

## Charles LaBelle: Sugar Hill Suite

Anna Kustera Gallery

John Ewing

The romance New Yorkers have with their city occurs on many levels—the physical, first and foremost. New Yorkers engage the urban landscape with their eyes, ears and moving bodies, all the time witnessing an ever-unfolding history. If one is watchful and receptive, the city is a tireless interplay of human faces and architectural façades. As you pass it, it is also passing you—and changing.

Charles LaBelle is one of the city's watchful; moving to New York in 2004, the Los Angeles-educated artist settled in an old tenement in Sugar Hill, the neighborhood running roughly from 145th to 155th streets. Sugar Hill is one of the highest points in the city, held up by a massive formation of handsome rock known as Manhattan schist. The neighborhood contains grand old apartment buildings and featured prominently in the Harlem Renaissance.

LaBelle's *Sugar Hill Suite* (a not-so-sweet play on words) documents the architecture of the neighborhood, which through the years has survived insult and degradation, much like its residents. But LaBelle's recording of Sugar Hill bears witness to the neighborhood not through nostalgia or politics but through the firsthand wonder of a new New Yorker, a special state of mind that has its own shelf life.

Comprised of maps, drawings, handmade clothing and objects, *Sugar Hill Suite* finds different ways to tell the same story. LaBelle's "blood maps," hung in the gallery's foyer, are eerie topographical records of fourteen neighborhood walks taken by the artist in 2005. Painted in LaBelle's own blood, these roughly depict the street grid of Sugar Hill and are adumbrated with Letraset headings, logistical notes, graphics and musings that become stranger as the series progresses: "Charles Southern Style Kitchen – light another cigarette, learn to forget"; "Zone of primal exclusion"; "Area of charged eroticism."

In the gallery, 352 watercolor pencil-on-paper drawings of Sugar Hill façades (from a series of 788 drawings) are hung in neat rows. Rendered in a brownish monochrome from snapshots taken during LaBelle's neighborhood walks, these quickly drawn works are precise but unfussy. While maintaining the original photographs' oddly tilted angle of view, the drawings isolate each façade from the surrounding streetscape, paradoxically freeing them from adjoining edifices. This treatment allows the viewer to focus on the specific details

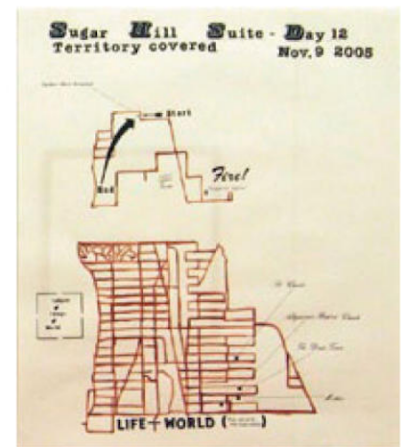


Charles LaBelle, *Sugar Hill Suite, BLDGS* (from series of 788 drawings), 2005-06  
Watercolor pencil on paper  
11 x 11 inches each

that define each building and communicate its age and identity to the street, be it a shop, church, school, apartment, or city agency.

LaBelle notes these details as he sees them, giving no particular weight to the quality of the materials or the current condition of the buildings. The drawings call to mind a warmer version of Ed Ruscha's 1966 artist book *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, but LaBelle goes one better, visually differentiating the structures while maintaining the street-level connection and progression through the series' installation. And maintaining his own freakish, ten-plus-year commitment to drawing every building he physically enters, LaBelle presents a hand-drawn version of the world that he has literally "processed" through himself (a personalized style of documentation most colorfully demonstrated in his 2000 work *Disappearance—Shirt That Passed Through My Body*).

If the objects in the exhibition feel less successful, it may be because they are taken too literally from the street and not processed enough through the artist. A coat and suit of clothes are made from upholstery fabric, wigs, bones and other trash found in the streets of Sugar Hill (renowned as one of the nattiest dressed neighborhoods in the city's history). Elsewhere, LaBelle has encased found underwear and gloves in white plaster; these forms are supports for push-pin maps of his walking routes—a documentary gesture that is conceptually remote and visually incoherent.



Charles LaBelle, *Sugar Hill Suite-Territory Covered (Day 14)*, 2005-06  
Blood and Letraset on paper  
17 x 14 inches

However, a rebound occurs on a printed list tucked into my press packet—it's an archive of the drawings listed by building, date, address. The columns of words recreate the streets of Sugar Hill like chatter between neighbors...hair salons, brownstones, schools, tabernacles and chicken joints—cheek by jowl, as in most New York neighborhoods. Some things are lost here, histories covered over by more recent history. For instance, Moment of Truth Church on 145th Street, where LaBelle began the project, has recently become a real estate office. As LaBelle notes, Sugar Hill is experiencing the "usurpation of one system of values (spiritual) by another (capital)." In ways that are hard to measure, projects like *Sugar Hill Suite* help to forestall the inevitable.