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Gather 'Round, Willie Birch Is Speaking

Across five decades of work, he always asked: What's my neighborhood, and what does it need?

Nereya Otieno – September 23, 2026



Willie Birch, "Memories of the '60s" (1992), painted papier-mâché, canvas, and mixed media (all photos Nereya Otieno/Hyperallergic)

LOS ANGELES — Imagine sitting next to your favorite uncle. Or rather, you're a child perched on his lap, enraptured by the tales he tells of things he's seen and places he's been. He draws you in with his eloquence, the vividness with which he can animate and transfer the world he's explored into your own mind. You can taste, hear, and feel everything he's sharing with you, right where you are. *Willie Birch: Stories To Tell* is an exhibition that plants every viewer in that position: safely ensconced in the sphere of sharing. At the California African American Museum, this career retrospective of Birch — his first ever — spans over five decades of work across multiple mediums and cities.

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Weaving chronologically through Birch's life and art, this exhibition gives one the sense that he has a keen interest in people — at large, but especially Black people. There is an affinity for observing community practices, ways individuals navigate the world, and how past actions influence and inform present activities.

The exhibition begins in the 1970s, a decade when Birch seemed amused by patterns of behavior. His work from this period comments on and codifies how people move within Black traditions and histories. There is "Voodoo Series #1" (1978–79), a mixed-media work based in Xerox collage that marries symbols of ancient spiritual and medicinal practices with then-burgeoning household technology. Or "Passages" (1982), a literal rumination on movement across oceans with carved, brown wooden bodies on a painted water-like surface. The figures are arranged like a second-line parade from Birch's hometown of New Orleans, their faces either appearing serene or portending great danger. After moving to New York City in 1975, Birch created "New York City Jazz Series" (1978) — a gridded painting of invented symbols, pictograms, and hieroglyphs — to mimic jazz musical notation and codify the goings-on of his new environment.



Willie Birch, "New York City Jazz Series" (1978), acrylic on cardboard

New York grows more prominent as the exhibition moves into the second major era of Birch's work, when he began introducing paper-mâché to his technique. Graphite, charcoal, and acrylic paint form large-scale New York scenes like short stories, while paper-mâché frames extend the core ideas of these works. Three-dimensional touches and debossed words give context to Birch's thinking at the time. Works like "Keeping Up with the Iran-Contra Hearings" (1987) and "Birthday Celebration for Nelson

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Mandela" (1988) reflect the concerns of New York City's Black community with its leading figures while situating those concerns within the broader national and political issues shaping life in the city.

The wall-hanging pieces give way to a new era in Birch's work: life-size figures. Variously hued Black bodies animate the exhibition space, posed as if telling their own stories. From smaller, scone-sized sculptures like "For Alex Haley" (1993) to figures that could fill a room, each lifelike presentation represents a layered aspect of Black existence. "Memories of the '60s" (1992) is a sprawling, intricate quilt of important events from the Civil Rights Movement. Centered on the words of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., the quilt rests across the knees of a woman with grayed locs sewing in the final seams; a gold *Gye Nyame*, an Adinkra symbol that gives praise to God, hangs around her neck. It's an arresting piece, not only for its gargantuan size but for the simultaneous serenity and gravity it elicits. It also ushers viewers into a larger gallery of Birch's more recent work.

Additional paper-mâché figures transform half the gallery into a life-size diorama of Black life to wander through. These sculptures embody themes such as solitude ("Bird Catcher," 1991), escape ("Going South," 1989–90), education ("Knowing Our History, Teaching Our Culture," 1992), and simple everyday being ("An American Family," 1991).

The rest of the gallery takes on a different tone. Two walls are covered in over 20 large-scale charcoal and acrylic paper works. These pieces were born from Birch's return to New Orleans in 1995 and his documentation of what he saw in the Seventh Ward. On a raised platform on the floor facing these works is "Crawfish Dwellings" (2013), a collection of bronze sculptures of crawfish mounds. Birch cast these after he saw the crustaceans beginning to surface in his own yard as the waters from Hurricane Katrina began to dissipate. Throughout his life, the scale of Birch's works may change, but they hold true to the same scope: What does he encounter outside his window? What is his neighborhood, and what does it need? Who makes up his life?

"Song (Five Lines and Four Spaces)" (2018) marks the end of the exhibition. It makes me think of how Birch's works mirror an aspect found throughout Black American musical traditions of hip hop, jazz, and blues: the belief that every story is worth telling. To be a fan of those genres, all of which have roots in or have flourished in Birch's hometown, is to support an individual's right to divulge their truth. That same respect for individual expression draws us to listen to songs like "6 in the Mornin'" (1987) by Ice-T or "Everyday I Have The Blues" (1978) by Professor Longhair, and to what Birch distills in his work.

It's a generous approach to art. Educational in its offering, but not prescriptive or demanding of a specific feeling or action. It's an invitation to bear witness, to honor someone's experience, to get to the roots of their perspective and why it might seem to have a particular filter — rose-colored or blood-spattered. The traveler's responsibility is to share. Birch has not only carried this ethos but vaunted it through both his life and his practice. "This is what I see," his work seems to say. "Come see it for yourself."