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Spirit of Jersey City Museum lives on, in Zimmerli Art Museum's 'American Stories' exhibition

Tris McCall – September 13, 2022



Willie Birch's "Promise Land" is part of the "American Stories: Gifts from the Jersey City Museum Collection" exhibition at the Zimmerli Art Museum in New Brunswick.

All is quiet on the northeast corner of Monmouth and Montgomery in Downtown Jersey City. The squat but stylish Charles Gifford-designed building at the intersection sits empty.

This was not always so. 50 Montgomery St. was once the home of the Jersey City Museum, an arts institution with a national reach that reflected the scope and ambition of the Garden State's second biggest city.

At the turn of the millennium, it suited Jersey City to have a museum: Hudson County has a long tradition of excellence in visual art, and the Warehouse District on the Hudson was alive with

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incendiary self-motivated painters, sculptors and dreamers. The institution had good stewards, good sight lines, good illumination (a central skylight was one of its defining features) and the tacit support of the municipal government and the creative community.

It failed nonetheless. Nobody is exactly sure why. For reasons that are still contested, Jersey City never fell in love with its museum. It was Downtown, yes, but it was sufficiently removed from the galleries and workspaces of the Arts District that it never felt integrated into the local scene. Montgomery Street is not an easy place for visitors to find parking.

In 2010, the sputtering museum closed its doors with the promise to reopen at some point in the future. A false dawn broke a few years later. But when the Jersey City Museum threw in the towel a second time, leaving its treasures in limbo, few in the Garden State still had any faith in the institution. So it is both sad and fitting that the collection once held in the museum is no longer in Jersey City. In 2018, the art came into the possession of the Zimmerli Art Museum, on the campus of Rutgers University in New Brunswick.

“American Stories: Gifts From the Jersey City Museum Collection,” the biggest special exhibition of the Zimmerli’s fall season, consists of nearly 100 works from the Jersey City Museum vaults. If you frequented the museum during its late-’90s-to-’00s heyday, you’ll surely recognize many of the names in this substantial show, and maybe even some of the pieces, too. Thus “American Stories” feels a little like a pop-up restaurant in a strange storefront by a chef who has lost his lease or, perhaps, that pandemic-era period when the Toronto Blue Jays were forced to play their home games in Buffalo.

It is also a powerful reminder of how much Jersey City has lost. Hudson County is well known for independent shows by a coterie of emerging and idiosyncratic artists; what it lacks is the window to the wider world of art that a museum provides.

“American Stories” includes pieces from artists of considerable renown: Romare Bearden, subject of a 2012 retrospective at the Newark Museum of Art; David Wojnarowicz, whose artworks occupied half of the cavernous sixth floor of the Whitney in 2018; silhouette specialist Kara Walker, creator of the black and white scene that scalded visitors to the Montclair Art Museum’s special exhibition gallery in 2018; and Jacob Lawrence, visual essayist and creator of prized pieces in the collections of museums around the country.

At the same time, the show makes room for local favorites. Susan Evans Grove, experimental photographer and regular contributor to the monthly group shows at 150 Bay Street in Jersey City, gives us a pair of impassive Newport towers rising over a wave of silt. Bayonne pop artist Joe Waks, who enlivened the Firmament Gallery at Nimbus Dance a few months ago, delivers a pizza box filled with political satire. Orlando Cuevas, Jersey City art teacher, magician and provocateur, invites us to peer into the windows of a model tenement that is about the size of a milk crate.

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There is no discontinuity between these photos, paintings and sculptures and those made by artists whose fame stretches well beyond the Hackensack. In “American Stories,” the local and national voices exist in rough and democratizing dialogue. That was a hallmark of the Jersey City Museum: well-known artists and upstarts side by side, striking against each other and showering sparks on visitors.

The pugnacious tone of the Jersey City Museum collection has been preserved by the Zimmerli, too. Curators Cynthia Sanford, Gary Sangster, Rocio Aranda-Alvarado and Alejandro Anreus often mounted shows that broadcast discontent. “American Stories” concentrates that aggression into a few galleries. One artwork amplifies the thunder in the next; a visitor standing by Cuevas’ tenement might look in any direction and be confronted by a piece that shouts about poverty, injustice, historical cruelty, or neglect by authorities.

Sometimes the implications of a work are unstated but unmissable, as in Helen Stummer’s brutal black-and-white shot of African-American children in Newark, playing in a vacant lot strewn with discarded tires. Others are deliberately pointed: Rafael Sánchez’s “Les Innocentes,” an image of a golden bone amidst a heap of skulls, is designed to make a challenging statement about the blamelessness of the victims of AIDS.

Was this why the Jersey City Museum never captured the imagination of its host city? Was Jersey City, a town on the come-up and determined to show a happy face to investors, allergic to bad news? The curators at 350 Montgomery had an idea of what a city was, and it didn’t always square with the hypercaffeinated images on the real estate billboards and open house posters that still wallpaper the local landscape. The Zimmerli show offers a quick but accurate distillation of that perspective: urban space in the Garden State as an amalgam of races and ethnicities and a raucous discourse, a superimposition of Catholic Latin America atop the bedrock of African-American culture, with traces of indigenous nations visible around the margins.

José Bedia Valdés’ lithograph “Nfumbi Mpanjui” exists among those crosscurrents. Its dog-headed figures, cactus-prickly plants and knives jabbed point-first into the outline of a humanoid body seem to allude to so many traditions at once that it exists in its own singular storyline. “Nature’s Retreat” by Janet Taylor Pickett, a collage, rests a line of skyscrapers atop a pattern of squares that hums with the harmonies of quilt-making.

Then there is Willie Birch’s remarkable lithograph “Promise Land” — an image of urban space that no broker would endorse, but which the Jersey City Museum’s curators were always willing to embrace. It’s a bustling, chaotic street scene populated (mostly) by brown-skinned people, some lingering in doorways, some asleep on the sidewalk with newspaper pillows, some sitting on the hoods of taxis, some with Bibles and tambourines in hand, spreading the Gospel. There are liquor bottles under the benches in the bus stops, onlookers peering from apartment windows, worried mothers trailing determined children, and a message above a graffiti-covered, corrugated-iron gate reads, in English and Cyrillic, “Behold!, Jesus Comes Quick.”

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To many in Jersey City and New Brunswick — and in other Garden State cities — this will feel very much like home. Yet “American Stories” is also a peek in the rear-view mirror: a missive from a version of Hudson County that is presently inactive. Much has changed in Jersey City since the museum shut its doors. The front doors of those Newport towers that Grove photographed are no longer washed by waves of silt. Many of the tenements that Cuevas reconstructs in miniature, with such love and horror, have been pulled down and replaced with new construction. Even the heavies are different: Waks’ pizza-box of mystery targets George W. Bush, which, while evergreen, does not feel exactly topical in September 2022.

So “American Stories” is best appreciated as a portrait of Jersey City as it was — the collective anxieties of a town of a quarter million, captured by the artists and curators whose task it is to interrogate such things. 2010 was not so long ago, but time in Hudson County moves so fast that the recent past can be hard to see. If the Jersey City Museum was still around, its principals would be doing their best to adapt to the city that Jersey City has become. As it is, “American Stories” has a genuine Hudson County tale to tell. Even if you’ve got to go to Middlesex County to hear it.