



A R T I S S I M A

DAPPER BRUCE LAFITTE

Dapper Bruce Lafitte grew up in the Lafitte Housing Development in the 6th Ward of New Orleans. This community has inspired his art so much that he has taken the name Dapper Bruce Lafitte to acknowledge its impact on his life. This inspiration is also apparent when you view Bruce's vibrantly detailed drawings chronicling his life in New Orleans. While Bruce is not shy about tackling the gritty subjects of poverty and racism, his art also documents the joyful parts of his life in the city.

Dapper Bruce Lafitte is an artist whose work is capable of breaking down the partition which separates folk art from fine art once and for all. These are big issues: how we define and reduce our culture through effective catch phrases and ineffective oppositions like fine versus folk, outsider versus insider, trained versus self-taught or vernacular. All these characterizations ring hollow today. They are fraught with the prejudices and contradictions of class and racial manipulation, no less so when they are deployed in the study of the liberal humanities. Lafitte escapes these confines in several ways. Through his connection to the street, public art and community rebuilding, he has focused on his local sub-cultures and folk-cultures, with the mind of a contemporary urbanist. His visual dynamics recall both Futurist and Russian Suprematist ideas of movement, crowds as movements. Like Busby Berkeley, Eisenstein, or socialist stadium spectacles, Lafitte renders a public in motion, a processional choreography defined by the streets, and thus an art of the streets, though not street art per se. The art world still struggles to define such phenomena. Born of a confluence of military marching forms and ancient religious processions, the parade form itself is rooted in the structure and image of the river, its forward flow, its bends and banks, just as it is reflected in the arterial systems on which both cities and human bodies rely. In depicting these resonant forms, Lafitte's drawings illustrate human columns and patterns in the flows of power, transport, communication, revelry and rivalry.

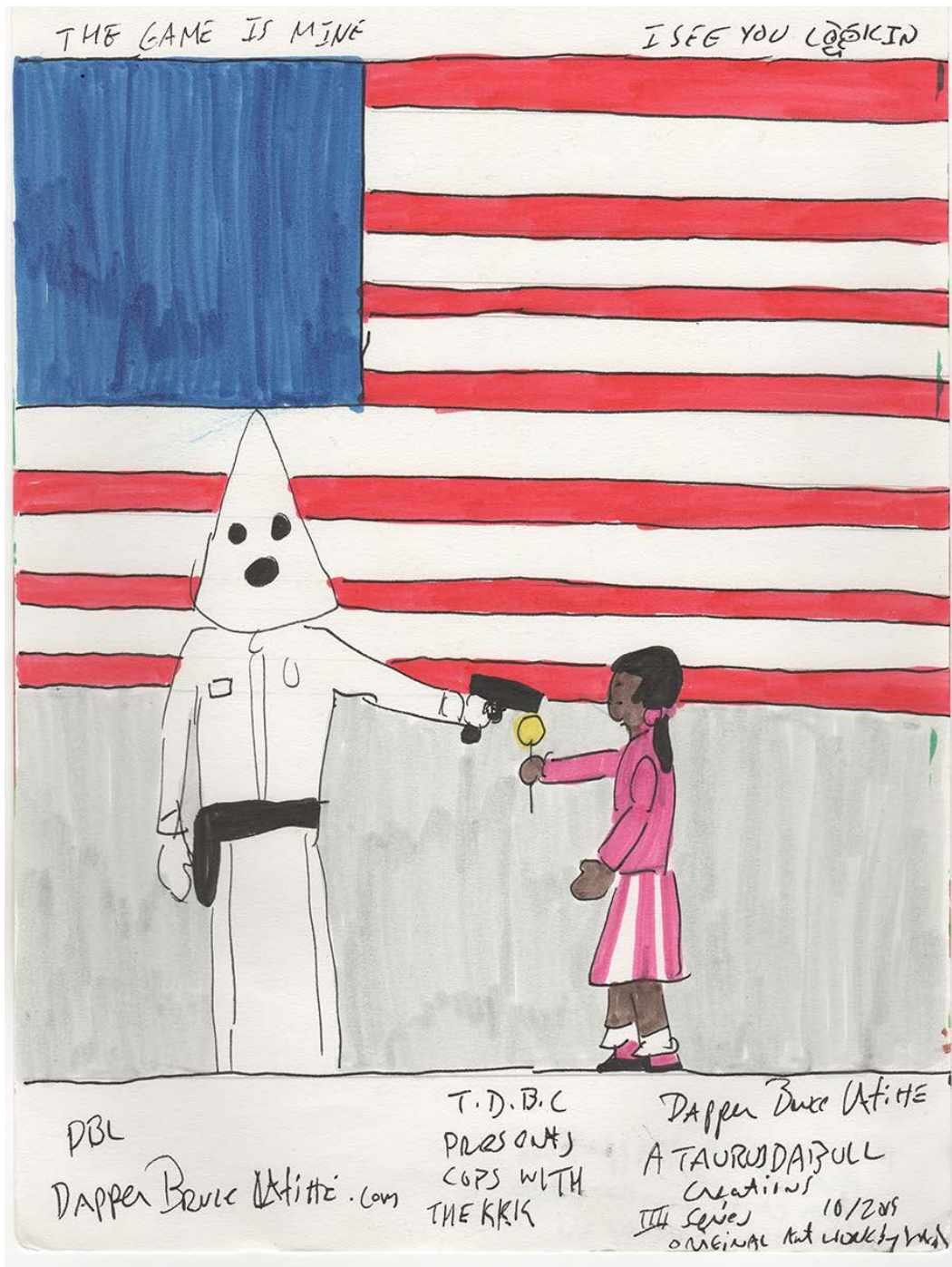
Excerpt from Erin McNutt, "Dapper Bruce Lafitte and the Grittier Side of Art", New Orleans Canvas Magazine, 04.03.2018

Dapper Bruce Lafitte's (1972, US) work records a singular personal trajectory in a grander, historically significant moment. A self-trained artist, he began making and showing work in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina to commemorate the then decimated street culture of parades and marching bands of the city. Recent solo exhibitions include those at FIERMAN Gallery, New York, US (2020); Galerie Tatjana Pieters, Ghent, BE (2018), Atlanta Contemporary (2016) curated by Daniel Fuller; Ohr-O'Keefe Museum, Biloxi (2015) MS; Vacant Gallery, Tokyo, JP (2012) and was part of "Prospect 2.0" the New Orleans Biennial (2013) curated by Dan Cameron. In 2009 he was a recipient of a Joan Mitchell Foundation Award.

Dapper Bruce Lafitte

This New Orleans artist emerged after Hurricane Katrina as a draftsman of epic vision and humble means, rendering scenes—of marching bands, Civil War battles, and the city after the storm—in astonishingly detailed aerial panoramas. Lafitte’s works in colored ink on paper are often immersively large, but his online exhibition “Stuck Inside,” on the Fierman gallery’s Web site, features two dozen new sketchbook-size works, made during the pandemic in New Orleans. These blunt drawings address the tremendous pain of our time. In one, a hybrid of Klansman and cop points a gun at a black girl; another depicts Trump as a colorless ghoul in the center of a radial composition featuring Confederate statues and figures in *Sieg heil* salutes. Colorful portraits of African-American Mardi Gras revellers in fabulous costumes strike a joyous note, but images of coffins lifted through crowds act as foils, showing a tragic flip side to the celebration. In Lafitte’s city, as across the U.S., the pandemic—like police violence—has taken a disproportionate toll on black communities, and his powerful drawings illuminate the shameful connection.

—*Johanna Fateman*



T.D.B.C. Presents Cops with the KKK
2020

Archival ink on acid free paper
31.5 x 23 cm

march on

Artist Bruce M. Davenport Jr., born Bruce M. Washington, aka “Dapper Bruce,” lives and works in the back of a tidy shotgun house on a street a couple of blocks from the Mississippi River in the Lower 9th Ward of New Orleans.

Davenport, 42, grew up in the Lafitte housing development in the city’s 6th Ward, not far but a world away from the French Quarter. The Lafitte Projects “ain’t there no more,” to use a particularly New Orleanian turn of phrase, having been razed and turned into sterile tracts of mixed-income housing in the years after Hurricane Katrina. But the part of the Lower Ninth where he currently lives looks like it’s doing just fine.

The first thing you see when you come into Davenport’s living room are the two enormous aquarium tanks bubbling away practically in the middle of it. A big, sweet-looking turtle bobs contentedly in one of them. The next thing you notice is that whatever space in the room isn’t filled by the aquariums is crowded with memorabilia related to Davenport’s life and career as an artist. Stacks of magazines, newspapers, and drawings occupy whatever surfaces might have otherwise been used for seating, and a good part of the floor as well. Dozens of framed press clippings from magazines all over the world cover the walls, along with thank-you notes from principals and band directors for the drawings Davenport has donated to their schools. A giant framed poster of Biggie Smalls, propped up next to a bookcase arranged with Davenport’s high school football trophies, watches benignly over all. The effect is equal parts atelier, archive, and bachelor pad, and the clustered clutter of words, faces, and colors feels a little like being in one of Davenport’s drawings.

Davenport’s dense, intricate art—which these days depicts boxing matches and football games in addition to the local high-school marching bands that first brought him prominence—has captured the attention of the international art market. In addition to exhibiting at three installments of Prospect, the Big Easy’s contemporary art triennial, the artist has shown in places as far-flung as Marfa Ballroom in Texas, Vacant Gallery in Tokyo, and John Hope Franklin Center Gallery at Duke University, in Durham, North Carolina. Since being picked up by New York City’s Louis B. James Gallery last year, Davenport and his work have been featured to great acclaim at the Outsider Art Fair (in Paris in October 2014 and New York in February 2015).

VJ: So I hear you played football in school. Were you an artist back then? **BD:** I played football at Bell Junior High, and then I went to Joseph S. Clark High School and played there. I was pretty good coming up as a football player. I played tight end, and then I was an outside linebacker. When I went to college they moved me to strong safety, then back to linebacker.

We had art classes in school but it wasn’t taken too seriously when I was coming up. I loved art but I didn’t have an audience to show it to. I didn’t have people who understood art to show me the way. My grandparents, who raised me, told me that since I liked art, I should sit down and do it. It would keep me out of trouble. I could laways look at something and draw it—I just had to look at it long enough and get it in my mind.

When I got older, it stopped, because the school cut down the art programs. So I wanted to play football instead. I was good at art, but now I had to show that I was good at football as well. So I let art get away from me. It’s like you’re married to art, but you go and cheat on it with something else.

VJ: When did you start making art again? **BD:** Well, after college I came back to New Orleans and went to work for

12 years. I started drawing again about a month before Katrina hit. I wanted to see if I still really was a talented artist. My plan was to go to galleries and show them my work and see what would happen.

But *BAM!* When Katrina came, it knocked all that out. I got sent to Atlanta, and then to Minnesota, and in Minnesota my social worker said, “You need to be an artist, because you’re good.” I said, “That’s what my grandmother told me!” So I said I would go back to New Orleans and make a mark on New Orleans like Katrina did. My whole thing was to defeat Katrina. Whatever memories we had before Katrina, I’m going to draw them and make people feel happy, and it’s going to be alright.

VJ: How did you decide to start drawing marching bands? **BD:** I thought if I did the bands first, maybe that would excite people. If I did Katrina, people would be like, “Nuh-uh, that’s too rough, we already seen enough of that.” But then with the bands—I could donate art to all the high schools in New Orleans. I wanted them to see it and say, “You’re a fan of us, and we like you.”

VJ: It was after Hurricane Katrina when your career really took off? **BD:** Yeah, but it took a while. After I went to college and then started working, I would deliver furniture to people’s houses and see art on their walls and I would tell them, “I can do better than that.” And they’d say, “Just take this tip and get on out of this house.” So I thought, ‘Alright, I need to show these people something.’

So when I came back to New Orleans after the storm I sat down and started thinking about art again. I kept thinking about those people who put me out of their house when I told them their artwork wasn’t good. I kept thinking of that social worker who told me I should be an artist. I kept thinking of my grandparents and about the people who loved my art, and I thought, ‘I got to please them.’

Then, when guys from the art world seen it, it took off. By my third year [making art], I’m showing in New York. By my fourth year, I hooked up with [curator] Diego Cortez and we’re going to Tokyo and going to France and doing biennials. He had all these connections.

We did a show at Duke University, and I did an interview with this black history professor, and when we finished he just looked at me and said, “Man, you just hipped me to something new. I knew all about Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King, and you can be the next one. Whatever you do, you need to inspire the next generation.” And then that stuck to me. *BAM!* I didn’t know I could inspire another generation, inspire people who didn’t have hope. And so the art got a little more intense, the work got a little bit better, and then the stuff on it, like the texts, started switching up.

VJ: Let’s talk about the text. What are all the phrases that keep appearing in different drawings? **BD:** The texts started with just my signature and where I came from. Then I put different things, like “R.I.P.” for my grandparents or maybe a family member, or a teacher who inspired me, or for bands for schools that were closed by Katrina. It’s a way to remember them. I’ll put their name on it and it’s like a shout-out to them. And “I see you looking”—what happened is that maybe a lot of times I can’t go to Spain, or to Germany with the artwork, but the artwork is there—and I want people to be like, “OK, this artist is looking at me, because I’m looking at his art.” I put that on there so they’ll go looking for me too. And when they start looking for me, they start looking at everything, all the detail.

And then with “The game has changed”—it means that the artwork has changed. Everything about it changes—the size of the paper, even what I put on the back of the artwork. Different galleries change. Everything in life changes. So I put “The game has changed” on everything to express that. Next year, I’m going to start putting “The game is mine” on the artworks now.

VJ: You talk a lot about art in terms of it being a game. **BD:** When I got into this art game, I wanted to shake it up. And *BAM!* When I shake it up, I can control it. It’s all mine.

My whole thing is about competing. Art is like a football game. The shows are like a football game. Getting a show in a museum is like the Super Bowl to me. When you get up on that wall, you gotta have people running up to that wall and you gotta put a smile on their faces. And at the end of the show, just like at the end of the game, people are going to be shaking your hand, saying, “Good job!” You want to walk through your neighborhood and you want people to be proud of you. They’re like, “Good game!” You want to be the baddest thing they’ve ever seen.

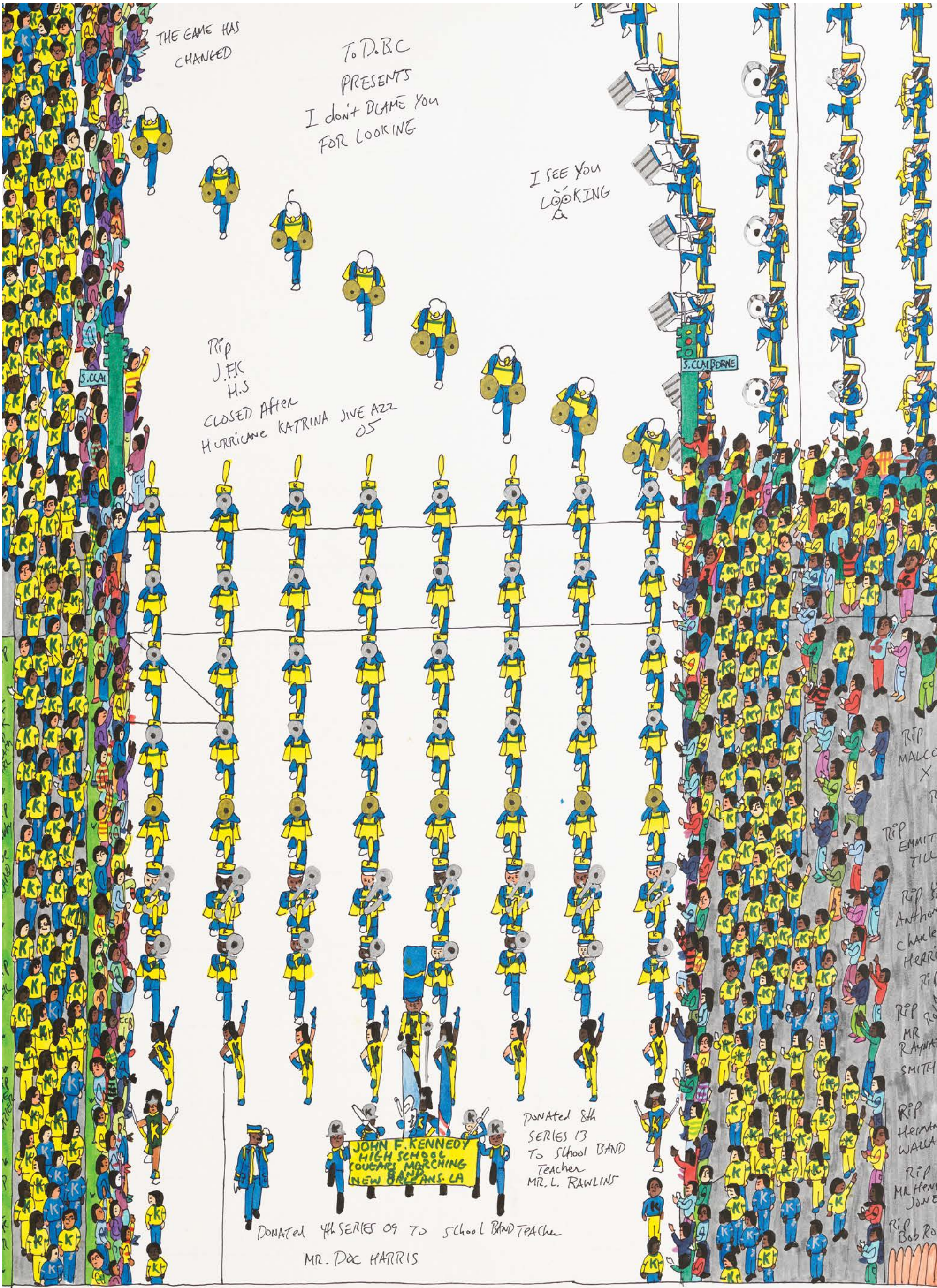
So that’s how I play it in the art game. They put me next to Picasso, I’m gonna kick his ass. They put me next to any artist, I’m gonna kick his ass too. If they put me in the folk art game, I want to dominate it. If they put me in the contemporary art game, I’m going to dominate that too. So it doesn’t matter to me where they put me.

VJ: Do you consider yourself a New Orleans artist? **BD:** I want to be a New Orleans artist who’s separated from all the bad things about New Orleans: the crime, the bad politicians, the evilness that’s going on. And I want my art to be separate from anything that makes people forget about education. People are all about the Saints being the “home team.” I say forget about the home team—it’s all about the home people you gotta cheer on. So I don’t care what you want to call my art. Call it “Bruce Art,” because no one does what I do.

VJ: People who only know your marching band drawings are sometimes surprised to know that you’ve moved on to drawing other things now, like boxing. **BD:** When I was coming up it was all about Tyson, and when my uncle was coming up it was Muhammad Ali, and when my grandad was coming up it was Joe Louis. So my grandad would talk about Joe Louis to my uncles, and they would talk about Ali to me, and I want to talk about Mike Tyson to the world. I’m happy to be part of a generation who had a superstar, just like Ali and Joe Louis were superstars for my grandad and my uncles.

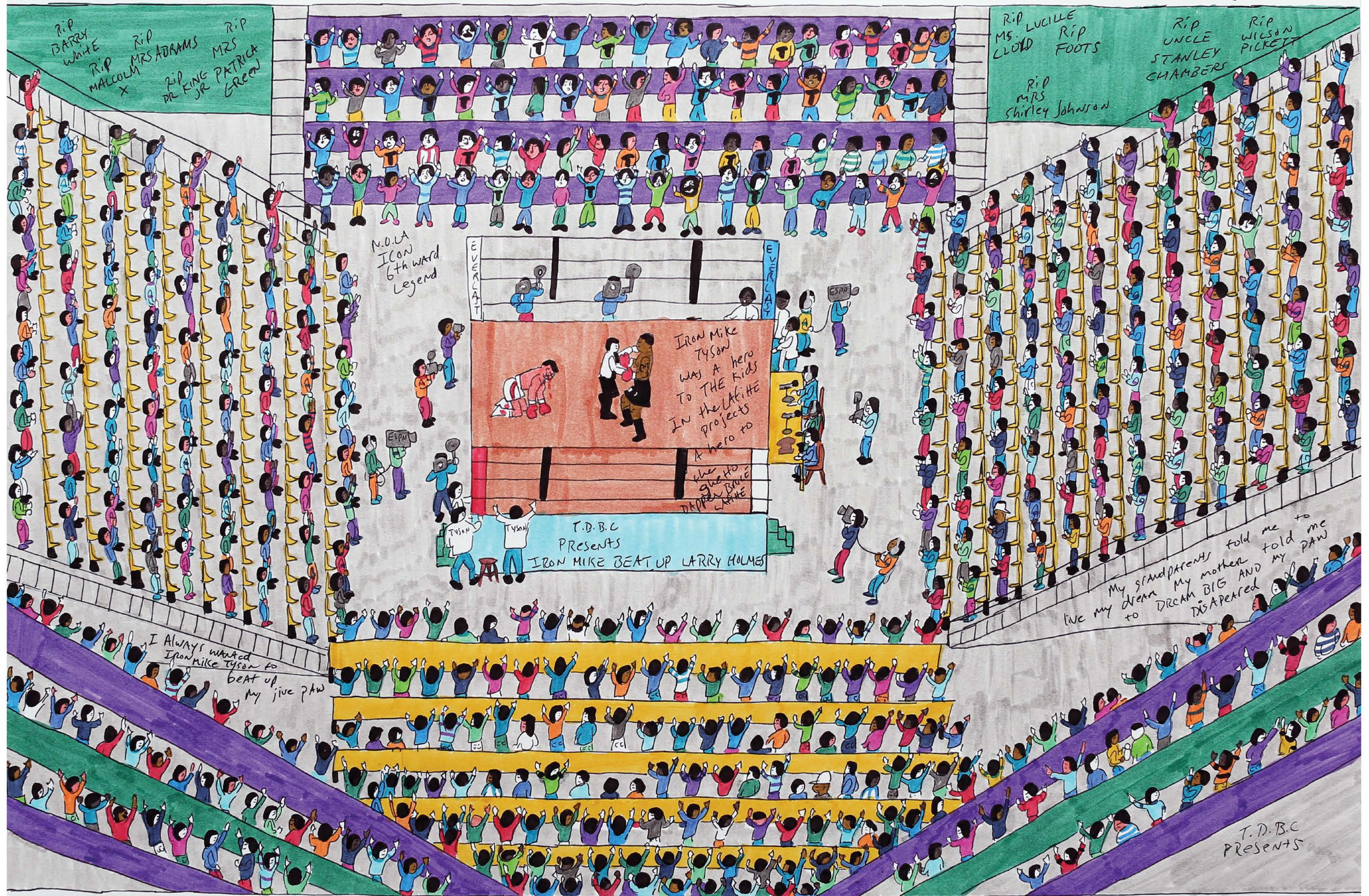
VJ: Can you talk about how sports and marching bands are related, especially in New Orleans? **BD:** When we were coming up it was all related—education and athletics and the bands. So kids were well grounded. But this generation is losing something. Like now, when you go into a school and see a football team, there’re only 15 kids who want to play. And only maybe six of them have enough skill to play and to move on to another level. Some of these kids even have the wrong teachers and coaches in the schools holding them back. So when they come out of school, they’re hurt and mad and upset and their parents may not be home, so then they’re double mad and upset. And then you have an angry kid with no way to get out.

We can gain from telling stories. I gained something from being an artist, from being a human being. I just gained, over time. That’s why I said the game has changed, and that’s why I say now that the game is mine. ■



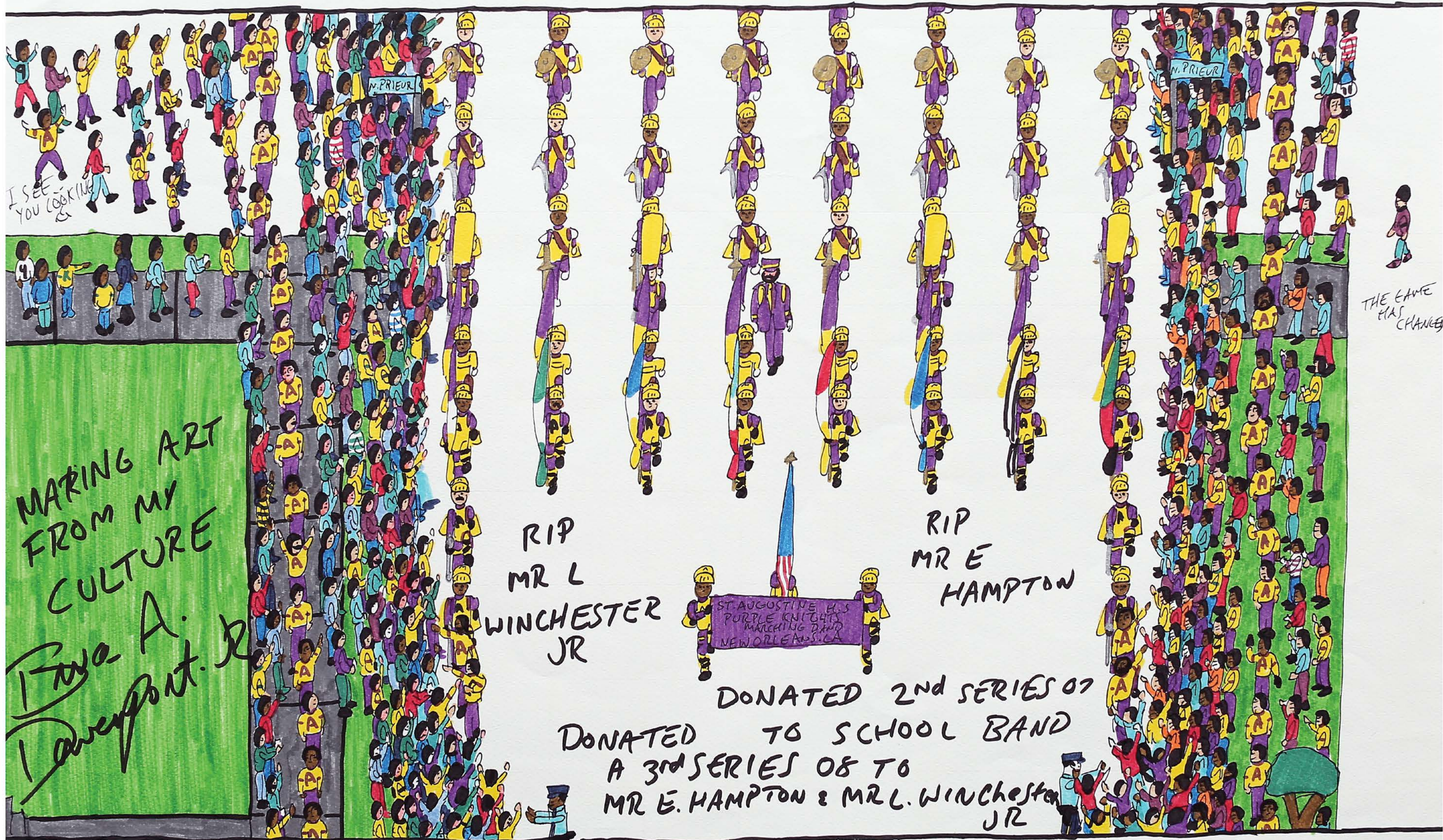
THE GAME HAS CHANGED

I SEE YOU LOOKIN



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DAPPER BRUCE LAFIHE

Bruce A. Davenport, JR
A TAURUS DA BULL CREATIONS
9th Series 14 12/2014
ORIGINAL ARTWORK by hand



B.A.D
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T.D.B.C
PRESENTS
PURPLE ON N. PRIEUR ST

Bruce A. Davenport, Jr
A TAURUS DA BULL CREATIONS
7th SERIES 12 3/2012
TAURUS DA BULL22@YAHOO.COM
ORIGINAL ARTWORK by hand

THE GAME HAS CHANGED

I SEE YOU LOOKIN

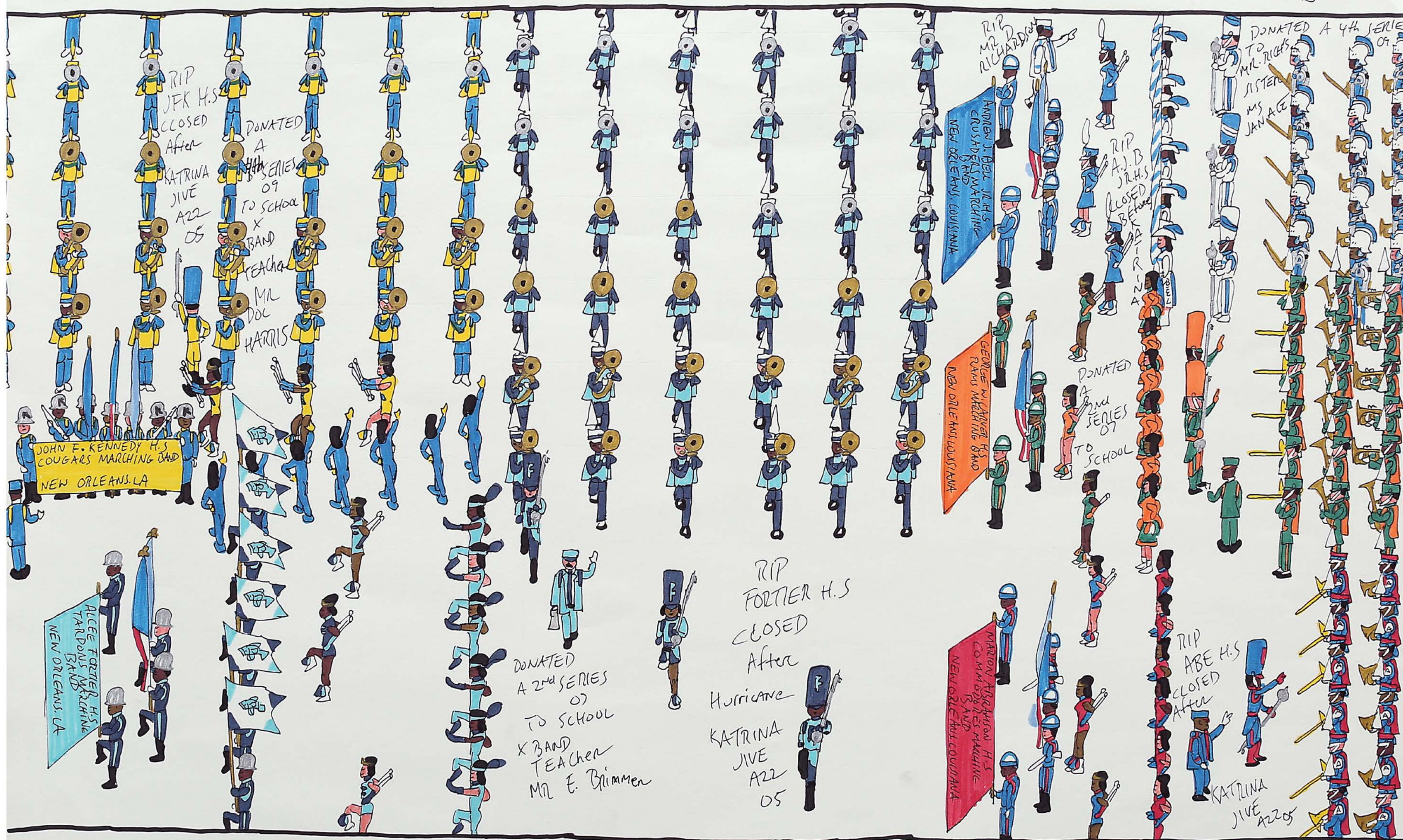


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DAPPER BRUCE LAFIHE

Bruce A. Davenport Jr.
A TAURUS DABULL CREATIONS
9th Series 14 12/2015
ORIGINAL ARTWORK by hand

THE GAME HAS CHANGED

I SEE YOU COOKING



B.A.D
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T.D.B.C
PRESENTS

ARTIST DELIGHT!!

Bruce A. Davenport, JR

A TAURUS DA BULL CREATIONS
6th SERIES II 3/2011

TAURUSDA BULL 72 @ YAHOO.COM
ORIGINAL ARTWORK by hand

