

# FORT GANSEVOORT



## Willie Birch: Chronicling Our Lives: 1987-2021 at Fort Gansevoort

Jonathan Goodman – March 16, 2022



Willie Birch, *Ritual of Inevitable Violence*, 1989, Pencil graphite and gouache on paper with acrylic painted papier-mâché frame, 28.25 x 36.25 x 1.75 inches. Courtesy of Willie Birch and Fort Gansevoort, New York.

Willie Birch, now 79 years old, works and lives in New Orleans. Born there, he attended Southern University in the city, where he received his BFA, and then went to Baltimore for his MFA at the Maryland Institute College of Art. On receiving his graduate degree, Birch made his way to New York City, where he lived and worked among colleagues such as Romare Bearden. Then, in 1994, he returned to New Orleans. Birch is known as an artist specializing in the representation of African-American life; he favors directness in his work, often describing everyday activities. In this show, "Chronicling Our Lives: 1987-2021," whose works date from the later Eighties to nearly

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the present, Birch reveals in his paintings and in a few sculptures his incisive willingness to address the conventions that make up black life and the ongoing prejudice that harms it. A few of the paintings on exhibit are paintings made of words, often directly alluding to racial matters. Above all, the work points to the notion that art can both describe and heal.

In *Ritual of Inevitable Violence* (1989), five boys hold pistols made of orange candy. Two of them have placed the ersatz guns in their mouths. Behind them an open chain fence supposedly protects the children from the street, although such protection can be debated. To ensure his audience recognizes the implied danger of the images, Birch has rendered two genuine guns at the top corners of the composition. And above, in the middle, a skeleton's head is flanked on either side by white crosses. On both sides, beneath the black guns, is a cemetery headstone and a complete skeleton. The wall text makes the point that candy in the form of weapons was often sold in poor neighborhoods, taking advantage of the violence even younger children experienced. Then, in *Black Humor* (1994), Birch pays homage to the tradition of comedy in the black community. Very much a word painting, *Black Humor* consists of the names of well-known entertainers, including Bert Williams, the first African-American to be given a leading role in film; Amos "n" Andy; Dick Gregory; Richard Pryor; and Whoopie Goldberg. There is a dominant image: a man in a tuxedo and bowtie, wearing a top hat. There is also an open mouth laughing, with bright teeth and red lips, in the upper right. In this work, Birch commemorates black comedians, and at the same time, implies that the path for entertainers of color was often blocked by prejudice.

In the most recent work in the show, *Broken Dreams (Tattered White Picket Fence)* (2020-21), a white picket fence, with a repaired gate on the left, stands before bushes and, on the left, a tree. It is night, and the greenery behind the fence is hard to fully make out, as is the house with a windowed door, also on the left. Since 2000, Birch has made the decision to work in black and white, and in *Broken Dreams*, he uses the limited palette marvelously well. The house sits in Birch's current neighborhood, and the title, along with the visible darkness of the setting, comments on the continuing pathos of lives blocked by more than casual disregard. Many artists of color have addressed this problem, which undeniably persists. But few have done it as poetically as Birch does in this painting. Partly a storyteller, partly an activist, partly an artist of memorial and change, Birch continues to work in a gifted, declarative fashion in the latter part of his career. His method of unswerving address, coupled with an imagery that matches this address, makes him a painter of social force. He speaks across communities in ways that are memorable for their critique of traditional American convention, so destructive to African-Americans. Black life becomes, then, not only an opportunity for description in his hands; it becomes a metaphor for resistance and pride. Given Birch's longevity, which encompasses both the Civil Rights era and the years before it, he has become a telling historian of self and political change.