 Somebody's Child: Paintings by Willie Birch

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September 14, 2002 - January 5, 2003

Somebody's Child features thirteen paintings by acclaimed artist and educator Willie Birch. Born and raised in New Orleans, Louisiana, Birch studied art at Southern University in New Orleans and received his M.F.A. from the Maryland Institute College of Art in 1973. Birch lived in Brooklyn, New York, for over twenty years before returning to New Orleans in 1994, where he now lives and works.

As a young man in the 1960s, Birch was active in the civil rights movement. In the course of his career he has continuously demonstrated the potential of art to provoke social change. The paintings in *Kidspace* each tell an evocative story of contemporary African-American life in New Orleans through richly painted portraits of Birch's friends, neighbors, and members of his community. These vibrant, beautiful figures, painted on a human scale, face us as we look at them and compel us, in turn, to look back and examine ourselves.

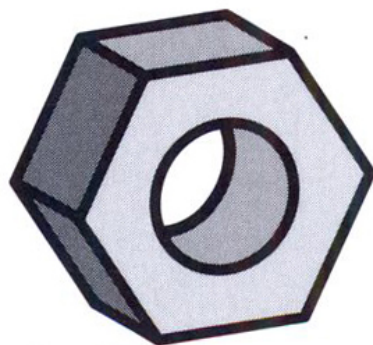
As a graduate student, Birch was influenced by abstraction and color field painting, but in the late 1970s, during a residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem, he began looking more closely at the forms and content of American folk art and outsider art. Birch cites many artists who have inspired his work, including photographer P.H. Polk, Romare Bearden, Bill Traylor, Paul Klee, Nellie Mae Rowe, and Grandma Moses. His work is also informed by his study of art from around the world, especially from African and American Indian cultures.

The title of this exhibition, *Somebody's Child*, comes from Birch's recent reflections on the frequency of violence in our country and throughout the world. Whether playing music, dancing, resting, or posing, the people in Birch's paintings convey basic human characteristics – pride, strength, tenderness, energy, uncertainty – that are universally recognizable. At the same time, Birch portrays these people in a highly individualized manner and gives their specific experience as African Americans in New Orleans vital form. In this way, Birch pays tribute to his community and cultural heritage and points to aspects of the human condition shared by us all.

Cover images clockwise from top left: Two young girls get jazzed in front of *Playing to the Crowd*. In this painting, musicians play jazz music outdoors while the streets fill with spectators. • *Watching the Parade Go By*, 2001. Acrylic/charcoal/paper. Courtesy Luise Ross Gallery. • The exhibition consists of 13 large paintings portraying the people of Birch's hometown of New Orleans. Photos: Kevin Kennefick.

Somebody's Child was organized by Molly Polk with Megan Hack.

Special thanks to Luise Ross and Ned Puchner. Willie Birch is represented in New York by Luise Ross Gallery and in New Orleans by Arthur Roger Gallery. All works courtesy of Luise Ross Gallery, New York. All works are acrylic and charcoal on paper. *Kidspace* at MASS MoCA is a joint program of the Williams College Museum of Art, the Sterling & Francine Clark Art Institute, and MASS MoCA. Additional funding is provided in part by the Massachusetts Cultural Council (a state agency), the National Endowment for the Arts (a federal agency), the James and Robert Hardman Fund for North Adams of the Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation, the Cherkis family, and the Brownrigg Charitable Trust in memory of Lynn Laitman. Support for *Somebody's Child* has also been provided by Wal-Mart, GE Plastics, and Sheffield Plastics.



Kidspace
at MASS MoCA

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