NEW ORLEANS WALKS WITH YOU

On September 1st, 2017, Emily Wilkerson and Allison Glenn sat down with Prospect.1 artist Willie Birch and Prospect.4 artist Odili Donald Odita in Mr. Birch's studio to discuss New Orleans, abstract art, heritage, music, and culture (before heading to lunch at Dooky Chase).

Willie: I've always been interested in Odili because he's an unusual American. His parents are Nigerian, and he was born in Africa, but grows up here. So, you have that ahistorical perspective in terms of how you bridge contemporary Africa, Africa as we knew it, traditional Africa, with this thing called the African American experience. And I'm very interested, the people in your generation, from the standpoint of this thing that I call abstraction, which is underneath scrutiny from people like me because I believe that everything is abstract. I was in New York with people like David Hammons, and our work was based on metaphor and symbolism, but you folks probably see it as abstract. But those symbols mean things, which takes it someplace else, so I'm looking at you in terms of using geometric shapes. And you and I have talked about using Sol LeWitt and wall to wall pieces and so on, and understanding what you come out of in terms of your ancestral legacy, in terms of this natural geometric way of creating something...

Odili: The other day I was listening to a radio station where they were talking about gospel music and the guest, a gospel historian, had said something about how traditional gospel has aspects of the blues in it. And that was really interesting to hear, because there's a certain dichotomy when you talk about gospel versus blues. It's like talking about the church and alcohol at the same time, you know? Because our common understanding of the blues speaks of spiritual degradation and challenge.

Willie: Totally.

Odili: When we speak to the history of the migration from Africa into what is the United States, the pain of the experience is colored blue. So, I'm interested in thinking about art here in the States based on this connection and disconnect with Africa; connection and disconnect with Africa and the certain kind of formation of this cultural, intellectual enterprise called African American culture and African American art, how it's connected to Africa, but it's its own thing at the same time, right? How on one hand, for instance, you have the Harlem Renaissance, which is kind of like a metropolitan construction of aesthetic. It's about the vanity of the city. Versus southern culture—where the South has this entire connection to the Caribbean, to Caribbean culture, to African Culture, to that sort of thing. And there is that schism, let's say in the States, between art of this type, the southern art and the art of the metropolis like the Harlem Renaissance, right? And I look at much of in recent times, let's say what Wynton Marsalis has done in his programming at the Lincoln Center, and I think of it in terms of the music with Duke Ellington. Duke Ellington and his classicism versus what Miles turns to in the 70s with his kind of funk, an African kind of music.

Willie: Well, that comes out of Miles playing at the Newport Jazz Festival and seeing Sly and the Family Stone, and the numbers they attracted with their electric sound. And Sly and the Family Stone come out of James Brown.

Odili: Right, right!

Willie: And then, you go to Fela.

Odili: Right.

Willie: Fela Kuti comes out of James Brown, and call and response.

Odili: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Willie: "Say it loud. I'm black and I'm proud." You know what I'm saying? So, you have all of these artists such as Thornton Dial and Lonnie Holley that we think of as abstract artists, but I just don't know what to say about younger abstract artists and how artists like Dial and Holley exist in that narrative. And, now, Rauschenberg comes out of them in an indirect way. He comes out of yard art, which is beyond that. And he saw quilts, and that comes out of Africa in terms of how we contextualize that and put that together, because it's all asymmetrical, it's all narrative. But then when we put it within this so-called contemporary art setting, the context is lost.

Odili: Right, and I'm being very specific when I talk about isolation of the African element, in the sense that it puts it into question, or puts it into a certain kind of, not necessarily inferiority, because it's a big elephant in the room when we talk about this big mix, but the need to be able to define what you create, against something. Like this northern thing against what might be a southern thing. But you're talking about something even more complex in that, you're talking about the whole gumbo, which I like because it's not even about say, north versus south. Not a binary.

Willie: It is global.

Emily: I'd like to talk a little about audience. What I find super fascinating in having you guys here together is what you're working on for Prospect.4, Odili, and what you've always done in your practice, Willie, which is capturing everyday life in New Orleans—snapshots of life—in your drawings and paintings. And Odili, you're working in a newer medium for Prospect.4, drawing attention to sites in New Orleans that have really incredible histories through flags you've designed. So, there's this overlap with someone who's living their everyday life in relation to these sites, someone who has also lived through many of these experiences the project's sites are drawing attention to, with someone visiting the city to participate in the exhibition, highlighting moments of

life so others can experience their importance and impact. For Allison and myself, it is such an important part of working on Prospect. It is thinking about audience and site.

Allison: And this idea of speaking from a place and speaking of a place. And it's really beautiful Willie to think about you painting these scenes, and then also your new Old Prieur project in the 7th Ward where you're embodying the site. And adversely Odili, you've been painting architectures. You're dealing with site and painting directly onto buildings, and now you are kind of distancing it in a way, but still thinking about site. So there are these beautiful connections and I'm just wondering if you could talk about or think about what it means to speak to a place.

Emily: I also brought an image of Willie's work "Thank you Homer Plessy," as a jumping off point. Willie created this image of the railroad tracks that denote where Homer Plessy was arrested in 1832, and this is also a site where one of Odili's flags will be for Prospect.4.

Willie: Right and now most people, whether they are black or white, don't know who Homer Plessy was, but we would not have had *separate but equal* if it wasn't for what this black man did in challenging the status quo of racial separation. So it's very fascinating. The beauty for me is that these are the rail road tracks right in front of where he got on the train—I'm bringing all that baggage and placing it right down front, and the people who know that and know my work understand that this thing is layered. Well, first of all, my practice taught me that the best art that's created, particularly about people of color, is art that's layered. So, when we speak, the way we use language—like the phrase "now we told you"—it is loaded. Our gestures, and New Orleans, for me is the personification of all of those other different ways of speaking to other human beings, regardless.
In terms of the music, thinking about call and response, it comes out of the field, then it turns into the church, then it turns into jazz somewhat, then it turns into rock and roll, and now it's at hip hop.

Odili: Yeah, I'll jump in because I think, for example, (pointing to a work in Willie's studio) look at that piece. That's just a bucket of bones, of food, or this is just the railroad tracks. I mean, if you're looking at, let's say western art, we talk about the desire to become, and the way it's spoken about too, to become simple in the way that the image is made. This is what abstraction is to an essence, right? But what is actually happening is that essence is what you just said, layered and impacted, but it's made to appear as if it's clear. It's that magnanimous tension between what looks to be just wires in space, but it explodes into all this different kind of tension and meaning. But that's the power of art.

Willie: But that's the power of the music too. That's the power…

Odili: With jazz.

Willie: The problem is that we have this tendency to leave out the content when we speak about abstraction.

Odili: And about the figuration that comes from that content, because the fact is that in a lot of cases, even if you have no object, you're still objectifying something. I think one of the greatest misconceptions of engaging in conceptual art is that you tend to understand that the power lies in the space of consideration, but what's the vehicle that gets one to that space?

Willie: But do we want to stay there in our middle class upbringing at that point? For me, I said, "I want my mama to understand what I'm doing." The art practice is there because of the intellectual component that has been added. It's not enough just to do it, unless it's direct, there is also this intellectual rhetoric that comes with it. And I'm saying I think the artists that are more concerned about who will buy their work are a bunch of young bucks.

Odili: Okay, okay, okay. I'm not defending, but I want to say that we have to reeducate the educators. They have to be re-educated because they're coming at the students with all this theory, and so forth, and having them engage the theoretical and gauge the texts as if they are the commandments. But as we realize in living life, theory comes after practice.

Willie: Right.

Odili: You have to live your life to make the theory become valid. And you have to see that it's not that you've lived life by a theorem, but that you have based the theorem after living. When you live your life every day, what is the circumstance of your life, engaging people every day. That's real --not some text.

Willie: You see, you and I agree, and the first time I heard that was through Dizzy Gillespie when he talked about the music, about the sound that Duke Ellington was making, that Louis Armstrong was making, that even Buddy Bolden was making. These were sounds that came out of the street, cries and sounds that they lived every day of their existence. That is where I get in trouble because I'm saying, "No, you gotta know about them people, baby. I'm not leaving them behind." You know? You may not want to give me the money yet.

Odili: You have to understand that that's reality, and that's how you engage in reality.

Allison: You have to be in the now. I'm curious about the site, the Plessy site and the form of your work. We've talked a lot about form—the form that you two chose to address that site, Odili using the flag and its abstraction, and the form of your drawing Willie. I'm curious about why?

Emily: And layers.

Allison: Yes. Why these forms and how are they different and how they maybe come together?

Willie: Well, for me they're the same thing. With this work, I happened to be artist in residence at New Orleans Center for Creative Arts (NOCCA), and they asked me what I wanted to do, and I said I wanted to build a garden for Plessy. And I wanted these kids at that school to experience something that was not going last, so the flowers weren't going to last. So we built this thing in the shape of this train.

Hopefully, we'll all be catching up all of our lives. But once that lightbulb moment comes in, all of a sudden, that's—that's revolution then! Because then you got a whole bunch of people who now understand something that they didn't before. That's why it's important that Odili comes to New Orleans, he's not just interested in the superficial. Most of the artists that come to New Orleans, white, black or what, they want me out there to explain to them something about New Orleans. I say, "man, why don't you go home and just do you, and you bring that to me because I'm sure there is something there that I could learn from." I have a very good idea of why we're in New Orleans and what makes New Orleans so important at this time, in terms of the exploration of where these conversations are going. So now we have this great Prospect and we're bringing all these young people in here, and I'm bumping heads with them, which I love. I love it, because we are going to reeducate. You know it's like going to Africa. You go to Africa and think that you're going teach Africa something? {Laughs.} It's the total opposite. It's going teach you—it's going teach you how to be human. It's going teach you your interconnection to the environment here. You know they're gardening.

Odili: I'm glad you bring that up because, see, I want to get beyond the space of a hierarchical position. I'd like to be in a place where there's no hierarchical position like Africa versus African Americans. Man versus woman. White versus black. European versus Eastern European versus Western European. I just want to get in a place where labels and language don't create hierarchies. And that's how I think about things and so I heard this term *separate but equal*, and I was thinking about it in the context of the flag and I was like "wow" that makes me think about the red and white with the blue. Red and white are equal, yet contrasting as dark and light, even though in color systems, red would be a middle tone. And then I connected that back to Plessy, that whole thing about the case, what it came to, how profound it was at that time, separate but equal.

Willie: So profound.

Odili: But you know, we had the great theorists who debated that term, that said, this is not the case! We have separate facilities, but they're not equal. And the situation became such that you could challenge the term and say, "this is not being enacted."

And it came to Brown versus the Board of Education and that's where I learnt, wow, that landmark case that changed this country, came straight out of Plessy's case. That was the precedent. And that's when I started to see New Orleans. Like this leads to this, then to that, and then there's a line you can draw….

Willie: See and it's all there.

Odili: You know, I just want to say it's interesting because I think the time we live in, with what we have in Washington, it has created so much strength in resistance and so much positivity in resistance. And I'm thinking that during Obama's time, I sometimes question if we were asleep. And it's like, no, let's say things are culturally better, but you didn't feel the urgency we have now, which is like we are totally under threat.

Willie: I see that when you live, you got it. It's one continuum. Your heartbeat, it starts beating, and when it stops, you're dead. You transition to something else and in that transition hopefully you left enough that those who transition with you will run with that. That's why death is so important, and that's why in New Orleans we deal with life and death and we see them as equal partners in this whole dynamic in terms of what it means to be alive. And so for someone like me, I don't separate it, so I can understand sometimes how I may even come off confusing or abstract or what, because those contradictions are part of who we are.

Emily: I'd like to ask you guys about community and what community means, but I also want to combine that idea with this idea of art's role if you feel it has one, which I think you do in helping us understand, learn from, grow with, and maybe even love each other.

Willie: What Odili said earlier, I believe, and what art does is it forces the viewer to see things a different way. We are always seeking for truth and truth is the thing that gets us in trouble. So that's why there are these pieces you make and you don't know how they got there. You cannot talk about how you came to put these things together, but there is a desperateness of trying to create art out of chaos that you synthesize these two pieces and then you step back and you go, "oh god."

Allison: You're making meaning.

Willie: Right. So Obama, he allowed black people to have a voice that could challenge any voice. And then we put Trump on top of that and Trump really shows us that we really have a voice. He is ignorant.

Odili: Exactly. He's activating.

Willie: Oh he's activating, what has been lying dormant there which nobody wanted to see, now you have to see it. And I think that's healthy.

Odili: But it's negative/positive. It's activating.

Willie: Right, man. You know what Frederick Douglass said, "no struggle, no progress"? You see all of those things are built into my DNA at this point in my life. And New Orleans, this is one of the greatest cities in the world. When you go anyplace else and you say New Orleans, 90% of the people know where you are talking about.

Odili: It's a special city. I mean every city has a spirit to it, but this one is like, it walks with you. You can tell it walks with you. Some cities you don't recognize whatever spirit they have, and how it turns into this and that, but this one, it's in the streets. I want to say thank you, too, because you were the inspiration for my piece at the New Orleans Museum of Art. You gave me a book on the Black Indians.

Willie: Yeah. I just want to pass on. I'm deep down inside an educator, and I love that part because you have impact long after. Educators and women have had a big impact on who I am—from Ms. Ramsey helping me get on a different bus to go pick up a *New York Times* in sixth grade, to Ms. Daniels, and Ms. Leah Chase. Now Ms. Chase is in this new film I just made, "Beautiful Community," because she grew up over on Old Prieur. And she and I have become good friends because I met her when I was 18 in the civil rights movement. We used to meet in front of the restaurant and then we would go and demonstrate. So, Ms. Chase and I got this special bond and I call it big sister little brother.

Allison: And Dooky Chase is another site for Odili's work for Prospect.4. As well as Oretha Castle Haley.

Willie: Oretha was a mentor of mine, and she would say, "Willie Birch, the artist has one foot in poverty and one foot on the outside." The folks with the money need you because you buffer them in terms of making it, but they're usually not going to give you enough money to move out of your situation." You have to figure out how to really keep the voice of the people with you in terms of what you're trying to do. At the same time, understanding that at some point the whole dynamic just needs to change. The point is that my job is to push forward.

Emily: As we close, I'd love to bring up one more question: What does it mean when your work that is made here, is shown in other places. For example, Odili, what will your flags carry with them if they leave the city?

Willie: That's a powerful question. Since New York is usually the focal place of how we want to see American culture. And then you come here, and somebody like me says, "No, I don't want to do New York." What does that do, when you're forced to take your work to New York? The first black and white work I did, I couldn't sell it in New Orleans, so I took it to New York, and the MET bought it, in 2000. I went to New York to

challenge this whole idea of high and low, partly inspired by Bill Fagaly, putting together folk art shows at the New Orleans Museum of Art, and they were kicking my ass. I wanted what they had! An honesty, a truth, and an authenticity. We're in the bastion of this place, whereby we have this self-trained, or so called self-trained, and we have this tutored society. And the two here bridge together—that's where something new will grow.

Odili: The flags are meant to symbolize this city. If they are shown in another place, they will hopefully carry their memory of this city with them. The flags are now site-specific.

Published on the occasion of Prospect.4: The Lotus in Spite of the Swamp, New Orleans, 2017
© Prospect New Orleans