

FORT GANSEVOORT

ARTFORUM

The artist's retrospective at CAAM brings a folk sensibility to works that offer a personal and shared lived experience of American history.

Red Cameron – September 11, 2026



View of "Willie Birch: Stories to Tell," 2026. Photo: Elon Schoenholz.

Through October 21, 2026—The first-ever retrospective of Willie Birch's multifaceted oeuvre accomplishes that rare feat of charting an artist's progression through time while also successfully providing the content and texture of the historical events through which he lived. Born in New Orleans in the early 1940s, Birch traveled extensively in Europe, then lived and worked in New York from the 1970s until he moved back in 1994 to New Orleans, where he currently resides. The works on view attest to that history: early works of assemblage focused on evidence of the African in African American culture, accomplished abstract paintings, paintings of street scenes invested with the drama of history painting, and large black-and-white drawings in charcoal that depict scenes from New Orleans that have largely preoccupied Birch since his return to the city.

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The exhibition, curated by Russell Lord, is organized chronologically but equally arranged to account for sight lines and juxtapositions that resonate thematically. Some of the best works are paintings, such as *Martin Luther King, McDonald's, and Miami's Burning*, 1989, that depict scenes wherein the everyday drama of American life interacts with historical events. In this work, a handmade, black papier-mâché frame seemingly “embossed” with the work’s title surrounds a depiction of a storefront scene where onlookers peer into a window loaded with TV screens. Some depict advertisements, others the violence of civil uprising, and on a television in the middle of it all a black-and-white image of Martin Luther King delivering a speech. These paintings mark Birch’s first use of papier-mâché, and whether used as frames for scenes of urban life, small wall reliefs, or life-size freestanding sculpture, this simple form of painted paper is clearly Birch’s most accomplished medium.



View of “Willie Birch: Stories to Tell,” 2026. Photo: Elon Schoenholz.

Eight life-size papier-mâché sculptures were exhibited here, including the excellent *Going Home*, 1992, a masterpiece of realism and symbolism. In it, a fashionable black woman rests amid luggage while a young girl sits on her lap, a simple black doll on her lap in turn. As in much of his work in this medium, Birch decorates the work’s surface with emblem-like painted symbols. In this case, the luggage’s surface holds images of a young Black man in profile, standing in a starry night; planes, trains, and automobiles mid-transit; skyscrapers; tombstones; and children playing double Dutch. These supplementary images seem to quiver between decorative ornament diegetic to the depicted scene and manifestations of the interior lives of his sculpted figures. A trompe l’oeil version of Margaret Walker’s 1966 novel “Jubilee”—a civil-war story of the life of a biracial enslaved woman who “passes” as white—is laid on the luggage

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nearby. The book's cover, featuring a three-quarter bust portrait of a black woman, adds another portrait of femininity to the scene and further complicates the image through allusion to historical narrative.

The exhibition ends with examples of Birch's most recent work, a series of roughly four-by-six-foot drawings in charcoal and acrylic on paper portraying scenes of New Orleans. The ongoing life of various neighborhoods is depicted in a straightforward, high-contrast, realist style that make the images seem drawn from memory or life rather than from a photograph. Pictures of tree-shaded front yards, men cleaning sidewalks, police cars occupying corners, big bands marching down the street, worn picket fences, and well-kept old cars hang salon-style across several walls, the nonhierarchical presentation mirroring the leveling effect of the simple black-and-white approach to this imagery. Combined with its scale, this work amounts to a kind of tender monumentalizing of the people and places of the city.

The exhibition makes clear that Birch has approached the task of depicting the broad scope of American history from the vantage point of the individual people and lives that are the content and form of that history. His technically proficient and wide-ranging oeuvre, one that is sweetly tender and occasionally heartbreaking, serves as a reminder that life is witnessed and lived at the same time.