



Peter Precourt

The Katrina Chronicles

exhibition essay by: Veronica Kavass

GALLERY GUIDE



About The Katrina Chronicles

Mississippi is very much the bastard stepchild of the fifty states; this became all the more clear to me in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Few people outside of Mississippi know that the power of Katrina did not strike New Orleans directly; it was coastal Mississippi that took the brunt of the storm winds. In fact, the original headlines immediately after Katrina in the Atlanta Journal read "New Orleans spared, Coastal Mississippi devastated". Shortly thereafter, New Orleans flooded, the news media latched onto the racial implications of wealth disparity and government ineptitude in Louisiana, and Mississippi was once again an afterthought.

Why do I know this? Not because I am scholar of the storm, or a meteorologist. I know this, because on July 30, 2006 I sold my home in Houston. My family moved to Gulfport, Mississippi so I could chair the painting area at a small college that overlooked the Gulf of Mexico. Less than one month later, I lost most of my possessions, including my art and my slides, in Hurricane Katrina. The most depressing visual feature of the Mississippi coast, after the immense destruction, was the endless amount of debris. Everything was leveled and spread across the coastal landscape: nails, drywall, toilets, tires, forks, needles... everything that was once in a house or a garage was now scattered all over the ground. Over the past six years, I have struggled to come to terms with a way to tell my experience, which is a single story amongst thousands of stories in the aftermath of Katrina.

Ultimately, it made sense to me to tell *the Katrina Chronicles* in a form that embraces the stepchild nature of Mississippi and the leveling power of Katrina. The *Chronicles* are told in a visual form that hovers somewhere between a graphic novel, a journal entry, a painting, a memoir and a flippant conversation. It is pieced together on the most delicate and fragile of surfaces, paper. The work is both visually spare yet dense with narrative. Sharpie and sumi-e, acrylic and encaustic, Mylar and rice paper, and text and image are fused without hierarchy; I hope to make images that openly engage the imperfection of memory, the possibility of change and the restorative power of storytelling.

About the Artist

Peter Precourt lives and works in Winthrop Maine with wife Jane and teenage children Charlotte and Will. He is an interdisciplinary artist, curator and Professor of Art at the University of Maine at Augusta (UMA) where he coordinates the UMA Art Department. He received his MFA in Painting from the University of Houston in 2000, and later served as an affiliate artist there. In 2005-2006, he served as head of the painting department at William Carey University in Gulfport, Mississippi. In 2007, he conducted a four-part lecture series at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, concerning art since 1960.

His studio-based hybrid painting/drawing/graphic story memoir *The Katrina Chronicles* recalls the events of after his family's time in coastal Mississippi before, during and after Hurricane Katrina. In the community, Professor Precourt has installed a number of site-specific, large-scale wheat paste murals in an effort to revitalize central Maine's downtown areas. . He has placed this work in Augusta, Gardiner and Waterville, Maine. He is scheduled to have public wheat paste installations at Austin Peay University and in Berlin Germany in 2021. Students have the opportunity to engage in these projects in the planning, production and installation stages.

Recognizing that central Maine has few contemporary art spaces, Professor Precourt has opened venues: ArtWorks: on Main in Winthrop and PopUp 265 in Augusta. He seeks to connect artists directly into

community spaces outside of the white cube of museum spaces. Exhibitions range from well international artists, UMA faculty and alumni to elementary students learning how to impact their community.

Peter has an active studio and social art practice. He has been a guest lecturer at the University of Southern Maine, the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, Reed College, Fort Lewis College, San Jacinto College, Lincoln Memorial University, Kennesaw State University, ArtHouse center for Contemporary Art, New York University and the University of Lisbon in Portugal. Peter's work has been exhibited in Austin, Cincinnati, Dallas, Gyeonggi-do, Korea, Houston, Los Angeles, New Orleans, Nashville, New York, and Portland.

The Centre Cannot Hold Katrina Chronicles/Peter Precourt

Peter Precourt's *Katrina Chronicles* reveal the unfolding story of an American artist's search for a balanced life in the midst of 21st century constraints. Cynics today might laugh at the notion of an 'artist's balanced life' given the state of institutions and the world in general, but I don't read *Katrina Chronicles* as a bitter tale. Precourt's four volumes of the chronicles revolve around an origin point (Hurricane Katrina), but take liberties to break off onto relevant and often humorous tangents. Consisting of approximately eighty two-dimensional works, the most dominant aspect of the autobiographical work is best described in the words Precourt used in one of our recent conversations: "we like to think of ourselves as fixed, but we really are fluid."

When I first heard about *Katrina Chronicles*, I wrongly assumed it was a New Orleans story. Precourt's experience took place in Gulfport, Mississippi—a state he refers to as "the bastard stepchild of the fifty states." He and his family moved to their new coastal home a mere three weeks before the hurricane hit. The chronicles provide context for the years before the big move—a time when uncertainty prevailed. Precourt was in great financial debt but building a family *and* wanting to develop his career as an artist. He had a penchant for poker and creating "absurd paintings of alcoholic penis men running amok." Precourt also wrestled with God's identity and purpose in his life. This backstory places the reader in an anxious state of wondering if the narrator will figure everything out. What will perseverance and stability end up looking like? Will he fail or succeed?

But we know Precourt's fate going in because this is called *Katrina Chronicles*. No happy stories come out of Katrina. Within a few weeks of moving to Gulfport with his family to start a new job as an art professor, they lose everything to Katrina. Game over. Start again. However, the experience doesn't end just because the house, job, objects, artworks are gone. The experience continues. This is where reflecting comes in but can quickly transform into haunting. We tell ourselves stories to understand our lives, especially the parts of our lives centered on loss or failure. While this helps us, the reflecting can become an overwhelming infestation.

Numerous stories circulate the planet, crossing and recrossing paths, clashing and reconciling, exploding into one another, making love, persisting, forgetting, retracting, repeating. The repetition is such a constant reminder that we lovely humans never learn *anything*. Except, perhaps, to keep telling stories and, hopefully, tell them well. We probably won't learn from them, but we will cry and laugh and pass history down through the generations. Remember when stories began with *once upon a time*? Of course, something happened once upon a goddamn time. Why make the "time" a vague fabric? The moment a story begins is imperative to understanding how a narrative molds itself into...a line, a rollercoaster, an octagon, a snoring wolf, a city, a coiling snake, a cloud.

This is what *Katrina Chronicles* does exceptionally well: avoids an ambiguous origin (i.e. *once upon a time*) and remains true to its fluid existence. This is a balancing act. How Precourt narrated the chronicles in 2012, when he started the project, is different from how he returned

to the story in 2020. For example, in volume three of the chronicles, I learn about the artist's relationship to poker—how he analyzes and manipulates fellow players. A few panels later, the artist receives a phone call from his mom who is worried about his art being destroyed by the storm. I find myself uncertain where I am within the linear story, but in favor of the uncertainty because it feels true to me and my own experiences. The shifting scenes aren't disorienting, but a form of convergence. Narrative is where threads, some of which are disparate, meet, Narrative is a form of being and, according to my understanding, being exists in its own order.

Katrina Chronicles reminds me of the neologism “callibiography” that the poet John Ashbery coined to describe Saul Steinberg's amazing drawings from the mid-twentieth century. He drew re-invented maps, ladders leading to houses floating in the sky, endless cats, words dancing around words. Steinberg titled several of his pieces “Biography” even though he had a love-hate relationship with his autobiography. Ashbery described it as such: “For this frustrated novelist turned draftsman, ‘art’ is something that gets in the way of narration, impeding it and finally, as though by accident, enriching it to the point where it becomes something else—the history of its realized and unrealized potentialities...”

While Precourt appears to have no qualms with making autobiographical art, it took a bit of time before *Katrina Chronicles* came into being. A year after Katrina, when he was teaching at the University of Maine at Augusta, Precourt met the *Persepolis* writer, Marjane Satrapi, who encouraged him to make art about his Katrina experience. At the time, her graphic novel about growing up in Iran during and after the Islamic Revolution was taking the world by storm. Precourt took her advice, but not until six years later. Today, Precourt says he cannot envision when the chronicles will end.

Last week, Precourt texted me a picture of a recently completed sumi-e ink work from his *Amusement Park* series—a section of roller coaster tracks. Seven of the pieces are interspersed throughout the exhibition at the New Gallery. He told me it was called “Things Fall Apart” and that “yes, the title is a nod to Chinua Achebe's book.” The literature nerd in me leaped at the opportunity to tell him the book's title was derived from the Yeats poem, “The Second Coming” and I text him the first stanza:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

While I don't want to end on this Yeats note, this is where I am. Even when we push them away, even when we try to drown them out—stories come out. In this context, a catastrophic

hurricane becomes a stabilizing frame of reference. What we survive becomes memorialized. At least until the waves wash all our stories away.

Veronica Kavass is a writer and criminal defense investigator based in New Orleans. She holds a MA in curatorial practice and critical theory from Chelsea College of Art in London and an MFA in creative writing from University of Minnesota in Minneapolis. She has written catalog essays and art reviews for numerous publications such as *Guernica* and *Burnaway*.

She is the author of *Artists in Love: From Picasso & Giotto to Christo & Jeanne-Claude* which received the IPPY 2012 Gold Award in the Fine Arts category. She recently completed a book of essays about the immigrant histories of her hometown of Nashville and is currently writing a book on the way memory and language works in the criminal justice system.

Oh and she co-hosts the podcast, *Thick as Thieves*, with her best friend Sara Estes on the history of art crimes.