way of the righteous: the art of roy ferdinand

by Martina Batan, as told to Alexander Provan and Peter J. Russo

"Rembrandt was Rembrandt, Picasso was Picasso, Kaowlevsky is Kaowlevsky, and Ferdinand is Ferdinand." The life and work of a self-taught New Orleans artist.

My story began a long time ago. Thirty-eight years to be exact. My name is Roy Ferdinand and in these following pages, I will try to give you an idea of what my life has been like. I make no claims to importance or fame. But I will tell you, whomever should read this, I'm so incredibly saddened by the current turn of events.

When I was maybe 15 years or so younger I had a great many ambitions and dreams. How I came to loose many of them is my own fault. In some instances the blame went to others. One or two were people I truly trusted.

I can make no clams to being a writer even though that was one of those ambitions that I aspired to. Mostly science fiction and horror which as a child were my favorites.

—From the sketchbook of Roy Ferdinand (1959–2004)


Roy's
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ONE WAY
NO LOITERING
21 YEARS
OR OLDER


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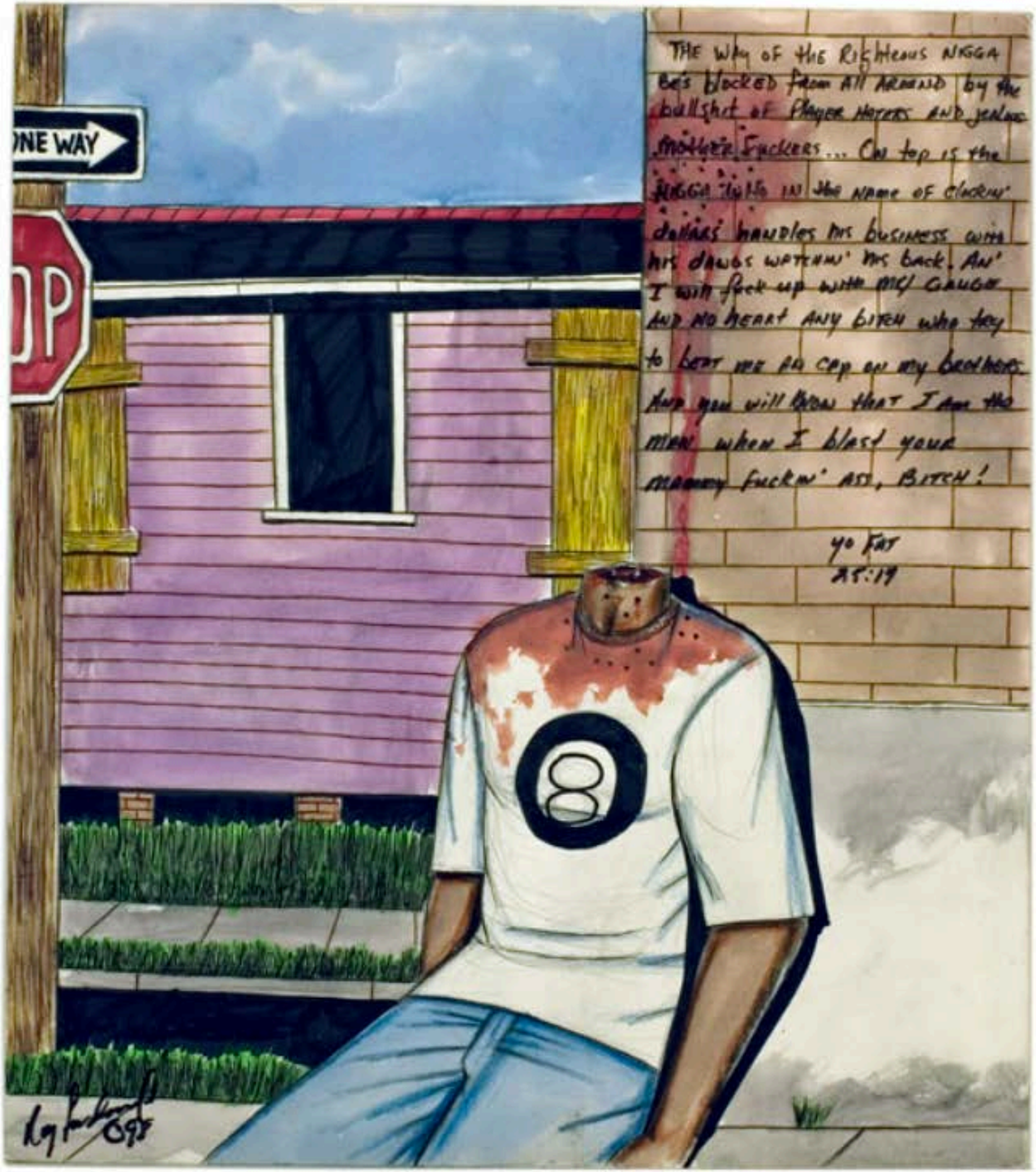
EAST TOWN
CAZ


ONE WAY
OP
THE WAY OF THE RIGHTEOUS NIGGA
BE'S BLOCKED FROM ALL AROUND BY THE
BULLSHIT OF PLAYER HATERS AND JEALOUS
MOTHER FUCKERS... ON TOP IS THE
NIGGA JUSTUS IN THE NAME OF CLOCKIN'
DOLLAS HANDLES HIS BUSINESS WITH
HIS DAWGS WATCHIN' HIS BACK. AN'
I WITH FUCK UP WITH MY GAUGE
AND NO HEART ANY BITCH WHO TRY
TO BEEF ME AN CAP ON MY BROTHERS
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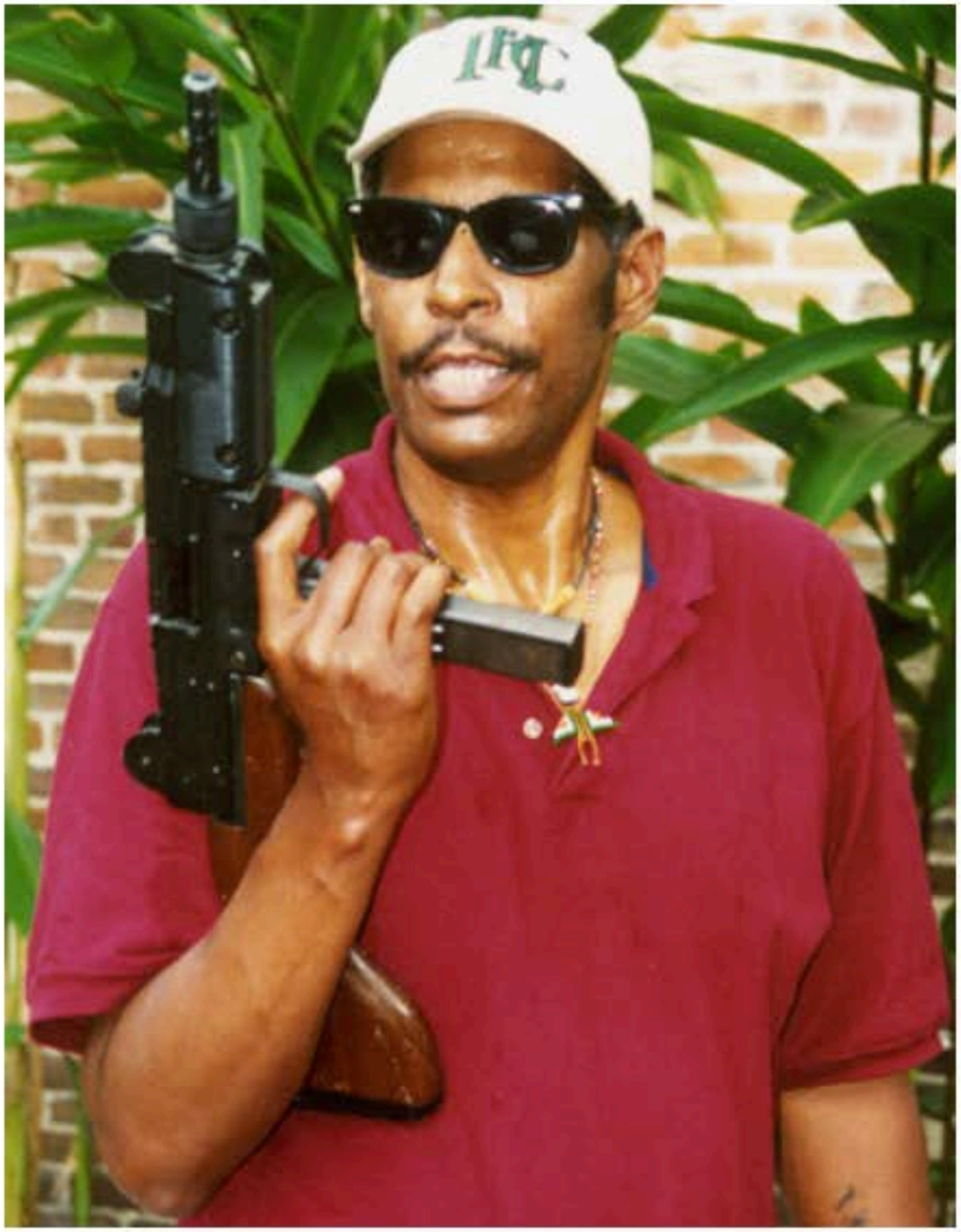


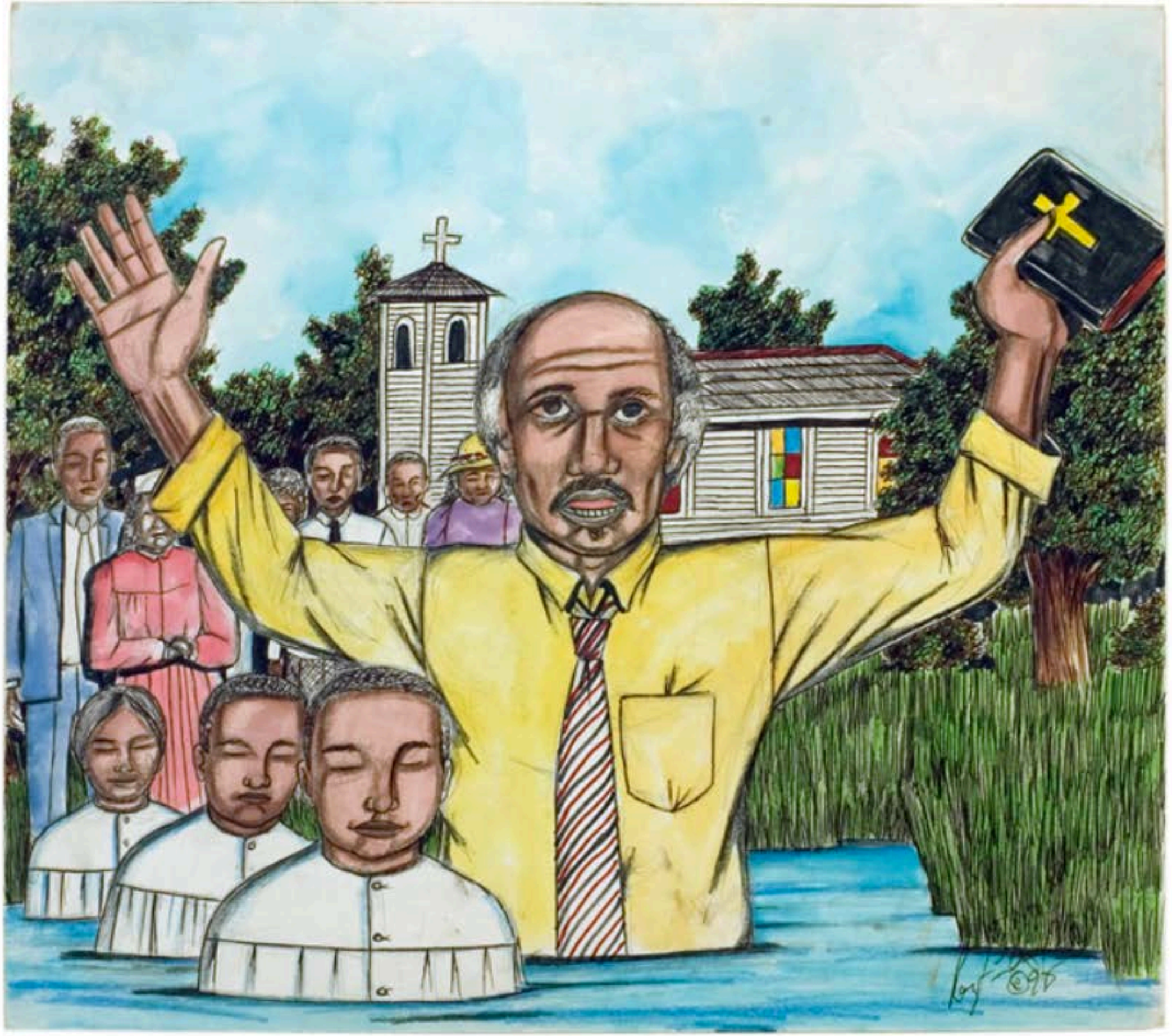
Roy Ferdinand with a plastic assault rifle. (Photo: Bill Sasser)

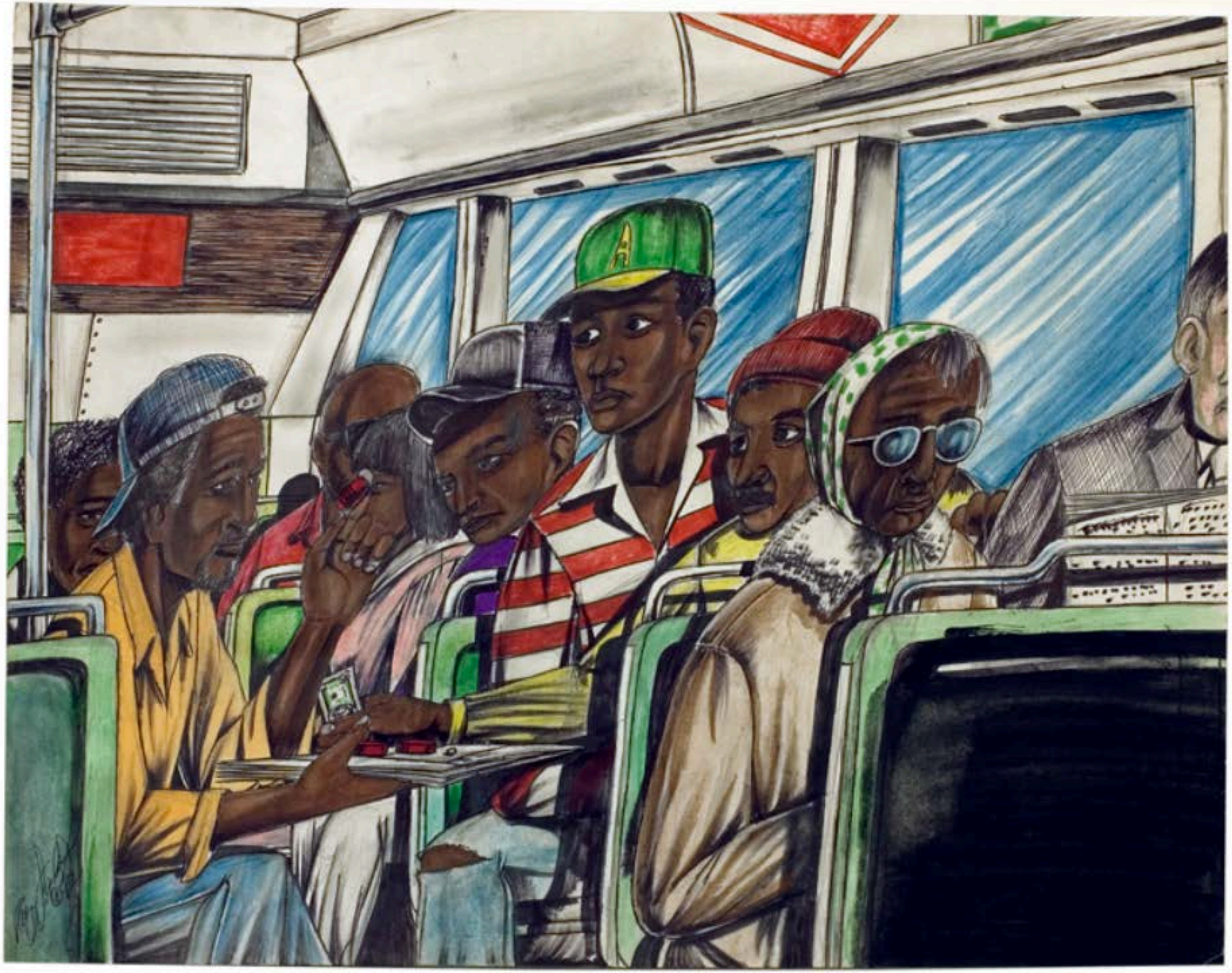
Martina Batan is a collector and independent curator. She began collecting Roy Ferdinand's scenes of New Orleans life in 2006 and has since amassed the largest collection of his work.

In 2006, just a few months prior to my first visit to New Orleans, I attended a lecture at the American Folk Art Museum by Regina Perry (a curator, besides being B. B. King's former girlfriend, which she'll tell you within five minutes of meeting her). She brought with her a drawing by Roy Ferdinand, which she pulled out of a poster tube and brandished in the air, waving it like a flag. Later I would wish that I had paid more attention to what she had actually said about Ferdinand, but the name was planted in my head. Roy had died in December 2004, eight months before the levees broke, at age forty-five.

A tsunami hit Banda Aceh, Indonesia, in January 2005. I was glued to the media coverage of the tsunami and the tragedy that unfolded in countless communities throughout the region. When Katrina hit months later, it created another media storm. For all the coverage provided, every time a great disaster strikes, people have a hard time remembering that something like it has happened before, oftentimes only months prior. Watching the coverage of Katrina, I thought, "Well, this time I could be there and see it for myself."

The first time I went to New Orleans was as a volunteer, in March 2006. I had never been there before. I went with a group of friends, all of us registered with animal-rescue groups there. Before leaving New York, I went online to check out some of the alternative gallery spaces, thinking I might connect with some part of the city's population through them.





Papier-mâché sculpture and Ferdinand's sci-fi novels, second-place shooting-contest trophy, cowboy boots, and Coca-Cola promotional camera.

Personal Artifacts

When I visited Barrister's, a gallery in the St. Claude Arts District that exhibits folk and outsider artists, I noticed a large stack of drawings that looked like the Ferdinand piece I had seen. I asked director Andy Antippas if he had anything by Ferdinand, and he said, "Oh yeah, there's a few," and casually gestured toward the stack. After spending an hour going through the stack, I asked, "Well, how much do you sell these for?" He said, "I couldn't be bothered to sell you just one or two. If you want to buy them all, we can talk." I came back the next day and asked, "How much for the whole stack?" That's how it began.

When Andy and I made this deal, it was clear that he had decided, for whatever reason, that I should be allowed to have the honor of owning Roy's work—and I don't mean that facetiously—and also his belongings, which Andy had kept at the gallery. (Andy had been one of Roy's closest friends, inheriting everything the artist owned after his death.) I took them, but there was one item I decided to leave: his ashes, which at that point were in a small, hollowed-out granite container with his name carved in it. I didn't feel comfortable taking them, or taking them out of New Orleans. I told Andy he should be the keeper of Roy's remains.

Roy left some watercolors, a paint-box kit, a couple of T-shirts, and a can of worn-down crayons. Roy was a sci-fi freak, and he left behind a small library of paperbacks. He also left a Coca-Cola promotional camera, which looks exactly like a soda can—for a while, I couldn't even figure out how to open the lens. A lot of his work was done from snapshots, Andy told me, and Roy had carried this particular camera so that no one would steal it. I opened it up and there was no film in it. I also took possession of his sketchbook, which has become one of the dearest things to me. In it he had attempted to write his autobiography. It doesn't go on for more than a page or two. He also pasted in the snapshots, and scrawled notations next to each one. The personal artifacts were something I felt couldn't be separated from the bulk of the drawings, at least the drawings I began with.

I also have his cowboy boots, which have his socks in them. Part of the myth he created about himself involved being a cowboy, and he often wore a black ten-gallon hat and a thrift-store western belt. Roy was a self-made legend, like Andy Warhol. You have to be aware that there is myth and there is fact, but ultimately the line disappears and it's just the character that remains. When Andy Antippas says something about Roy, or when Regina Perry says something, or when other people in the field who knew him say something, it's all with their own

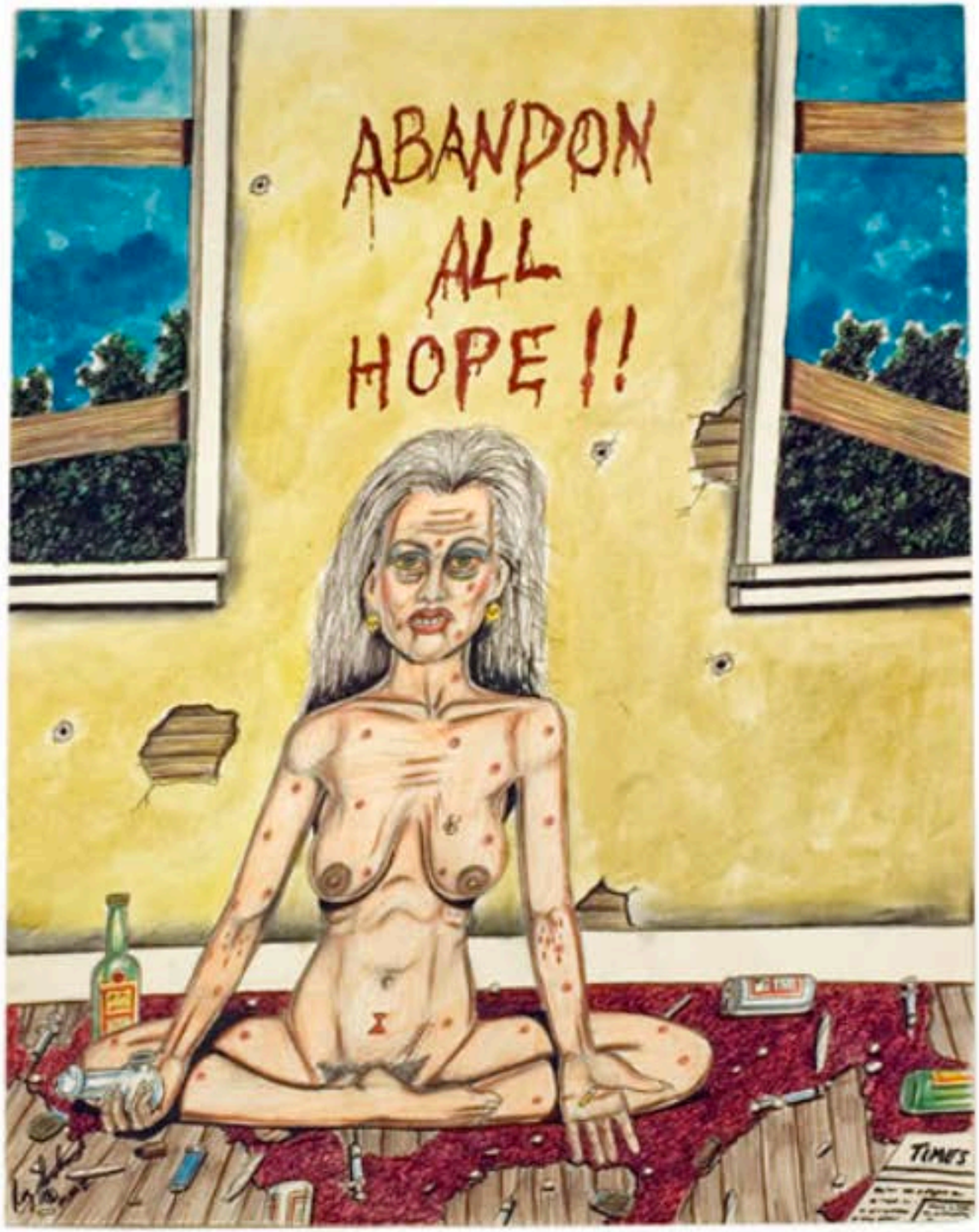
experiences woven into it; you never know what Roy told them.

Pecking Orders

Andy Antippas is director of Barrister's Gallery in New Orleans and inherited Roy Ferdinand's remaining artworks and belongings after his death in 2004. He relayed the following story via email.

I knew Roy for twenty years, and all the BS ultimately sorted itself out; in the end, it was pointless for him to self-aggrandize with me, because I knew him too well. I mentioned my gratitude to Roy for warning me that Chickenman, a local voodoo priest, had hired two gunmen from Houston to kill me: I had put Chickenman in charge of this voodoo shop, and I found out that he had been selling pot there. So I showed up early one morning and locked the shop's gates. Roy was friendly with Chickenman, and he must have overheard something, so he tipped me off. He came to me like he was a gangster, talking about how he knew the men from Houston. So I told him to arrange a sit-down with the two thugs so I could get a sense of how nervous I needed to be; I also wanted them to see that I was not going to be intimidated. I figured having hulking Roy with me would help level the playing field. After a day or so, it became apparent that he didn't know them and was petrified about even being associated with me during this whole episode. Finally, a couple of weeks later, after several confrontations with these two men at the gallery where they tried to shake me down, I got a friend with the NOPD to strap me with a shoulder holster and a Glock and go with me in plain clothes to Chickenman's place. Sure enough, the two guys were there. The officer acted like someone I had hired to protect me, and it scared the hell out of them. During our "conversation," I asked them about Roy. They had no idea who I was talking about.

The gangster stuff was fine for his image and sales—the only guns he ever owned were plastic replicas—and I let him go on in interviews and with clients. He would tell them how he punched out his sergeant in the army reserves (they actually released him for "noncompliance" or something equally innocuous), how he belonged to a neighborhood gang (it was more like a stickball team), his "initiation" into the voodoo priesthood (I saw him do fake tarot-card readings). Why did I find this behavior acceptable? I thought of it not only as another form of his artistry but also as an opportunity to watch the trickster consciousness at work. If Roy ever had a tutelary voodoo Loa, it was certainly Papa Legba, the legendary trickster.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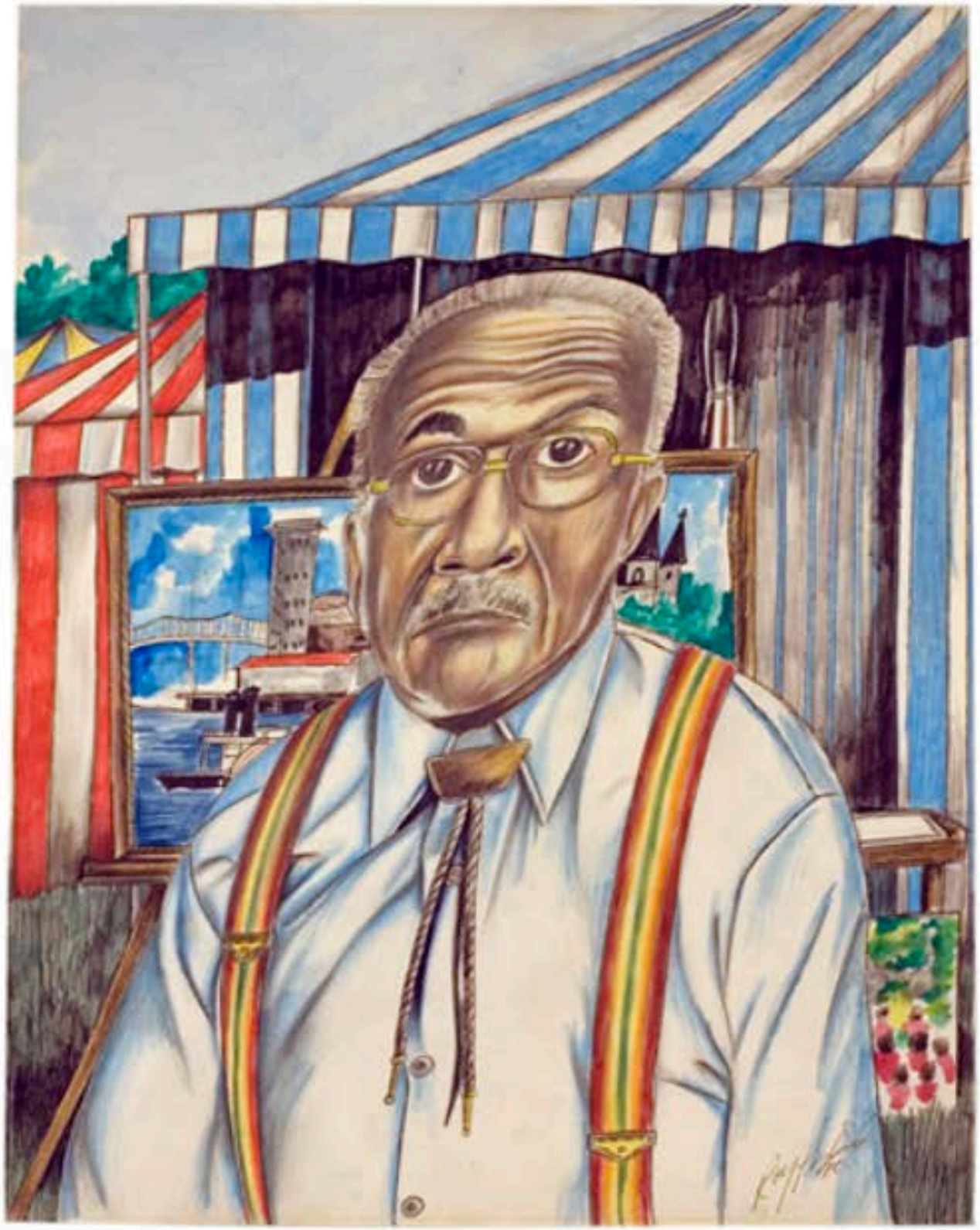


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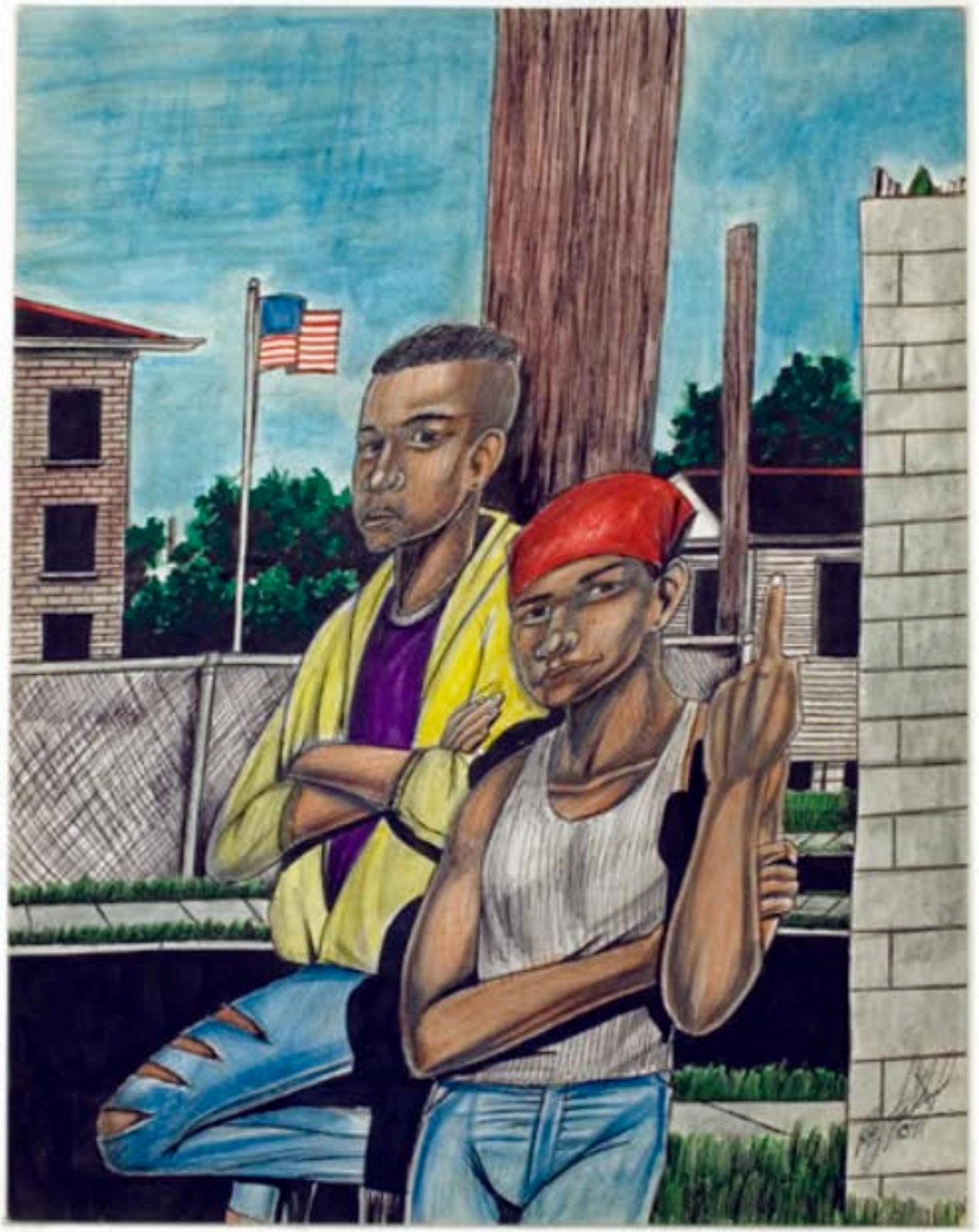

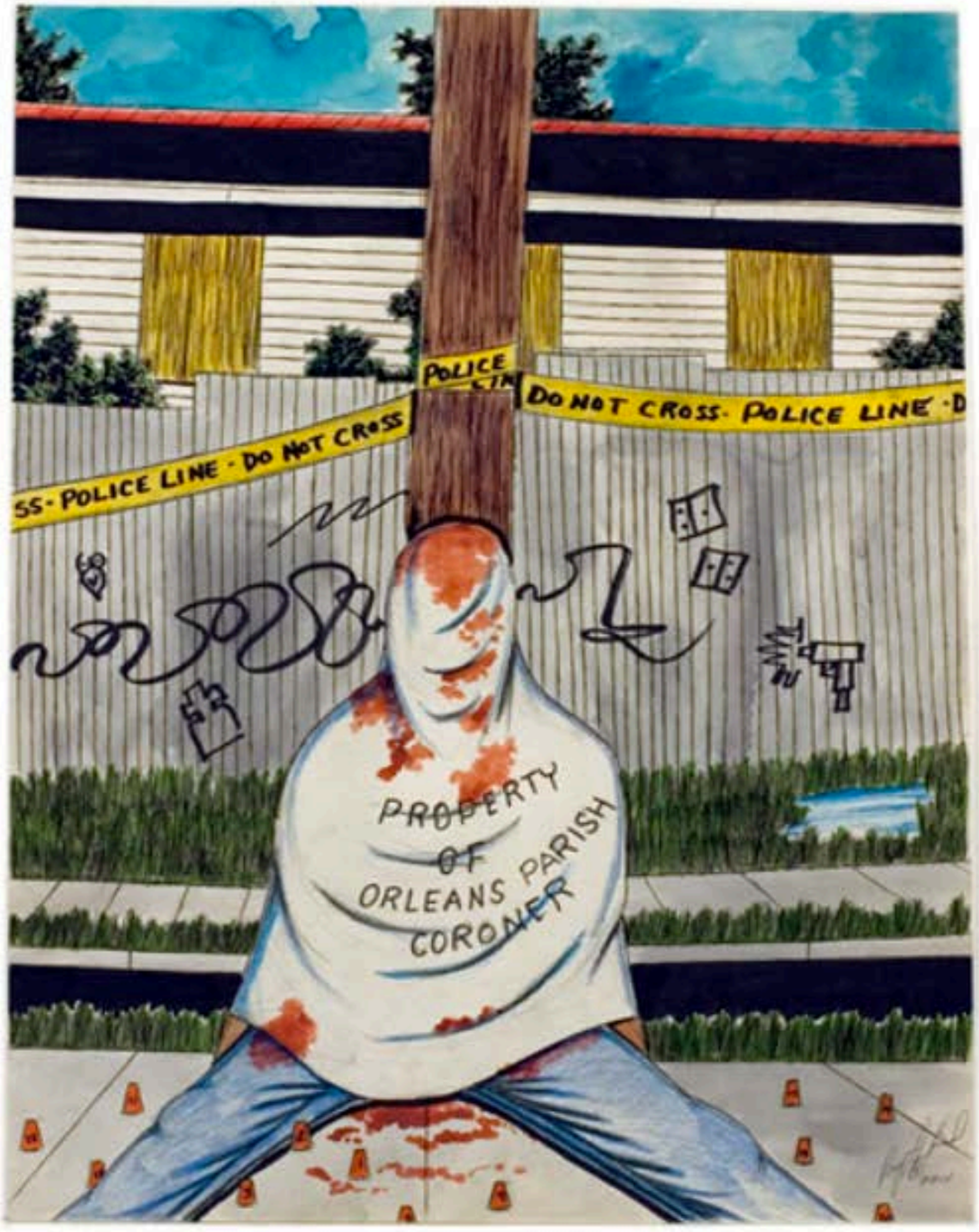
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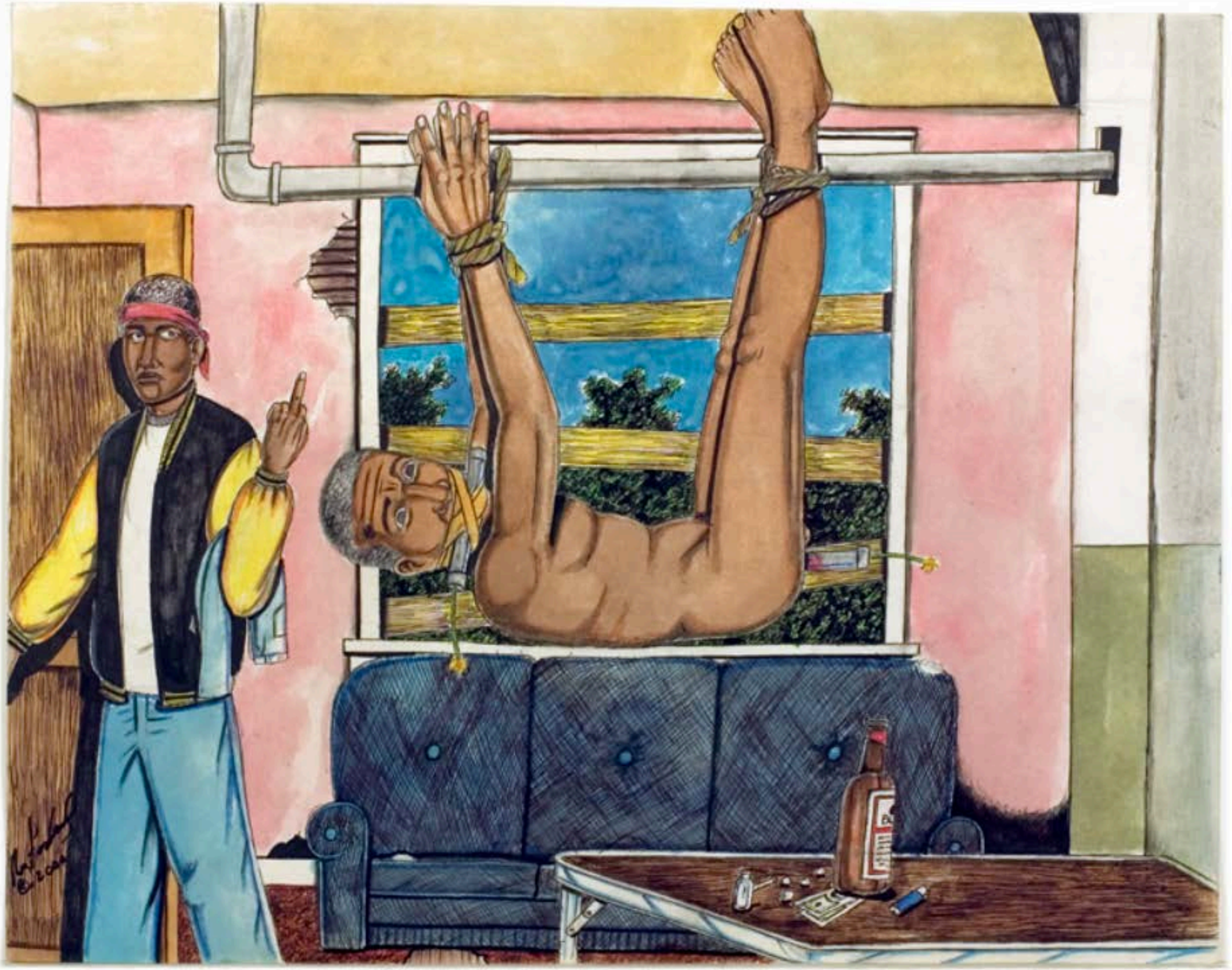

A Man Who Understood Death

Martina Batan continues... Roy was in jail when he started to draw; at least that's the story. He was a professional artist—he was a professional lot of things, but I think he was very proud of his identity as an artist. He said at one point, "Rembrandt was Rembrandt, Picasso was Picasso, Kandinsky was Kandinsky, and Ferdinand is Ferdinand." At times he did other things for money, for stability, as many artists do.

A lot of the local music scene knew him. Spice One, an early West Coast gangsta rapper, was a Ferdinand collector. Last December, I bought a bunch of drawings from a club owner in Vegas. He sold me what he touted as the most extreme and outrageous collection of Roy Ferdinand's work. When I got the package, some of them were really extreme, but they were scenes you could imagine Roy witnessing: torture, murder, drugs… I'm still trying to sort out what is real and what is fiction.

There were three things that struck me about his work when I began looking at it: The artist had died not long ago; the community that he depicted had been scattered, maybe not to return; and the architecture, which is really beautifully rendered, is also gone. People from New Orleans get really involved in figuring out the locations. Roy lived in a number of neighborhoods, but the Lower Seventh and Lower Ninth are where you'd see families getting busted by the cops in the middle of the day, which is something Roy painted.

There's one series of drawings that are just abandoned houses. You'd think they were post-Katrina. But they're not. That's one of the sad stories that people outside of New Orleans haven't picked up on: this is a city that was desperate. People tend to romanticize tragedy and hardship. When Kiki Smith spoke at the memorial service for the painter Leon Golub, she said that when she met Leon when she was a punk in the '70s, she realized that she and her friends were really romanticizing death. Here was a man who understood death and the hardships of life and depicted them. I still get chills when I think of Leon and Roy. I sometimes think that the unflinching gaze of the artist to the subject in Roy's work, and often the subject to the viewer, comes straight from Leon, and the way he rendered faces and anatomy; the musculature of the bodies, the flat perspective.

Leon Golub, *Try Burning This One...* (detail), 1991.


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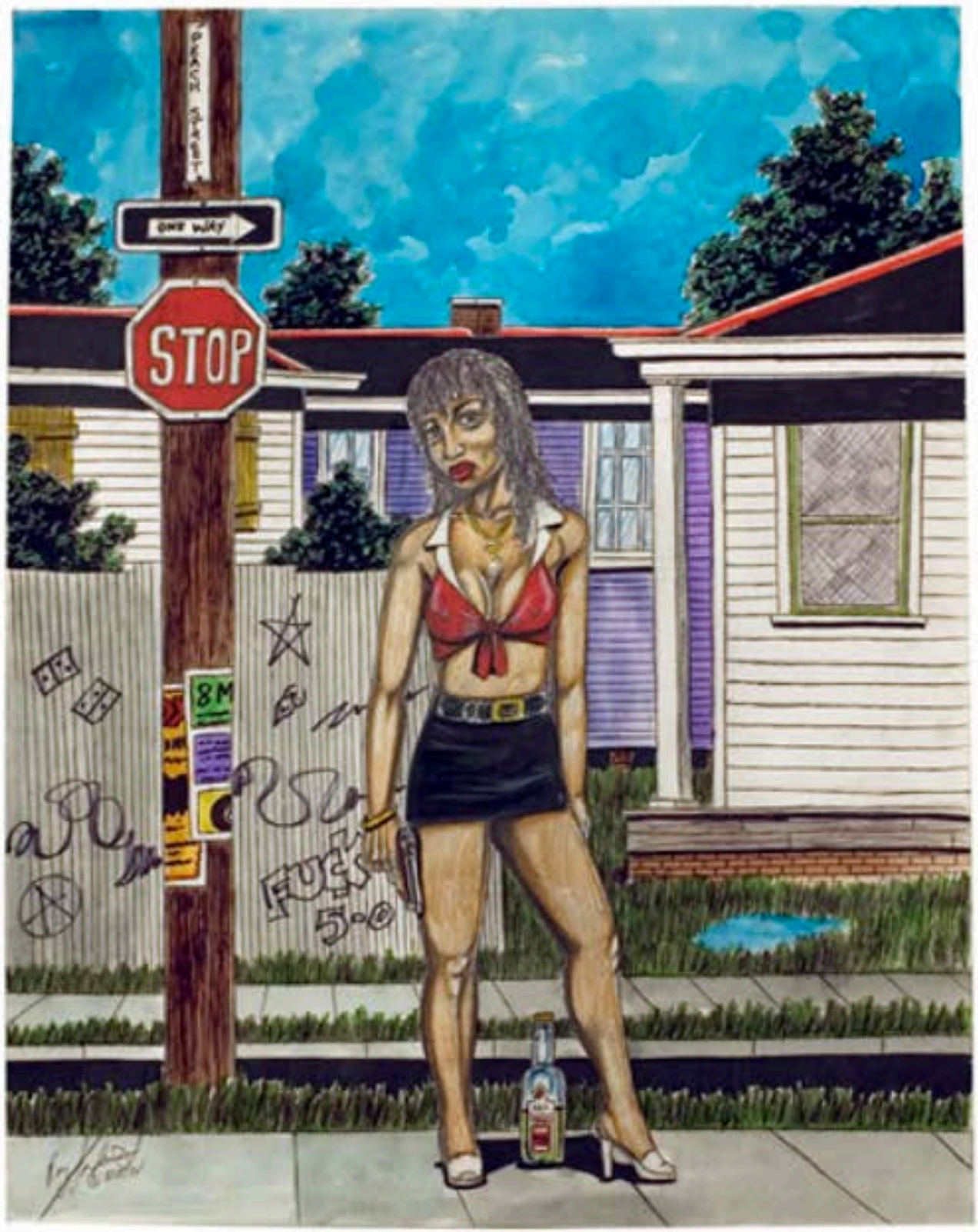
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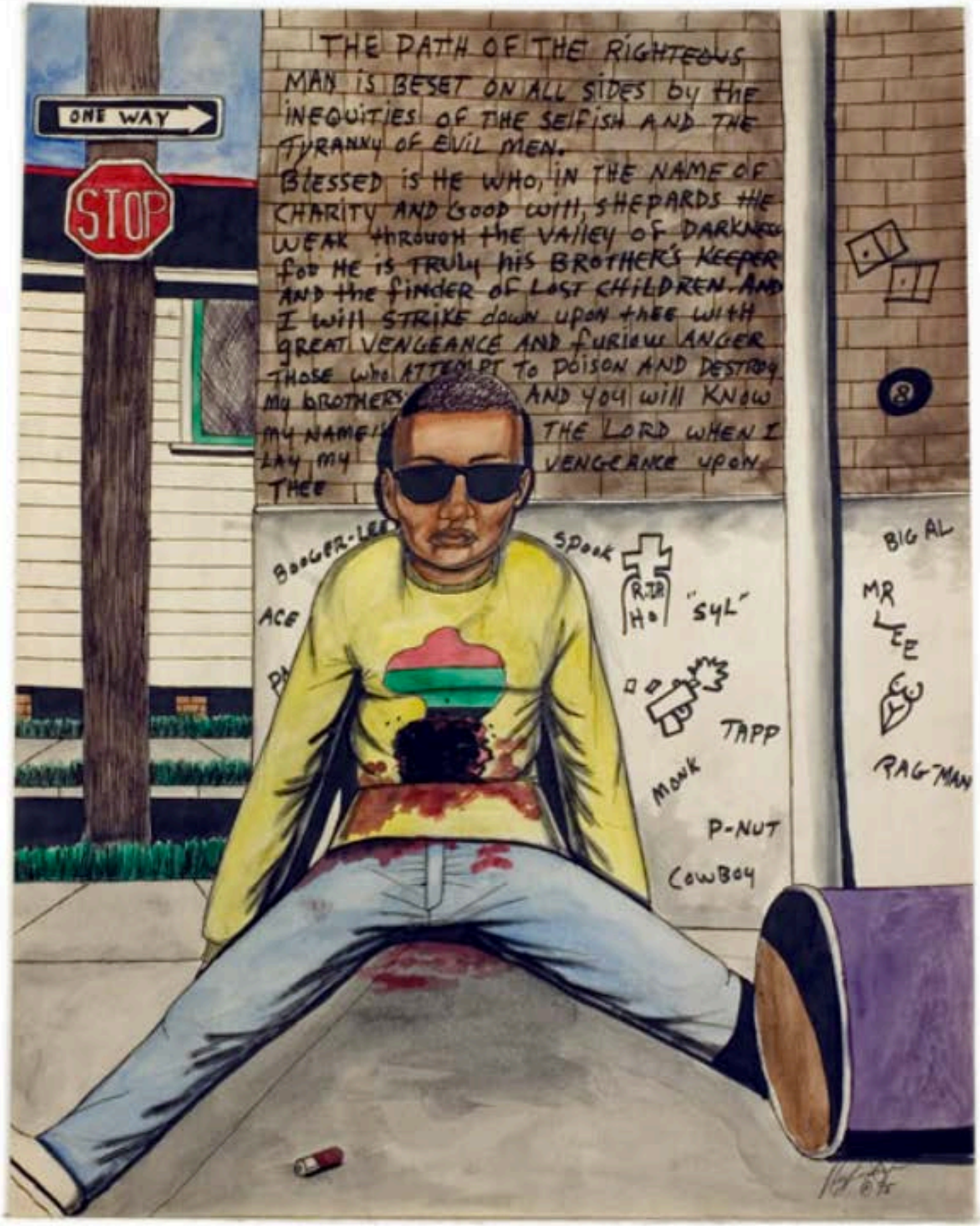
ONE WAY
STOP
THE PATH OF THE RIGHTEOUS MAN IS BESET ON ALL SIDES by the INEQUITIES OF THE SELFISH AND THE TYRANNY OF EVIL MEN.
BLESSED is HE WHO, IN THE NAME OF CHARITY AND GOOD WILL, SHEPARDS THE WEAK through the VALLEY OF DARKNESS FOR HE is TRULY his BROTHER'S KEEPER AND the finder OF LOST CHILDREN. AND I will STRIKE down upon thee with GREAT VENGEANCE AND furious ANGER THOSE who ATTEMPT TO POISON AND DESTROY
AND YOU will KNOW
THE LORD WHEN I LAY my VENGEANCE upon THEE
BOOGER-LEE
SPOOK
ACE
R.I.P.
"SYL"
TAPP
MONK
P-NUT
COWBOY
BIG AL
MR LEE
RAG-MAN

Marching On

Andy was Roy's dealer—he represented him, put him in shows—but he also offered Roy a place to work and maybe a place to live at one point or another. There are other people down there who did the same—hired him, kept him busy, purchased drawings. But I think Roy probably sold his work to whoever was offering money for it, and the sums varied, I'm sure, from fifty to a few hundred bucks. There was no one person who could control him or keep track of it all. That's something I'm trying to do, by faithfully documenting his work and collating together an archive of written material—creating a presence for him so that when the time comes, and people want to make inquiries or include him in shows, there will be an information base. Since part of what I'm trying to achieve is to create an archive, there are very few times I see something that I don't try to buy.

If Katrina invigorated the market for artists from New Orleans, specifically outsider artists, I wouldn't think of it as a bad thing. I went to New Orleans with a preconceived notion of what the city was—I thought it was a seasonal tourist destination. I should have been able to realize without going there how wrong this notion was. Now, in New York, I find a lot of art-world people are embracing New Orleans, maybe because of the hybridization that's gone on there historically, which is manifest in the culture, music, and art. Perhaps Katrina brought this to people's attention, along with everything else about the city that had been buried and then was suddenly being broadcast across the world—perhaps this is the aspect that certain people picked up on. There's an understandable desire, once you see that, to try to preserve it, create a space for it, and show it to others.

On my last visit there, I discovered Bruce Davenport, whose work is hanging in the Contemporary Art Center. Bruce is obsessed with marching bands, and he portrays them on poster board, which is what Roy used, depicting them in a flat, linear way and insisting on reproducing every single marcher. This is a skilled artist: He knows his subject, and he has a set of rules he's working within. But what was lost on me, until Andy explained it, is that marching bands in New Orleans are taken very seriously—they're the training grounds for all the great musicians. One of the tragedies is that a lot of these schools didn't come back, and many of these marching bands no longer exist. As with Roy's work, Davenport's drawings are portals to a community that is basically extinct. It reminds me again of Leon Golub, who depicted scenes of torture, interrogation, and violence perpetrated by mercenaries and the secret police, events we were unable to witness but knew were happening. Leon took magazine images and used them as the basis of his compositions. Roy found his torture victims by looking through bondage magazines. He scoured the press, too, and worked from photography. He used elements from disparate media and cultures and histories and pieced them together into compositions that, while realistic, aren't really based in any certain time and space.

In downtown Manhattan, there's almost no evidence of what happened on 9/11 (beyond the WTC site). You could say that's really good, or you could say it's tragic, and that we lost a lot that we should have preserved and remembered. There was one jeans store that lost its lease a couple years after 9/11. The owners had blocked off the front of the store, which had been filled with ash and debris from the explosion, and encased it in glass. When you entered the store, you walked through this little memorial, this preserved site. There was no signage, you just

took it for what it was. It registered with some people—it certainly registered with the owners—and then they just went on with their shopping. And that's the only way a city can move on. But I think there are a lot of preconceived notions about what a city is; it's a living, breathing organism. And the people that are there—most of them aren't there for any other reason besides that's where they live.

All works 22 x 28 inches unless noted; colored pencil, marker, watercolor, and pen on board, except *Skull*, date unknown, mixed-media sculpture.

Artwork images: *Rock House*, date unknown, 30 x 40 inches; *Tribute*, 1999; *Way Of The Righteous*, date unknown; *Small Baptism*, 1995; *Peaches House Christmas Eve*, 1993, 13.5 x 17.5 inches; *Card Game*, date unknown; *Bus*, 1992; *265 Abandon*, date unknown; *Folk Artist*, 1990; *BIG*, 1997; *Bird*, 1991; *Priestess*, 1993; *Coroner*, 2004; *Firecracker*, 2000; *Peaches House Christmas Eve*, 1993; *Malcolm*, 1992; *Peach Street*, 2004; *Scripture*, 1995; *Strawberry Hill*, 2000, 30 x 40 inches.

All photos of Roy Ferdinand artwork by Emily Poole.

Leon Golub, *Try Burning This One...* (detail), 1991, acrylic on linen, 112 x 113 inches, courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts. Photo by David Reynolds.