

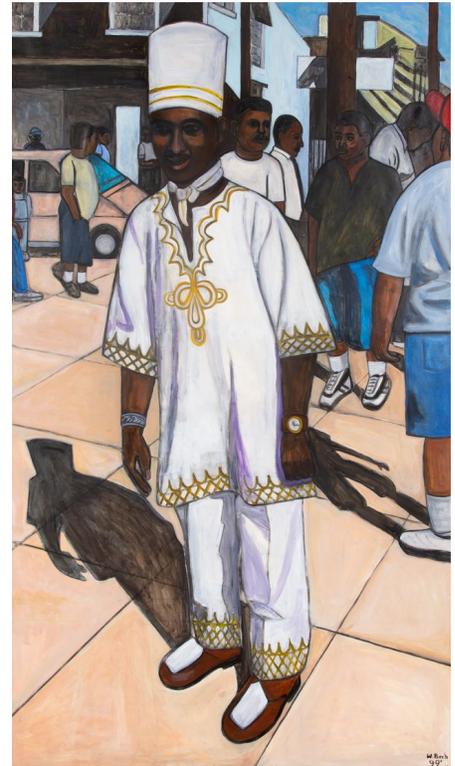
# FORT GANSEVOORT

EXPO CHICAGO

Willie Birch & Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson

Stand 315

April 9–12, 2026



Fort Gansevoort returns to **EXPO Chicago 2026** with a focused presentation of portraiture by **Willie Birch** and **Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson**, bringing together two celebrated Black American artists whose work is grounded in close observation of community, memory, and place. Through distinct visual languages, both artists treat portraiture as a powerful form of storytelling—transforming individual likeness into a record of cultural experience.

**Fort Gansevoort's presentation at EXPO Chicago coincides with significant museum exhibitions devoted to each artist.** In May 2026, the California African American Museum will open *Willie Birch: Stories to Tell*, a major touring retrospective co-organized by the New Orleans Museum of Art and the American Federation of Arts, which will travel to institutions across the United States through 2029. Robinson's work is currently featured in the traveling exhibition *Aminah Robinson: Journeys Home, a Visual Memoir*, on view at the Mobile Museum of Art, highlighting the enduring impact of her life's work as both artist and cultural historian.

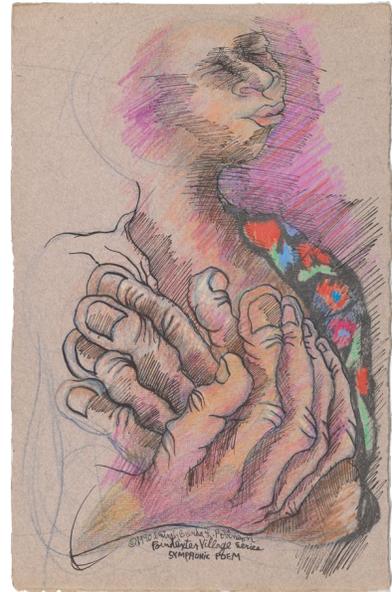
Born in New Orleans in 1942, **Willie Birch** emerged in New York in the 1970s and was among the first artists-in-residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem (1977–78), an institution that played a pivotal role in supporting generations of Black artists. In the mid-1990s Birch returned to New Orleans, motivated by a desire to make work rooted in the everyday lives of the people around him. The works presented at EXPO Chicago focus on a pivotal

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group of expressive color portraits created between 1998 and 2000, before Birch transitioned in the early 2000s to the charcoal and white acrylic works for which he is widely known today.

These vivid portraits draw from Birch's observations of his neighbors in New Orleans' historically Black community in the Seventh Ward. Often rendered at near life-scale, the figures confront the viewer with striking immediacy. Birch's careful attention to clothing, posture, adornment, and gesture conveys individuality while also revealing broader cultural attitudes and forms of self-presentation within the American South and the African diaspora.

Highlights include **Mourning (2000)**, an elegiac portrait of a stoic young woman in a long black dress and black hat, captured in a moment of quiet introspection. With her hands held over her heart, her comportment conveys self-comfort and restrained lament.



In dialogue with Birch's portraits, the exterior walls of the booth will feature works by **Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson** (1940–2015), the renowned artist, historian, and storyteller from Columbus, Ohio. Robinson, who received a MacArthur Fellowship in 2004, devoted her career to preserving and honoring the stories of Black communities around the world, and particularly those closest to home in Columbus.

Portraiture was foundational to Robinson's artistic language. Her attentive rendering of faces and hands heightens the individuality of her subjects. Robinson approached portraiture not only as direct depiction but as a form of visual testimony—layering text, symbolism, and storytelling to construct images that function as archives of personal memory and cultural resilience.

Among the works presented is the monumental allegorical portrait **Song from Blackberry Patch (1977)**, which depicts an imposing female figure holding a basket that references the agrarian history of the neighborhood before it became Poindexter Village, the housing development where

Robinson lived as a child (and one of the first in the Nation). The sweeping silhouette of the figure's orange coat and headscarf forms a striking visual emblem of endurance and beauty. At once elegy and invocation, the work

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gestures toward the spirituals sung by those forced into labor, transforming the portrait into a meditation on memory, migration, and survival.

Together, the works by Birch and Robinson presented at EXPO Chicago affirm the dignity of ordinary people while honoring the neighborhoods and cultural traditions that shaped their lives. Their portraiture resonates as an expansive language through which lived experience—rendered in vivid specificity—becomes deeply universal.

## Caption and courtesy information:

### **Willie Birch**

*Woman in Purple Sweatsuit*, 1998

Acrylic and charcoal on paper

78.5 x 44.75 in

*Mourning*, 2000

Acrylic and charcoal on paper

89.75 x 36.5 in

*Waiting for the Procession*, 1999

Acrylic and charcoal on paper

83.25 x 48.5 in

All works: © Willie Birch. Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York.

### **Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson**

*Song from Blackberry Patch*, 1977

Colored pencil, pastel, and acrylic, on felt paper

96 x 36 in

*The Chicken Man of Beaufort, South Carolina*, 1980

Ink, pastel, and thread, on paper

11.25 x 9.25 in

*Symphonic Poem*, 1990

Pen, ink, colored pencil, and graphite on paper

15.5 x 10 in

All works: © Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson Trust. Courtesy of the Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson Trust, Columbus Museum of Art, and Fort Gansevoort, New York.