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BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

New Orleans' African Retentions: Willie Birch with Billy Sothern

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Willie Birch, "Birthday Celebration for Louis" (2004).
All images courtesy of Arthur Roger Gallery, New Orleans, and Luise Ross Gallery, New York.

Willie Birch is a New Orleans-based artist whose exhibition *Celebrating Freedom: The Art of Willie Birch* is currently on view at New Orleans' Contemporary Arts Center. Billy Sothern, author of *Down in New Orleans: Reflections from a Drowned City* (2007), recently visited Birch in his studio, which is located in a neat, white, "double shotgun" house in the Seventh Ward, a neighborhood that is rich in New Orleans' vernacular culture but that otherwise suffers the economic, physical and social blight that has long faced many of the city's black neighborhoods.

Billy Sothern (Rail): I read that you moved back home to New Orleans from New York City, where you had a very successful career as an artist, about ten years ago. Why did you move back?

Birch: I had a New York state grant that allowed me to come to New Orleans to do research on slavery. I became so fascinated with the whole idea of how slavery was manifested in Louisiana that it took me on a whole other path in terms of trying to understand what I had been born into. I started doing research on my family. So that began to really force me to deal with African retentions—in terms of Robert Farris Thompson's books, in

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particular *Flashes of Spirit*. All these events began to lead me in a direction that I was propelled to, and that was to come home.

Rail: How did moving back home to New Orleans affect your work?

Birch: It changed it in the standpoint that I was doing paper maché in New York and that's where I made my reputation—using paper as social commentary in terms of dealing with fragility and the whole idea of what we consider precious. That was what I was doing in New York and that's what really hit when I seemed to explode on the art scene in New York in the '90s. The work that I first came here doing was a continuation of that. But the more I stayed here, the more I realized that I've been doing paper maché all my life. Not only as a child, making floats or whatever, but also in terms of the paper maché tradition in Mardi Gras floats in New Orleans. I like to feel that as an artist I am constantly moving forward, and after a while I started seeing other young artists doing paper maché. The more I saw that, the more I realized that I had explored that medium as far as I could and it was time to move on. In the meantime, I was taking these snapshots of community scenes and rituals. In 1997 I decided that I didn't want to do any more paper maché and I began to do these over-life-sized portraits of people in my community. The idea behind that was to make these people we call African American larger than life so that the viewer had to confront them as equals. This is because historically, most of the images that we see ourselves are mostly very, very small.

Rail: Black and white discourse is generally a limited discourse. Do you feel limited in by working in such a narrow palette?

Birch: No, I don't. I like limitations as an artist. I like to take the given and find how I can expand on it. When you study the music or you study something about the people that come out of New Orleans, you find that they are constantly taking nothing and making something out of it. Artistically, the limitation is there, but it's what you bring to it in terms of the layers that allow it to expand. So within those blacks and whites, there are many, many grays. And so after awhile, like any artist, it's no longer about the image that you are trying to project. It's about how can you make this thing as rich as you can and create this palette that deals with the symbolism within this particular culture. It focuses on what I call African retentions, and also begins to deal with the real sense of what makes New Orleans very, very different.

Rail: Your work obviously dwells on New Orleans as a place and has a great sense of place. Do you consider yourself more of a New Orleans artist now than when you lived in New York?

Birch: No. Never did. And never will probably. I see myself as an artist, period. I like to feel that I fit in the pantheon of all the great artists. How I will be recognized, that remains to be

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seen. I go all the way back to Egyptian art in terms of looking at that, and looking at Pre-Columbian art, or Mayan art. I see myself as an artist who is trying to define the timeframe I live in. And this just happened to be the medium that I have a certain expertise that I can use to articulate what is going on. And that's the way I see the artist. So I don't see myself as a New Orleans artist—that happened to be the luck of the draw in terms of my birth.

Rail: You don't consider yourself a New Orleans artist, and you don't consider yourself a black artist, but when people discuss your work they refer to those two things. Do you think that it's fair when the art media refers to your work as depicting "black life"? No one ever talks about Andrew Wyeth's work depicting white life. What do you make of that?

Birch: Well, first of all, I think that it's an insult. I think it's not only an insult to me, it's an insult to themselves. I find it part of the racist element of the country in the sense that we are pigeonholed. Part of the reason for doing the type of work that I do has to do with breaking outside that box that somebody's constantly trying to put me in. I'm just trying to reflect the human condition and it just happened to be people I know best because I come out of this underclass society that exists here.

Rail: The other label that I see is "inspired by folk art." I guess they're trying to make a distinction that you're a trained artist but again they are trying to suggest some sort of distance between you and the art world.

Birch: Well, do you call Picasso a folk artist? Do you call Matisse a folk artist? All of those artists are influenced by self-training on some level. I think that all of us are self-trained. I think that in our society people are put in categories, and by putting us in categories, it's easy to divide. At this point, I don't get offended by that, because I am very consciously influenced by self-training.

Rail: Much of your work represents aspects of black New Orleans' vernacular culture that your viewers might not otherwise have access to. What can those folks take from your pieces if they have never seen a second line or black Mardi Gras?

Birch: I think my work, like most post-modernist art, is allegorical. Everyone has seen a parade. So the idea is that I choose to do a scene that denotes that there is some kind of ritual going on. I am sure that anyone who has been in that kind of situation, wherever they are, can relate to that on some level. I find that for me, the uniqueness of New Orleans is that it has its own unique characteristics in terms of what it looks like. But in terms of world history, I've gone to parades in Germany. I've seen images of parades in Spain. I have seen brass-band imagery in Africa and I'm saying that there is something about the uniqueness of all of them that does not divide them. It gives them a commonality in terms of what we all

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have a need to be a part of as a normal activity that celebrates life. New Orleans just has a history of doing it probably more than most other places.

Rail: When you are dealing with images that are much more specific to Post-Katrina New Orleans like a destroyed shotgun house or a crumbling church, what kind of content do you think is behind those sorts of images?

Birch: By nature artists makes art out of chaos. We take something that one does not understand and make it understandable. That's what we do. In terms of when I went to the Ninth Ward and saw those houses, how they came together and stuff, I thought of Piranesi, an Italian artist who painted the ruins. I always thought that these were some of the most beautiful graphic pieces that I have ever seen in my life. That immediately just spurred and connected me to a whole other history of work that was very, very similar. What I am bringing to it is that fact that this is New Orleans and this is 2006 or 2005 and trying to make sense of how I feel about this. Because in that experience, I had a distant cousin who drowned in the Ninth Ward, and I also heard from people who were caught up in the Ninth Ward and had a lot of family—like most black people have family—in the Ninth Ward. But the reality is that all of these things become easier in terms of how I deal with my own pathos, my own sympathy, my own sense of what that experience means, but at the same time it's layered through the Roman ruins.



Willie Birch, "Barbershop" (2003). Courtesy of Arthur Roger Gallery, New Orleans and Luise Ross Gallery, New York.

Rail: What do you make of other artists – people like Robert Polidori – coming to depict our city in ruins for an audience at the Metropolitan Museum of Art? Do you think that's fair game?

Birch: I think it's fair. I think that the problem is when that becomes a definitive statement. I saw that particular show and thought it was brilliant. And also I read that he had spent a great deal of time in New Orleans so therefore he wasn't just coming here and shooting like a lot of people outside of here have a tendency to do. I'm sure, like most artists of any substance, he is looking at that beyond just the tragedy, the pathos, of what that represents.

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He's also looking at that in terms of the history of art. I think he's the exception to the rule. I think that he had a real clear understanding of what he was trying to do and brought that to the experience of photographing those things.

Rail: If he didn't understand the city, if he hadn't ever been here before, would it have been fair game for him to come here?

Birch: Of course, if he was compelled to come. I think that it's fair game for anybody to come if they figure they can add to something. The problem I have with most people who come here is that they are looking for something and they are probably not going to invest the time to really understand what makes this particular place unique. There's this show coming up next October, a big show here [the New Orleans Biennial] and I have had a couple of artists come up to my studio and ask me to take them around. And I refused them. What I'm saying is that if you really want to find out about New Orleans, you just go stand on my corner and just hang out there and talk to them cats out there. And they'll eventually turn you in the right way.

Rail: What's the future for the culture that you depict in your art—the second lines, the jazz bands, the Mardi Gras Indians—after Hurricane Katrina?

Birch: The religion we call voodoo has a nature of embracing everything. It pulls it in and when it shoots it back, it's disguised but it's still Yoruba. I see New Orleans' culture the same way. New Orleans culture is a culture that allows everything to come in but when it tweaks it and pushes it back out, you still hear those drum beats coming out of Congo Square. That is the root. This place is so powerful. It's not like New York. It's not like L.A. It's not like Paris. It's not like London. I've never been to Moscow although I've studied Pushkin—it's not like Moscow. It's not like Africa. It's not like Nairobi. It's not like Cairo. It's like New Orleans. And its culture comes from the bottom. And the bottom begins, as far as Willie Birch is concerned, at Congo Square. And the nature of what came out of that was able to take all of the human condition and put it in its pot and when it shoots it back out it shoots out a whole different idea of what it means to live in this place in this time of our existence. So I don't worry about the idea of what's going to happen.

Rail: What about establishment efforts to “keep the culture alive” like the Musicians Village being built by Habitat for Humanity? Do you think that those kinds of things have the capacity to keep New Orleans culture moving forward?

Birch: On certain levels but I think that historically that artists have lived in communities. So the nature of having musicians feeding off of musicians and being out of touch with what comes out of here—that's going to change the music somewhat.

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Rail: What do people who are in your paintings think when they see your paintings? How do they respond?

Birch: That's part of the beauty. I keep this door open. I want to hear what's going on outside. I don't care if I've taken a snapshot of something in this neighborhood. I still want to keep my ear outside because that may be the catalyst to allow me to resolve this piece and have everything in it. There are people constantly passing and looking in my door just to see what's on that wall. By the nature of how they respond to me, I get the feeling that I am respected in this community and also I act as an alternative to what other things do happen in this community. I am a grandfather so I play that one role. I am somebody that they see on television and in newspapers, that's another role. I'm somebody that they understand makes images that somebody pays a couple of thousand dollars for, so that's another role. I'm somebody who is a community activist who participates in trying to create a quality of life in my neighborhood that I feel we all deserve as human beings. But the responses of the brothers on the street—they are the first ones to accept this stuff because they've never seen themselves depicted that large and command that kind of space and that kind of beauty.

Rail: As someone who lived through segregation and the Civil Rights movement, do you view your work as inherently political?

Birch: I think all art's political. It's that simple. Whenever you do something, it says something about your existence and you are usually going to find somebody that objects to that. So the nature's not to get caught up in what other people think. It's that simple. How can you eliminate politics from breathing? Putting these things in categories is not how I see it. Life has all these different shades. So why is politics left out? Why is race left out? Why is class left out? I'm saying that they're all part of the whole structure and they all fit in. I find that I can't afford to get caught up in whether it's political. It's political because I grew up in a structure that denied me my humanness. It would be totally ludicrous for me not to have some of that type of imagery in terms I feel important about. That would be crazy. I'm doing what's normal, what any normal human being does.

Rail: Given where we're at in this country, putting aside all of the problems in this city, do you think it's on artists to be political in their work?

Birch: I think it's on people to be political. I think as artists we are people first. We got pain. We got all kinds of problems. We have the same problems as everybody else. This just happened to be what I decided I wanted to be at eleven years old and there was enough people around me to find ways for me to become who I am and encouraged me and found the resources for me to be the artist. So I owe those people an incredible service. There are people who paid a heavy price so that Willie Birch could do what he does.