the rebellious genius of Black vernacular culture and history.

Willie Birch, Procession for "Kidd" Jordan: A Fitting Farewell, 2023-2024. Acrylic and charcoal on paper, 24 x 36 inches.

Birch has long been inspired by what he refers to as "the African retentive practices" of New Orleans, found in jazz music and second-lines but also in the city's intangible mannerisms, its humor, its swagger. In his 1963 book *Blues People,* Amiri Baraka wrote on what he called the "changing same" of Black cultural expression, of the "consistent attitudes within changed contexts" reflected in foodways, rhetoric, and music of global Black diasporas. *Remembering* (2024), for instance, features a still-life of orchids, beer bottles, and a painted coconut (the signature Mardi Gras throw of the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club). The arrangement is cut

off by a second scene at top, which looks out towards the siding of a shotgun house, an architectural style with West African and Caribbean roots.
Procession for "Kidd" Jordan: A Fitting Farewell (2023–24), an installation comprising twelve works on paper installed on a staggered grid of two off-balance rows, is most readily evocative of this "changing same." Meant to be read from the bottom-right to the bottom-left, then up and around again, the imagery offers fractured views of a rainy day second-line for the titular saxophonist and educator, a New Orleans musical legend. Some works show the mourners who huddle beneath umbrellas as they dance and grieve, keeping pace despite the subtropical deluge. In others, Birch renders a downward gaze at the metal grates and cobblestones beneath our feet, as if to remind viewers that we're not just eyes, but bodies. In the final panels, a white hearse glides through floodwater that pools around the sidewalks of St. Charles Avenue. *In the Tradition* (2015) hangs nearby, depicting the feet of a trombonist, his instrument pointed down towards a storm drain on the road. It doesn't matter that these works were produced almost ten years apart. Like jazz, and like the city itself, the exhibition is non-linear and palimpsestic.

Willie Birch, Two Views of a Dismantled White Picket Fence, 2025. Acrylic and charcoal on paper, 96 x 72 inches.

In *Two Views of a Dismantled White Picket Fence* (2025), Birch vertically stacks a doubled drawing of dissembled posts and rails—perhaps evocative of far-gone American dreams. Between these, the shifts of his perspective by just a couple of steps, sideward and back, rhythmically transform the slanted cadence of shadows, ropes, and blades of grass around the

discarded pickets. These days, it feels like everything we've tried to build over the last ten, twenty, sixty years has been kicked down. But could this work also remind us that some institutions need dismantling, that we need not mourn all fallen regimes? From up there on the roof, with the benefit of experience and our hard work behind us, we might be able to fathom and enjoy a more equitable future.