

**Derek Fordjour**  
Nightsong  
September 13 – October 11, 2025  
Exhibition Binder

**Derek Fordjour**

Nightsong

September 13 – October 11, 2025

Los Angeles

Press Release

David Kordansky Gallery is pleased to present *Nightsong*, its second solo exhibition by Derek Fordjour, on view from September 13 to October 11, 2025. In the most radical transformation of David Kordansky's Los Angeles gallery to date, Fordjour, in collaboration with Kulapat Yantrasast and the design studio WHY, will create an immersive, multifaceted experience combining painting, sculpture, live performance, and video. Additional collaborators include a music team led by Omar Edwards, including composer Jason White and Josiah Bell, and a video installation co-directed and edited by Kya Lou. Opening hours will be limited to 6 – 10 PM in reflection of *Nightsong*'s themes. The exhibition will open to the public on Saturday, September 13 from 6 – 10 PM.

Variously described by Fordjour as a “giant music box in the dark,” an “acoustic wilderness,” and “a conjuring,” *Nightsong* immerses viewers in an atmospheric sensorium whose aesthetic and thematic depictions trace Black musical history as it manifests, evolves, and travels through time and genre. While Fordjour has long drawn on music and theatricality in his two and three-dimensional artworks, *Nightsong* brings these subjects to exuberant life, as numerous vocalists perform an original, four-hour songcycle, composed exclusively for the exhibition, across a spatial, multi-room nightscape. The interactive, durational experience of the exhibition ensures that no two viewings will be exactly alike.

Upon entering *Nightsong*, viewers cross into a gradual emulation of nighttime, a temporal state made spatial, in which music takes on material shape and live singers seem to have stepped, wholly animated, from Fordjour's painted tableaux. As galleries are populated with stages and mezzanines, and rooms give way to forests, architectural elements situated in minimal light, fold in and outdoors into a dream-like state. A wooded thicket harkens back to sites known as “hush harbors,” secret refuges in the woods where enslaved Africans would retreat to gather, sing, and plan escape. In this sense, as in the origin stories of work songs and spirituals, the beginnings of Black vocal music in America are inextricable from life-or-death strategies for survival, a legacy that persists, Fordjour reminds us, even behind the sequined glamour of a stage costume or the exultant joy of a Motown harmony.

Intertwined histories of oppression, labor, expression, and innovation reverberate throughout *Nightsong* as direct representations—and as visual motifs, including the repetition of rotating discs, patchwork fabrics, colorful globes, and reflective surfaces. A performer pushing a soundcart traverses the gallery in a sonic declaration of personal presence, evoking the slippage between public and private spheres familiar from street processions and block parties. Throughout the space, the accumulative process of collage Fordjour employs in his densely layered paintings expands across a field of visual, sonic, and symbolic accretion. Collage's foundational ethos of repurposing, or the idea of conjuring something from nothing, takes on an added dimension in the exhibition's emphasis on performance, in which the act of singing becomes a paradigm of radical resourcefulness. When one has been given nothing else materially to work with, the voice itself emerges, in all its expressive

potential, as Fordjour's vocalists demonstrate. At the same time, the voice, the moment it's celebrated, lends itself to quick commodification—along with the body from which it issues. When considering the history of music in America, the commodification of Black voices and musicianship—and the potential for exploitation and appropriation that's never far behind—is as foundational to any national sound as guitars and brass, the blue note and a doo-wop chorus.

In all the ways *Nightsong* is a paean for Black artistry, so, too, is it an elegy for what's been lost, stolen, or suppressed by a perpetual night. Near the exhibition's end, a primordial room with mud-caked walls, rock floor, and photographic portraits invites viewers into a vigil in memory of those who have passed on—relations of the artist alongside celebrated figures—while evoking eternal cycles of life, death, and rebirth. As a corollary to the exhibition's title, the notion of vesper songs, and their religious function as thresholds between day and night, light and darkness emphasize music's near-magical capacity to mark time while transcending it, bridging past, present, and future in an act of exchange between singer and listener, artist and viewer, that extends indefinitely.

Derek Fordjour (b. 1974, Memphis, Tennessee) has been the subject of solo exhibitions at the Pond Society, Shanghai, China (2021) and the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, MO (2020). He has received public commissions for the High Line, New York; the NYC AIDS Memorial; MOCA Grand Avenue, Los Angeles; and the New York City MTA's Arts & Design program. Recent group exhibitions include *Flight into Egypt: Black Artists and Ancient Egypt, 1876–Now*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY (2024–2025); *Get in the Game: Sports, Art, Culture*, SFMOMA, San Francisco, CA (2024); *Reverberations*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA (2024); *Day for Night: New American Realism*, Palazzo Barberini, organized by the Aishti Foundation, Rome, Italy (2024); *Abstraction after Modernism: Recent Acquisitions*, Menil Collection, Houston, TX (2024); *Windrush: Portraits of a Pioneering Generation*, Palace of Holyroodhouse, Edinburgh, Scotland (2023); NGV Triennial, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia (2023–2024); *The Slipstream: Reflection, Resilience, and Resistance in the Art of Our Time*, Brooklyn Museum, NY (2021); *Present Generations: Creating the Scantland Collection of the Columbus Museum of Art*, Columbus Museum of Art, OH (2021); *100 Drawings from Now*, The Drawing Center, New York, NY (2020); and *Plumb Line*, California African American Museum, Los Angeles, CA (2019). His work is in the permanent collections of institutions including The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY; Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY; Dallas Museum of Art, TX; the Royal Collection, London; Pérez Art Museum Miami, FL; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, CA; Brooklyn Museum, NY; Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, IL; and The Studio Museum in Harlem, NY. Fordjour is the recipient of the 2025 Gordon Parks Foundation Artist Fellowship and the 2023 St. Jude Children's Research Hospital Spirit of the Dream Award. He served as the 2020 Alex Katz Chair of Painting at The Cooper Union, New York, and serves on the faculty at the Yale University School of Art, New Haven, CT as a core critic. Fordjour is the founder of Contemporary Arts Memphis, and lives and works in New York.

# DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY

## Derek Fordjour

### Nightsong

September 13 – October 11, 2025

#### Gallery 1



#### Derek Fordjour

*Village Quartet Remix (after Jacob Lawrence), 2025*

acrylic, charcoal, cardboard, and oil pastel on newspaper  
mounted on canvas

26 1/4 x 32 1/4 inches

(66.7 x 81.9 cm)



#### Derek Fordjour

*Musicians on the Street (after William H. Johnson), 2025*

acrylic, charcoal, cardboard, and oil pastel on newspaper  
mounted on canvas

32 1/4 x 26 1/4 inches

(81.9 x 66.7 cm)



#### Derek Fordjour

*Crowd Painting Origin (after Archibald Motley), 2025*

acrylic, charcoal, cardboard, oil pastel, and foil on newspaper  
mounted on canvas

26 1/4 x 32 1/4 inches

(66.7 x 81.9 cm)



#### Derek Fordjour

*Color Study Charleston (after Aaron Douglas), 2025*

acrylic, charcoal, cardboard, oil pastel, and foil on newspaper  
mounted on canvas

32 1/4 x 26 1/4 inches

(81.9 x 66.7 cm)

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KORDANSKY  
GALLERY



**Derek Fordjour**

*Banjo Lesson in Minor Key (after Henry Ossawa Tanner), 2025*

acrylic, charcoal, cardboard, and oil pastel on newspaper

mounted on canvas

32 1/4 x 26 1/4 inches

(81.9 x 66.7 cm)



**Derek Fordjour**

*Thank You Romy (after Romare Bearden), 2025*

acrylic, charcoal, cardboard, oil pastel, and foil on newspaper

mounted on canvas

26 1/4 x 32 1/4 inches

(66.7 x 81.9 cm)



**Derek Fordjour**

*Dreamscape (after Palmer Hayden), 2025*

acrylic, charcoal, cardboard, and oil pastel on newspaper

mounted on canvas

26 1/4 x 32 1/4 inches

(66.7 x 81.9 cm)



**Derek Fordjour**

*Musicians (after James Weeks), 2025*

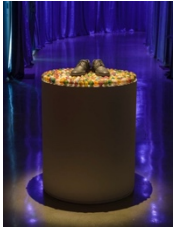
acrylic, charcoal, cardboard, and oil pastel on newspaper

mounted on canvas

32 1/4 x 26 1/4 inches

(81.9 x 66.7 cm)

# DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY



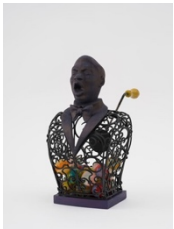
**Derek Fordjour**

*Trepidation*, 2025

resin, alkyd paint, glass, and MDF

39 3/4 x 29 1/4 x 29 1/4 inches

(101 x 74.3 x 74.3 cm)



**Derek Fordjour**

*Combinatoric Dilemma*, 2025

aluminum, steel, wood, glass, and acrylic

15 x 8 x 10 inches

(38.1 x 20.3 x 25.4 cm)



**Derek Fordjour**

*Heralder*, 2025

resin, fiberglass, iron, bituminous coal, gold, acrylic, and fabric

41 x 13 1/4 x 17 inches

(104.1 x 33.7 x 43.2 cm)



**Derek Fordjour**

*Motor Town Miracle*, 2025

acrylic, charcoal, cardboard, oil pastel, and foil on newspaper  
mounted on canvas

74 x 98 inches

(188 x 248.9 cm)



**Derek Fordjour**

*The Late Set*, 2025

acrylic, charcoal, cardboard, oil pastel, and foil on newspaper  
mounted on canvas

85 x 65 inches

(215.9 x 165.1 cm)

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**Derek Fordjour**

*Harlem Basement: The Birth of Black Swan, 2025*

acrylic, charcoal, cardboard, oil pastel, and foil on newspaper  
mounted on canvas

74 x 98 inches

(188 x 248.9 cm)



**Derek Fordjour**

*Pontchartrain, 2025*

resin, fiberglass, iron, bituminous coal, copper, gold, acrylic,  
wood, LED, and textiles

36 x 20 x 19 1/2 inches

(91.4 x 50.8 x 49.5 cm)



**Derek Fordjour**

*Beale Street Blues, 2025*

resin, fiberglass, wood, mother of pearl, iron, LED, copper, steel,  
bituminous coal, acrylic, fabric, and leather

36 x 20 x 20 inches

(91.4 x 50.8 x 50.8 cm)



**Derek Fordjour**

*Fermata, 2025*

resin, fiberglass, iron, bituminous coal, mahogany, glass, acrylic,  
textiles, mother of pearl, steel, gold, and LEDs

27 1/2 x 23 3/4 x 30 inches

(69.8 x 60.3 x 76.2 cm)

# DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY



**Derek Fordjour**

*Love Song*, 2025

acrylic, charcoal, cardboard, and oil pastel on newspaper  
mounted on canvas

67 x 87 inches

(170.2 x 221 cm)

## Gallery 2



**Derek Fordjour**

*Field Song*, 2025

wood, polymer, acrylic, nylon, cotton, burlap, paper, coffee,  
Plexiglas, steel, and LEDs

37 1/2 x 25 1/2 x 5 1/2 inches

(95.3 x 64.8 x 14 cm)



**Derek Fordjour**

*Gourd, String & Drum*, 2025

acrylic, charcoal, cardboard, oil pastel, foil, and glitter on  
newspaper mounted on canvas

85 x 65 inches

(215.9 x 165.1 cm)

## Gallery 3



**Derek Fordjour**

*Black Radio*, 2025

acrylic, charcoal, cardboard, oil pastel, and foil on newspaper  
mounted on canvas

67 x 87 inches

(170.2 x 221 cm)

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**Derek Fordjour**

*Oscillating Triad*, 2025

wood, acrylic, brass, nylon, and velvet

26 1/4 x 20 3/4 x 20 3/4 inches

(66.7 x 52.7 x 52.7 cm)



**Derek Fordjour**

*Boy Band Breakup: The Fall of Ascension*, 2025

acrylic, charcoal, cardboard, oil pastel, and foil on newspaper  
mounted on canvas

62 x 102 inches

(157.5 x 259.1 cm)



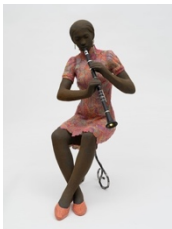
**Derek Fordjour**

*Hymn*, 2025

beeswax, LEDs, hickory, steel, aluminum, fiberglass, and water

66 x 37 x 37 inches

(167.6 x 94 x 94 cm)



**Derek Fordjour**

*Crosswinds*, 2025

resin, fiberglass, iron, wood, mother of pearl, LED, brass, steel,  
acrylic, and fabric

31 x 14 1/4 x 21 1/2 inches

(78.7 x 36.2 x 54.6 cm)



**Derek Fordjour & Kya Lou**

*Nightsong Exhibition Film*, 2025

video, sound

248 minutes

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**Derek Fordjour**

*Transmission*, 2025

wood, steel, iron, acrylic, and rhinestones

12 1/4 x 28 3/4 x 8 inches

(31.1 x 73 x 20.3 cm)



**Derek Fordjour**

*Congo Square*, 2025

acrylic, charcoal, cardboard, oil pastel, foil, and glitter on newspaper

mounted on canvas

four panels, each:

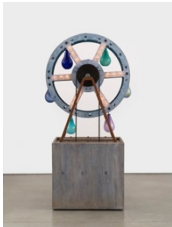
76 x 35 inches

(193 x 88.9 cm)

overall dimensions:

76 x 141 inches

(193 x 358.1 cm)



**Derek Fordjour**

*Burden Cycle Study (White)*, 2019

wood, dirt, hand blown glass, steel, iron, lightbulbs, and electrical motor

74 x 36 x 24 inches

(188 x 91.4 x 61 cm)



**Derek Fordjour**

*The Philadelphia Sound*, 2025

acrylic, charcoal, cardboard, oil pastel, and foil on newspaper

mounted on canvas

87 x 67 inches

(221 x 170.2 cm)

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GALLERY

**Derek Fordjour**  
Selected Press

# Wallpaper\*

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ART AND CULTURE

## Los Angeles art exhibitions: the best shows to see in September 2025

Read our pick of the best Los Angeles art exhibitions to see this month, from 50 years of 'Jaws' at The Academy Museum of Motion Pictures to foresty goings-on at Oxy Arts in Highland Park



Roy Scheider as Martin Brody and Lorraine Gary as Ellen Brody in a scene from *Jaws* (1975), as The Academy Museum of Motion Pictures' celebrates 50 years of the film (Image credit: Courtesy of Universal Studios Licensing LLC)

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BY CAROLE DIXON PUBLISHED SEPTEMBER 2, 2025 IN [NEWS](#)

The non-fall September weather, which in Los Angeles equals a heatwave, brings exhibits with a verdant background from 'Flesh of the Forest' at Oxy Arts in Highland Park, showcasing nine contemporary artists from the African diaspora who imagine new forms of human and nonhuman interaction between empire and land. While 'In Bloom' at Forest Lawn in Glendale examines the time-honored floral motif in all forms from painting to sculpture and video. Most of the fall exhibits are debuting mid-month, so plenty of time to plan, including the West Hollywood Design District ArtWalk (with a nod to Fall fashion); and in Hollywood, a unique performance installation piece by Derek Fordjour, in a collaboration with Kulapat Yantrasast of WHY studio at David Kordansky; plus, *Jaws: The Exhibition* at The Academy Museum of Motion Pictures is celebrating 50 (terrifying) years of the Spielberg classic film.

## Los Angeles Art Exhibitions: what to see in September 2025

### Nightsong



(Image credit: Courtesy of the artist)

### David Kordansky Gallery, 13 September to 11 October 2025

New York-based multidisciplinary artist, Derek Fordjour, will debut his second major solo show at David Kordansky Gallery. Drawing from Black sonic traditions—gospel, blues, jazz, and spirituals *Nightsong* will delve into a layered, immersive installation that fuses painting, sculpture, performance, architecture, and sound into a singular experiential environment. The show will be open exclusively during evening hours, with timed performances.

Upon entering, visitors will encounter a hush harbor-inspired passageway thick with trees, concealed viewing chambers and a raised performance platform inhabited by a live ensemble of singers – the environment was conceived in collaboration with Kulapat Yantrasast, founder of the award-winning design studio WHY, most recently recognized for their work with the MET and The Louvre.

Westall, Mark, "Artists Derek Fordjour & Timbaland Collaborate On Art + Vinyl Limited Edition for Miami Art Week."  
*Fadmagazine.com*, November 20, 2024

**FAD** magazine

## ARTISTS DEREK FORDJOUR & TIMBALAND COLLABORATE ON ART + VINYL LIMITED EDITION FOR MIAMI ART WEEK.

*By Mark Westall • 20 November 2024*



*Derek Fordjour and Timbaland Beatmaker Photo: Louis Kassam*

12on12 has announced **Beatmaker**, a groundbreaking edition developed in partnership with legendary American Multi GRAMMY®-Award winning producer-artist Timbaland and acclaimed artist [Derek Fordjour](#).

Set to launch on December 3rd, 2024, this unique collaboration presents a vinyl record and limited-edition print, reflecting a powerful fusion of music

Westall, Mark, "Artists Derek Fordjour & Timbaland Collaborate On Art + Vinyl Limited Edition for Miami Art Week."  
*Fadmagazine.com*, November 20, 2024

and visual art that honors each artist's legacy while exploring new creative horizons.



Sitting at the intersection of art and music, 12on12 provides cultural icons with a platform to tell their stories in innovative ways. Timbaland and Fordjour, both deeply influenced by hip-hop's rise, share a passion for advancing the scope of Black creative excellence through pioneering approaches to sound and material. With 12on12's support, **Beatmaker** brings their shared vision to life, celebrating cultural and historical significance while embarking on bold artistic frontiers.

*"At 12on12, we are incredibly excited to have brought together two icons in their fields,"*

says Claudia Moross, Founder and Creative Director of 12on12.

*"Derek Fordjour's passion for art mirrors Timbaland's drive and energy for music, and together they have created this unique masterpiece, Beatmaker."*

The Beatmaker release includes 400 hand-numbered vinyl records, priced at \$150 each, featuring a carefully curated selection of tracks by Timbaland, as well as original cover and sleeve art by Fordjour. Accompanying the record is a limited-edition print (a run of 25, priced at \$15,000 each), printed on 28 x 36" white, cotton rag archival paper. Both the vinyl and print are available on

Westall, Mark, "Artists Derek Fordjour & Timbaland Collaborate On Art + Vinyl Limited Edition for Miami Art Week."  
*Fadmagazine.com*, November 20, 2024

[12on12.com/collections/timbaland-x-derekfordjour](https://12on12.com/collections/timbaland-x-derekfordjour) crafted as rare collectibles that merge sound and art.

Fordjour's original Beatmaker artwork situates the viewer in the intimate setting of a young artist's makeshift bedroom studio. The vertical lines of the headboard and repeated circular forms are inspired by sonic structures of loops and bars. Conceptually, Beatmaker presents an exploration of the parallels in approach to composition and balance in both music production and visual art.



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*"Our creative lives are both rooted in an  
obsession that has very humble beginnings"*

says Derek Fordjour.

*"I am grateful to 12on12 for giving us the  
space and time to reflect on the young boys  
growing up in the south we once were, locked  
away in our studios trying to change the world"*

As a compliment to Fordjour's visionary artwork, Timbaland's hand-selected tracks reflect the emotional resonance and personal memories associated with each piece, underscoring the unique role vinyl plays as a cultural artifact that captures and celebrates singular moments in time.

In collaboration with global fashion and media brand Highsnobiety, 12on12 will celebrate Beatmaker's debut with a special launch event in Miami on December 3rd, 2024. This event will be part of Highsnobiety's "Not in Miami" series—a branch of the brand's broader global cultural festival. Held at their pop-up space in the Miami Design District, the celebration will include an instore release of a small portion of the records and a conversation between Timbaland and Fordjour, offering fans and collectors a unique insight into the creative process behind Beatmaker.

*"I'm beyond excited to share this 12on12 vinyl,  
a true piece of my journey as a producer,"*

says Timbaland.

*"Each track is a chapter, and with Derek Fordjour's custom artwork, this collection becomes more than music – it's a visual and sonic experience. Derek's artistry brings a unique, vibrant layer to these beats, capturing the spirit and energy of the sounds that defined a generation. Together, the music and artwork create a story that listeners can feel, see, and hold – a piece of history that lives on in a form that's as timeless and powerful as the music itself."*

Westall, Mark, "Artists Derek Fordjour & Timbaland Collaborate On Art + Vinyl Limited Edition for Miami Art Week."  
*Fadmagazine.com*, November 20, 2024



Beatmaker is a defining project for 12on12, underscoring its mission to bring art and music together in dynamic and meaningful ways. By harnessing the depth of Black cultural expression, Timbaland and Fordjour's collaboration promises to leave a lasting mark on the landscape of both music and art.

## **PRE-ORDER: [HERE](#)**

### **About**

**Derek Fordjour** was born in Memphis, Tennessee to parents of Ghanaian heritage. In 2018, he was awarded commissions for the Whitney Museum of American Art Billboard Project and the MTA Arts & Design program. Recently, he was the inaugural artist for the Building Art Series on the façade of MOCA Grand Avenue in Los Angeles. His work has been reviewed in The New York Times, Financial Times, The Los Angeles Times, and Hyperallergic. He has also been featured in several publications such as The Wall Street Journal, Juxtapoz, Vanity Fair and Forbes Magazine. His work is held in the private and public collections of The Studio Museum of Harlem, Guggenheim Museum, Metropolitan Museum of Art, SFMOMA, Brooklyn Museum, The Whitney Museum and LACMA. He is a graduate of Morehouse College, earned a Master's Degree in Art Education from

Westall, Mark, "Artists Derek Fordjour & Timbaland Collaborate On Art + Vinyl Limited Edition for Miami Art Week."  
*Fadmagazine.com*, November 20, 2024

Harvard University and an MFA in painting from Hunter College. Fordjour is the founder of Contemporary Arts Memphis.

With a discography second to none, **Timbaland's** signature sound remains downright inescapable. His dramatic keys, swaggering grooves, and unmistakable drums have underscored successive generations of smashes—ranging from Jay Z's "Dirt Off Your Shoulder" and "Big Pimpin'," Justin Timberlake's "Sexy Back" and "Cry Me A River," and Missy Elliott's "Get Ur Freak On" and "Work It" to Aaliyah's "Are You That Somebody" and "One In A Million," Ginuwine's "Pony," and One Republic's "Apologize." His discography spans cuts for Madonna, Beyoncé, Mariah Carey, Rihanna, Elton John, Drake, Coldplay, Alicia Keys, Ludacris, Nelly Furtado, Nickelback, Sam Smith, The Fray, Bryson Tiller, and Chris Cornell, to name a few. Along the way, he has collected four GRAMMY® Awards out of 18 nominations in addition to 200-plus ASCAP Music Awards. Scoring more Top 10 hits than either Elvis Presley or The Beatles, Billboard voted him #3 on its "50 Greatest Producers of the 21st Century," and is a 2024 inductee to the Songwriters Hall of Fame. No stranger to tech, he also launched the music technology platform Beatclub as a co-founder, owns and operates his label Mosley Music Group, and co-created VERZUZ alongside Swizz Beatz.

**12on12** is a lifestyle brand at the intersection of Music and Art. Drawing on decades of experience in product ideation and creative execution, 12on12 provides a distinctive and unique canvas for storytelling through the powerful analogue medium of vinyl records. Whether through new music releases, greatest hits collections, or bespoke compilations, each 12on12 record is a curated musical experience, preserved on a pressed 12" vinyl. Collaborations with renowned visual artists transform the vinyl sleeve into a collectible piece of art, embodying a shared creative vision between the music and artwork. In addition to vinyl releases, 12on12 offers a curated selection of editioned fine art prints and lifestyle pieces, featuring artwork from its collaborations. Grammy Award-winning artists Swizz Beatz and Timbaland have a strategic stake in 12on12. Successful past collaborations include Nas x Futura, RUN DMC, Swizz Beatz, Dita Von Teese, Travis Scott x Saint Laurent, and ComplexCon featuring artwork by Takashi Murakami. [www.12on12.com](http://www.12on12.com).

### Author



**Mark Westall**

Mark Westall is the Founder and Editor  
of FAD magazine -

# The Washington Post

ART

## A sweeping look at the inventive, vibrant art of collage

"Multiplicity: Blackness in Contemporary American Collage," a show of 49 artists, combines formal intricacy at extravagant scale.

🔊 5 min 🔖 📌 3



Derek Fordjour, "Airborne Double," 2022, Acrylic, charcoal, cardboard, oil pastel, and foil on newspaper mounted on canvas. (Photo: Daniel Greer/Derek Fordjour/Frances Fine Art Collection/David Kordansky Gallery/Petzel Gallery)



Review by Mark Jenkins

August 28, 2024 at 9:00 a.m. EDT

The artworks in "[Multiplicity: Blackness in Contemporary American Collage](#)" are dense, layered and intricate. But what's immediately striking about many of the pieces is their size. This is a big show — filling galleries on three levels of the Phillips Collection — of big art.

Although slimmed slightly from its original incarnation at Nashville's Frist Art Museum, "Multiplicity" is a sweeping overview of recent Black American collages. It includes work by 49 artists, most in midcareer. The most venerable participant, [Howardena Pindell](#), was born in 1943; the youngest, Kahlil Robert Irving, in 1992.

As a distinct art form, collage began in Europe a little more than a century ago. Early practitioners such as George Braque, Pablo Picasso and Kurt Schwitters usually worked on a modest scale. While adapting the techniques of those predecessors, many of "Multiplicity's" contributors emulate the extravagant reach of the largest abstract expressionist canvases.



Howardena Pindell, "Untitled #5," 2009. Mixed media on paper collage. (Howardena Pindell /Garth Greenan Gallery)

That connection clearly occurred to curator Katie Delmez. The seven-section show ends with "Toward Abstraction," which features nonrepresentational assemblages by such notable artists as Sanford Biggers (who had a Phillips show in 2021-2022), McArthur Binion and Mark Bradford.

The last, whose epic "Pickett's Charge" has engulfed the inner circle of the Hirshhorn Museum's third floor since 2017, offers "C'Mon Shorty." Typical of Bradford's early work, the 2002 assemblage is constructed of end papers used at his mother's beauty parlor to protect hair during perms. Some of the papers have singed edges, which adds drama to the composition, while Bradford's use of the castoff materials hints at autobiography.



Installation view of "Multiplicity" at the Phillips Collection. (Lee Stalworth/Fine Art through Photography)

Such subjective undertones are also present in what initially appears to be the most formalist of the "Toward Abstraction" entries, a seven-foot-square drawing that's part of Binion's "Modern: Ancient: Brown" series. A grid of rough squares-within-squares rendered in multiple hues, the picture appears to be purely an exercise in color and geometry. But submerged within the paint-stick lines are personal photos and documents, making this as much of a historical testament as anything here.

The title of the show's first section, "Fragmentation and Reconstruction," could be applied to nearly all the artworks. The process of devising new wholes from repurposed shreds is a metaphor for building individual and cultural identity. Both projects invoke Black Liberation struggles. Derrick Adams's picture of a man in a pool, all bold blocks of paint-and-fabric color, was inspired by a photo of a lighthearted Martin Luther King, Jr. In Helina Metaferia's mixed-media portrait of Frist curatorial fellow Chase Williamson, the subject is wearing a crown made of 1960s newspaper clippings about the civil rights movement.

Evoking the Middle Passage, Radcliffe Bailey places depictions of African sculptures in a stormy, red-spattered sea. Draped above the surface are actual ropes, suggesting nautical gear as well as human bondage. A white picket fence frames an ominously dark scene in Kerry James Marshall's collage-painting, a comment on the obstacles to Black homeownership. Mostly realistic, the picture includes abstract touches and its own title, "Century Twenty One," scrawl-painted at the top.



Helina Metaferia, "Headdress 61," 2023. Mixed-media collage. (Helina Metaferia)



Devan Shimoyama, "Tasha," 2018. Colored pencil, oil, collage, sequins, glitter, silk flowers, beads, and Flashe (vinyl emulsion paint) on canvas stretched over panel. (Photo by Oriol Tarridas/Collection Pérez Art Museum Miami)

Another section, "Gender Fluidity and Queer Spaces," partly overlaps with "Notions of Beauty and Power." Both include elegant and often gem-encrusted collages by Mickalene Thomas and Devan Shimoyama.

Several collages depict bodies that nearly merge with landscapes. Perhaps the most immersive of these is Lester Julian Merriweather's 28-panel "BetterGardensandJungles," initially inspired by the killing of the artist's brother. One of the figures who appears about to be swallowed by lush vegetation is Tupac Shakur, in a photo taken just before his fatal shooting. The flora, Merriweather has explained, represents the concrete jungle of the urban United States.



Installation view of "Multiplicity" at the Phillips Collection. (Lee Stalsworth/Fine Art through Photography)

Seemingly more upbeat is Joiro Minaya's print of a smiling woman whose face and body contain scenes of an island paradise. It's one of a series of collages the artist made from old postcards designed to entice tourists to the Dominican Republic, where the New York-born artist was raised. The picture challenges simplistic notions of both gender and the tropics.



Yashua Klos, "Uncle Scott," 2022. Woodblock prints on archival paper, Japanese rice paper, acrylic, spray paint, colored pencil, and wood mounted on canvas. (Collection of Marc Rockford and Carrie Gish/Sikkema Jenkins & Co)



Rod McGaha, "Family Freedom," from the Regeneration series, 2021. Inkjet print on paper. (Rod McGaha)

Among the most elaborate works is Ebony G. Patterson's three-dimensional, multi-panel construction, in which butterflies and torn and cut paper evoke a rainforest, interspersed with small bodies. The stern face of Yashua Klos's "Uncle Scott," assembled from segments of woodblock prints, is softened by garlands of flowers. In Rod McGaha's stark "Family Freedom," bodies both perch on and become part of bare tree trunks.

McGaha's inkjet print is included in "Digital Stitching," a section devoted to computer-made collages. It includes some powerful images, and yet is the show's least involving chapter. The digital products lack the tactile appeal and sheer physicality of such thickly tiered pieces as Derek Fordjour's "Airborne Double," in which twinned drum majors leap above a field of torn, red-painted newsprint that might as well be infinitely deep. Their levitating forms, like so much of "Multiplicity," express as much joy as conflict.

Marius, Marley, "A Closer Look at the Sport-Inspired Art Installations at the Prelude to the 2024 Olympic Games," *Vogue.com*, July 26, 2024

# VOGUE

ARTS

## A Closer Look at the Sport-Inspired Art Installations at the Prelude to the 2024 Olympic Games

BY MARLEY MARIUS

July 26, 2024



Photographed by Marco Bahler

On Thursday evening, a glittering Parisian cocktail party hosted by LVMH chairman and CEO Bernard Arnault, Comcast NBCUniversal chairman and CEO Brian Roberts, Louis Vuitton men's creative director Pharrell Williams, and Anna Wintour (along with Charlize Theron, Serena Williams, Rosalía, and Omar Sy) gave joyful new meaning to the phrase *Olympic Games*.

Ahead of Paris 2024 (the opening ceremony, conceived as a grand procession down the River Seine, is tomorrow), multihyphenate par excellence Pharrell Williams had an idea. He called on a small group of top-flight contemporary artists, largely based in New York, to create interactive, carnival-style games and amusements based on the Olympic ones.



KAWS's archery installation Photo: Anthony Ghnassia/Getty Images



Photo: Anthony Ghnassia/Getty Images

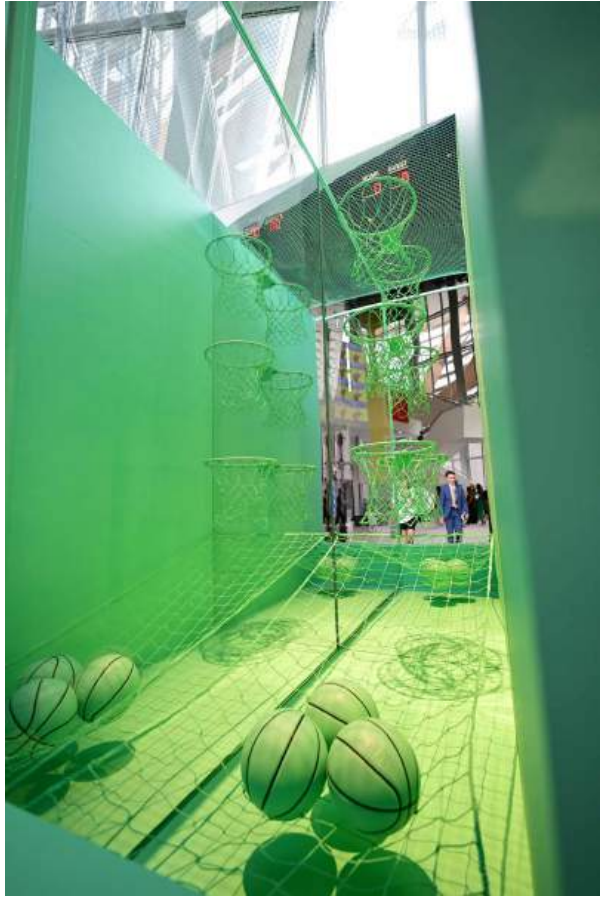
The results—installed in the vast auditorium of the Louis Vuitton Foundation amidst more traditional pinball machines, foosball tables, and a claw machine filled with items from LVMH maisons—were fantastically varied. For some artists, the main action was adapting a motif from their body of work for this playful new context. Just take Brian Donnelly, known around the world as Kaws, who reimagined one of his iconic cartoon characters—once likened by Christie's to “a dystopian Mickey Mouse”—as the bull's-eye of an archery target. The painter Julia Chiang, to whom Donnelly happens to be married, did something similar, transforming the mesmeric geometries of her tensely colorful canvases into cones for cotton candy. (Had the couple's two young daughters attended, one could easily imagine them getting a kick out of this.)



A view of Derek Fordjour's equestrian-themed diorama, *Red Queen's Race* (2023) Photo: Anthony Ghnassia/Getty Images

Others, like Derek Fordjour and JR, reconstructed or reiterated existing projects for the occasion. In a nod to the Olympics' equestrian sports, Fordjour brought his *Red Queen's Race* (2023)—a kinetic diorama peopled with miniature painted jockeys riding miniature rocking horses—to the foundation, while JR, known for his large-scale photographic street art, brought his Inside Out photo-booth truck,

which allowed guests to generate posters of themselves in a matter of minutes. (When, in the spring of 2013, JR parked the truck in Times Square, scores of New Yorkers plastered the streets with their faces.)



A view of Daniel Arsham's basketball activation Photo: Anthony Ghnassia/Getty Images



Honor Titus's tennis installation Photo: Anthony Ghnassia/Getty Images

Based in Los Angeles, Titus, for his part, is a big tennis guy: Last summer he had a show at Gagosian's Beverly Hills gallery called “Advantage In,” and in November he unveiled a customizable poster for the Nitto ATP Finals in Turin, Italy. His contribution to the foundation's soiree was a sculpture from “Advantage In,” made of an artificial grass court with an ornate iron fence instead of a net, and a painting of a tennis player. Like the night's other installations and activations, Titus's works were engaging and dynamic—and guests could get up close without breaking a sweat. *Allez* to that.

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Art & Exhibitions

## A New Show of Collage by African-American Artists Finds Multiplicity in Black Identity

The medium offers a site for meditations on subjects like collective history, cultural hybridity and gender fluidity.



Lorna Simpson, *4 Walls* (2023). Courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth, © Lorna Simpson

by **Artnet News** • July 4, 2024

A museum exhibition opening in the nation's capital this summer explores the ways that Black artists use the century-old medium of collage to treat subjects ranging from national heritage to sexual orientation, from notions of beauty to fragmentation and reconstruction.

"Multiplicity: Blackness in Contemporary American Collage" is billed as the first major museum exhibition devoted to contemporary collage and exploring the wide range of Black experience and identity in the U.S.

“A New Show of Collage by African-American Artists Finds Multiplicity in Black Identity,” *News.artnet.com*, July 4, 2024



Paul Anthony Smith, *The Tales of Tourism* (2022-2023). Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, © Paul Anthony Smith.

Taking place at the Phillips Collection, in Washington, D.C., it comprises more than 60 works by a multigenerational cohort of some 45 artists. The show was organized by the Frist Art Museum, in Nashville, Tennessee.



Derek Fordjour, *Airborne Double* (2022). Courtesy of the artist, David Kordansky Gallery, and Petzel Gallery. Photo: Daniel Greer. © Derek Fordjour.

"Multiplicity" includes a pantheon of stars including Sanford Biggers, Mark Bradford, Njideka Akunyili Crosby, Lauren Halsey, Rashid Johnson, Kerry James Marshall, Wangechi Mutu, Howardena Pindell, Lorna Simpson, Mickalene Thomas, and Kara Walker.



Lester Julian Merriweather, *Moment (from #BetterGardensAndJungles)* (2017). Courtesy of the artist, © Lester Julian Merriweather.

"Twenty-first-century collage is an arguably understudied and undervalued medium, especially in museum exhibitions," explained Katie Delmez, senior curator at the Frist Art Museum and the exhibition's curator. "'Multiplicity' is an opportunity to spotlight the formal complexity and vibrancy of the technique and to assert its contributions to the field through the lens of some of today's leading artists."



Kara Walker, *Divining Rod* (2007). Courtesy Sikkema Jenkins & Co., © Kara Walker.

Collage originated with French Cubists and German Dada artists a century ago, and the tradition has been taken up in innovative ways by African-American artists such as Romare Bearden, David C. Driskell, Jacob Lawrence, and Faith Ringgold. Some of the artists in “Multiplicity,” like Mutu and Deborah Roberts, principally work in collage, while it’s just a part of the practice of many of the others.



Howardena Pindell, *Untitled #3C* (2009). Courtesy of the artist and Garth Greenan Gallery, © Howardena Pindell.

"The exhibition asserts that collage parallels how identity is constructed with a multitude of elements that create a singular whole," said Adrienne L. Childs, senior consulting curator at the Phillips Collection and organizing curator for the presentation in Washington. "The process of merging form and content aptly represents Black life. The artists create multifaceted works through the meaningful use of objects from their own lives that reflect their experiences and concerns."



Lorna Simpson, *4 Walls* (2023). Courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth, © Lorna Simpson.

A catalog further explores some of the ideas in the exhibition and includes essays by contributors such as UCLA African art assistant professor Tiffany Barber, Boston University art historian emerita Patricia Hills, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts curator Valerie Cassel Oliver, and Duke University art historian Richard J. Powell.

*"Multiplicity: Blackness in Contemporary American Collage"* will be on view at the Phillips Collection, 1600 21st Street, NW, Washington, D.C., July 6–September 22.

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# The New York Times

## Six Artists Reflect on the Legacy of the Harlem Renaissance

A century later, the first African American modernist movement continues to inspire and challenge.



By Aruna D'Souza

Feb. 18, 2024

### Derek Fordjour



Derek Fordjour, "Masons, Magicians, Showgirls & Kings," 2022, newspaper mounted on canvas. Fordjour often quotes directly from Harlem Renaissance artists like Archibald Motley Jr., and Richmond Barthé, he says, in order to keep their contributions in art historical consciousness. via Derek Fordjour and David Kordansky Gallery

Derek Fordjour traces his interest in Harlem Renaissance art to his childhood in Tennessee, where he saw Aaron Douglas's murals at Fisk University, and to his art history classes at Morehouse. "I was completely riveted by the contributions that the Harlem Renaissance artists had made to art history," he said in a recent conversation. "It gave me this alternate canon that really made it clear that I was working out of a rich legacy."

For Fordjour, whose painting surfaces often include acrylic, charcoal, pastel, foil, newspapers and even glitter, the lessons of Harlem Renaissance artists are felt in many ways. "I don't think it's possible to have a conversation about figuration without going back to this very fecund moment of Black artistic development."

He often quotes directly from predecessors. "You can almost graph my crowd scene compositions onto an Archibald Motley Jr., jazz scene. You can see the bones of Richmond Barthé in my sculptures," he said. "They were really sidelined from the main stage of art history back then and for decades after, so I see it as an obligation to enlighten my audience in the way that I was enlightened in those college classrooms."

## Xaviera Simmons



Xaviera Simmons, "They're All Afraid, All of Them, That's It! They're All Southern! The Whole United States Is Southern!" from 2019. For this painting, the artist pulled out excerpts from wall labels that Jacob Lawrence and Gwendolyn Knight wrote for "Migration Series." via Xaviera Simmons Studio, David Castillo Gallery and SFMOMA

"The Harlem Renaissance has been a part of my lexicon since birth," the interdisciplinary artist Xaviera Simmons said in a recent conversation. But while its celebrated figures, such as Jacob Lawrence, have made their way into her work, she is acutely aware of those who were erased from the history of the movement, especially queer femmes. "There was a certain level of misogyny and oppression against women, and queer women in particular, that I find problematic as I delve deeper," she said.

Simmons's engagement with Jacob Lawrence's "Migration Series" (1940-41) pays homage to and challenges received histories. Lawrence's series is composed of 60 paintings depicting the mass movement of African Americans from southern states to industrial cities up north starting at the turn of the 20th century, each with an accompanying label explaining the scene. "I didn't realize that his wife co-wrote the labels," Simmons said, referring to the artist Gwendolyn Knight (1913-2005), who married Lawrence in 1934.

In "They're All Afraid, All of Them, That's It! They're All Southern! The Whole United States Is Southern!" (2019), Simmons's mural-sized array of canvases covered with hand-drawn text or monochromatic expanses of paint, she highlights Knight's contribution to Lawrence's masterpiece. Simmons retains Lawrence's distinctive palette of blue-green, orange, yellow and gray-brown, interspersing it with handwritten passages from the captions they collaborated on.

The visuals are certainly important, she explained, "but the text, which you don't really pay much attention to, is just as critical."

## Priyanka Dasgupta and Chad Marshall



Priyanka Dasgupta and Chad Marshall, "Along 155th Street, Where the Windows Face East," 2023, at the Sugar Hill Children's Museum of Art & Storytelling. The pair's installation investigates a little-known aspect of Harlem history: the century-long intermingling of Black Harlemites and South Asian immigrants. via Timothy Lee

In Priyanka Dasgupta and Chad Marshall's collaborative project at the Sugar Hill Children's Museum of Art & Storytelling, "Along 155th Street, Where the Windows Face East," on view until Feb. 19, the artists delve into the lesser-known but entwined history of Black Americans and South Asian Americans, especially Bengalis, living in Sugar Hill and other Harlem neighborhoods. "It kind of us set us free," said Dasgupta.

In the 1910s and 1920s, Bengali immigrants landed in Harlem, often marrying Black Americans or passing as Black to evade restrictions on immigration from Asia. Drawing upon the research of the historian Vivek Bald, the artists created a "parafictional" character for their exhibition named Bahauddin "Bobby" Alam, a sailor turned jazz musician. They turned the east-facing windows of the museum into Alam's imagined apartment, and filled each set piece with objects and traces that allude to his complicated life's journey.

The project hits close to home for the pair in more ways than one — Dasgupta is Bengali American and Marshall is Black. A married couple and the parents of a toddler, they modeled Alam's home after their own apartment, which is just down the street from the museum. "We live in a building that has had an outsize role in the Harlem Renaissance. Artists like Aaron Douglas lived

here," Marshall said in an interview.

In her archival research, Dasgupta came across a single sentence that sparked the project: "I had been looking into Bardu Ali, who was a jazz musician," she said. He was also Indian, and had been informally credited with having discovered Ella Fitzgerald, she said. "We began to think about how we could go about filling in the gaps of these histories. Creating the character of Bobby then liberated us from dealing with the weight of real life."

It also liberated them in other ways. "When the world is becoming increasingly nationalistic and insular, it's a reminder that identity is fluid, and a celebration of love and camaraderie between two groups of minorities that are too often pitted against one another," Dasgupta said.

## Nina Chanel Abney



Nina Chanel Abney, "Light-Footed," 2022. Abney's collage work is indebted to artists such as Jacob Lawrence and Romare Bearden, while her lively style nods to William H. Johnson. via Nina Chanel Abney and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Nina Chanel Abney's work channels a wide range of influences — cartoons and comic books, emojis, Henri Matisse, Stuart Davis, and popular culture. Recently she's moved toward a collage aesthetic, using geometric abstraction and overlapping shapes that come together to depict figures and cityscapes.

More and more, she said, that mix has been influenced by Jacob Lawrence and Romare Bearden. (Bearden, born in 1911, was too young to be considered part of the Harlem Renaissance but his work was deeply indebted to the movement.) "The compositions, the colors, the themes — I think there's a direct pipeline to me," she said in a phone call.

Her engagement with Bearden's work in particular deepened when in 2012 she took part in the Studio Museum of Harlem's "The Bearden Project," in

which 100 artists made work honoring the centennial of his birth.

A 2022 collage on panel, "Light-Footed," depicts a dance party of the period, bringing to mind the expressionistic paintings of William H. Johnson. With other works, Abney channels such art historical borrowings through an explicitly queer lens, "which maybe didn't get so much visual representation back in the '20s and '30s," she said.

## Dawoud Bey



Dawoud Bey, "Three Women at a Parade, 1978," from his "Harlem, USA" series. Bey cites Langston Hughes as a rallying cry for artists today, expressing "our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame." Dawoud Bey, via Stephen Daiter Gallery

When he was 16 years old, in 1969, Dawoud Bey went to the Metropolitan Museum to check out the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition's protests of "Harlem on My Mind" for failing to include a single Black painter or sculptor.

"The demonstrators were fortuitously not there on the day I showed up," he said via email, "so it left me with little choice but to go in and see the exhibition." He had just gotten his first camera but didn't yet know what to focus on. "That exhibition helped me find my subject, reminding me that my own narrative began in Harlem in the 1940s when my mother and father met there."

It did include documentary photography by James Van Der Zee, whose work had a lasting impact: "His photographs depicting Black formal elegance and self-possession became the basis of what became my first project and exhibition, 'Harlem, USA,' beginning in the mid-1970s," he wrote. Bey's portraits of the neighborhood and its residents are startlingly intimate, though he always maintained a respectful distance from his subjects. It was a form of street photography designed to allow both image-maker and subjects to define African Americans against centuries of stereotyping.

Bey believes it's important to continue the "sometimes-heated conversations that Black artists, writers and intellectuals" were having a century ago. "Langston Hughes's statement serves, I think, as a rallying cry and affirmation for Black artists today as it was when he wrote it in 1926: 'We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame.'"

Aruna D'Souza writes about modern and contemporary art and is the author of "Whitewalling: Art, Race & Politics in 3 Acts." In 2021 she was awarded a Rabkin Prize for Art Journalism.

A version of this article appears in print on Feb. 18, 2024, Section AR, Page 19 of the New York edition with the headline: Artists Reflect on a Legacy's Enduring Impact. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)

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*Interview with  
Derek Fordjour*

*Allison Glenn*

**Allison Glenn:**

Thank you so much for sitting down to speak with me today, Derek, about the influence and impact that Mark Bradford has had upon your practice. Let's start at the beginning. Where and when did you first meet Mark?

**Derek Fordjour:** I met Mark through a friend of mine, ours, I believe Sam Levi Jones. [Mark] was mentoring Sam at the time. And Sam had come out from L.A. for a show at Sikkema Jenkins Gallery in New York... Mark was there and he was passing out tickets to the after party, which you know, would never happen now! I was with Sam, and Mark just said, "you guys should come to the Boom Boom Room." And I was like, "Oh, man, this is cool!"

You know, Mark being from LA, he was a big deal, but he wasn't exactly the rock star we know today.

Mark was so generous. We were just sitting around chatting. I said, "Mark, how do you do this? Like, how do you get to this insane level of accomplishment, the scale, the prices, the career?" I knew how much the paintings were selling for at that time, but I just couldn't fathom it. At that time, I could barely pay rent, and Mark's paintings were selling for more than my parents' home was worth. So I asked, "Can you bridge the gap for me? How does this happen?" And he said [Fordjour paraphrasing], "You know, I started by

receiving checks that were small. And then over time, they got bigger, and they got a little bigger. And when I started, I would show anywhere. I think artists now are a little too careerist. If there's a venue for your work, and you want to get it out, then show it! Show that work, and it will grow. And don't be afraid to be part of those conversations around pricing. You go in the back room of the gallery, you sit at those tables, and you have a voice in that process."

That doesn't sound like much now, but Mark Bradford laying that out for me before I had any gallery representation was not just a roadmap, it felt like he was giving me permission by telling me exactly where to go and how to operate. And he was absolutely right on both fronts. So that's my Mark Bradford Boom Boom Room career advice story.

**AG:**

I remember that time was, specifically, a moment for a lot of us. I think that [Black Artists' Retreat] created a sense of community that for me, has carried through. I think I met you and Yashua [Klos] and a whole circle of artists through [B.A.R.] that I wouldn't have known

otherwise. I think there is a real need for that kind of collegiality, that kind of community, but also there's a real need for mentorship.

What I'm hearing you say is that not only did Mark give you permission, but he showed you how to access permission.

**DF:** That's exactly right. And I think you're right about the collegiality, and not to go too far afield with the Black Artists Retreat, but it was revolutionary how we all got in a room shared a meal and now we are a loosely constructed alumni group of sorts. It's pretty amazing what Theaster [Gates] accomplished, but you can call people up that are on the other side of the country now as colleagues and peers, because you spent a wonderful weekend together. I'm forever indebted to Theaster for that. That was like a revolutionary act: say, I'm going to open my place, feed people for two nights and something special will happen. Theaster's example with Black Artist's Retreat and Mark Bradford with Art in Practice laid the foundation in my thinking for building charitable outreach into my practice thinking first about impact. They both modeled the artist as a catalyst for social change and made an indelible impression on me.

**AG:**

I couldn't agree more! Talk to me about Mark's paintings. What do you see?

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**DF:** So yeah, Mark's paintings...the last show I saw that just floored me was in London a few years ago. I think it was four paintings, and they were gargantuan. I also saw his work in Venice [at the 2017 Venice Biennial], when he did the US pavilion. I'm just thinking about moments that were mind-expanding for me as an artist. And then *Pickett's Charge* (2017– ongoing) at the Hirshhorn Museum, in D.C., in the Rotunda. When I see Mark's work you know, I see expanse, I see his reach.

Not just sort of metaphorically, but I actually see his body, his mark is actually physically large. And it feels apropos to his wingspan, and the kind of body scale relationship that artists have with the objects that they create. So, it has this presence that is on par with what happens when Mark walks into the room. So, I love that because there's something sort of honest and there's a symmetry that feels right about that. There is something very elegant about Mark as a human being, very sophisticated, very effortless.

But also, what I resonate most with, is this sense of community and open invitation. The work is generous that way. Mark is very human and the works feel very expansive and not formulaic. They are cartographic in a sense,

but his hand, his mark is most evident. Mark is engaged with the work, it looks like the record of a performance almost. So what I see are all those things when I look at his work, and I can't separate it from knowing him, that I really think that he puts a real heartbeat and humanity into the space of abstraction in a way that I think creates space for people that might have historically been shut out of that conversation. So that's what I see when I look at his work.

**AG:**

What do you think about his process and how do the paintings make you feel? What have you learned about painting from Mark?

**DF:** I love that I don't immediately know how the works are created. With a little research, I was able to find out he doesn't actually use pigment or brushes, or that sometimes there's rinsing and embedding and deconstruction. Nari Ward was my thesis advisor in graduate school, and he is friends with Mark. So as I was working in graduate school, and I was kind of having this interrogation of newspaper and finding different ways to tear, Nari introduced Mark Bradford's process to me and said, Mark will put embed ropes, and rip them out. And, you know, he kind of used Mark as a way to give me again, permission to engage even more rigorously with the material. And so, I think that his process, given my own, is very deeply personal and born out of his

experiences in the studio. I don't think this kind of deeply embedded personal process comes from thinking alone. It's very much engaged with the practice of doing. And so when I look at this process, I see a deep investment in studio time, because you simply don't arrive there any other way.

The paintings make me feel inspired, and they always have from the small papers that he used. His early works were very thin, translucent, sort of tracing paper. But to learn later that this came from his experiences in the salons and the beauty shops, I think his mom or another family member worked there, but he did also. So this material was culled directly from his lived experience.

But again, you know, thinking about material or how the paintings make me feel: they make me feel very seen. Because I always regarded abstraction as a sort of higher art, that the thinking is more opaque and less accessible, and requires a kind of legend or some sort of education to properly decipher it. But to find him locating the materials in a hair salon in South LA, in Leimert Park, I just felt that he brought our culture into this kind of hierarchy in this way that was really transformational. And so, when I think about what I see in our work, it is the ability to do that, to reconcile things that are otherwise regarded maybe in a high-low sense to collapse them into one space. And I really appreciate that.

**AG:**

Visibility is so important, and, for me, the perceived boundaries we have inherited between who is within and who is outside of the

conversation can be dismantled. On that note, where do you see yourself and your work within, or in conversation with, the larger canon of painting?

**DF:** Where I see myself within a larger canon of painting is probably something I don't think about too much. Right now, I am very busy, about the work of building an archive that has value and meaning and truth while I'm healthy and able to do it. I believe that when I do that really well, then I will earn a place in the canon. I think it's far too presumptuous at my stage in my career to make assumptions about where I might end up or how the canon may regard me. But I have great respect for the canon, and I think that [it would be] a tremendous compliment to my life's work, should it be there. I also love reading art news magazines from 40 years ago, to take stock of all the names that we don't hear anymore. So, the canon is a goal, but I think the way you make it into the canon is by being really committed to the life you're living now and to be relevant to the now. And then, later on curators and institutions will decide who we extract from the great wave of creativity of now. So how do I influence a larger, younger generation of artists? It's something I'm deeply, deeply passionate about. I try and make myself available to artists in every way possible, from doing visits to becoming a guest critic at schools and mentoring.

I also just created a Foundation. I'm thinking about Mark's Art and Practice, thinking about Theaster's Dorchester Projects, thinking about Titus Kaphar's NXTHVN and Julie Mehretu's Denniston Hill Residency. I created Contemporary Arts Memphis in my hometown that creates a kind of Skowhegan-style sleepaway art camp experience for twenty-six high school-aged artists. They have art intensive instruction for three weeks, and then we travel for one week. And that really is about democratizing the art world. I was born and raised in Memphis, Tennessee, so I know that kids in the Mid-South have limited access to world class museums. I really hope that this experience can become a beacon for the region for Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Tennessee. We had our first cohort this summer and I'm so excited for all the life changing possibilities. Much like Mark, I am also trying to do as much good as I can with my success and to live my life in a way that can serve as inspiration for artists of future generations.

## DEREK FORDJOUR

### Artist

*Did you grow up in an artistic household?*

"I wouldn't say art with a capital A, we didn't collect paintings for example, but I grew up in a home that was rich with textiles and sculptures and most of those artefacts came from Ghana, as both of my parents are Ashanti. They were mostly aesthetically compelling and decorative objects that as a child I was intrigued by because they came from a culture I was born into but hadn't yet discovered."

*Where you encouraged to do art?*

"For some reason my parents were very very encouraging and just gave me the room to be a weirdo and get lost in my creative world. I don't understand it; most Ghanaian parents would push you towards science or maths."

At high school I encountered an art teacher who changed my life. He was the first person to tell me that I could be successful as an artist. So after I left high school, I attended Pratt in Brooklyn eventually dropping out but it was really a great time to be in art school and a great time to be in New York."

*Did you have a particular breakthrough moment as an artist?*

"I am always careful to say that there are no such singular moments for me, it's a bit of a myth I think. But if I had to pick one conversation, I would say there was a woman I was dating who had observed that the art things that I got excited about weren't present in my work. Back then, I was very much an easel painter and struggling frankly in the studio. She gave me that criticism and I became instantly upset, my temperature shot up and I was embarrassed because it was true and I really didn't have a quick solution. She just said that there's a chasm between who I am and the work I am making. That was a moment of critical truth that at least set me in the direction of resolving it."

*And how did you resolve it?*

"I think from that moment I just set upon a path of evolution and discovery starting with the things that interested me visually, moments in culture, industry, ideas, cultur-

al norms, conversations of the moment and history. I think through intellectual inquiry, self-regard and self-discovery I eventually found my voice."

*Where do you work?*

"I have a dedicated space here in the Bronx, we actually work in three separate spaces in our building. One space is dedicated to sculpture, another space is for painting and special projects and then I have the main studio space where I host studio visits and take meetings."

I do have a team and that's headed by the studio director, Danni Pascuma, who is the point of contact for my galleries and she is the central nerve centre. And then on the art side I have a guy, Robert Maldonado, who is a magnificent sculptor who I have worked with for a number of years and he has a dedicated sculptural space upstairs. Then I have a prep team who are largely responsible for preparing my canvases which requires a lot of preparation time and special techniques and then I have painting assistants to actually help me make paintings."

*Why is Ghanaian art having its moment?*

"I think as a whole, we can start with the continent: we are witnessing a generation of Africans that are the most connected and informed that we have ever been at any point in history and I think there is a cultural revolution at foot, not just in contemporary art but in literature and music, theatre and entrepreneurship. I think that all of these categories are activated and it's the perfect platform for any country that is democratic, young, ambitious and has some proximity to the West and Ghana fits the bill for all of those. That's why Ghana is a leading voice and we're going to see increasingly more participation on a global stage from Ghanaians that are home and abroad. I think it's a cultural revolution and nothing short of that."

*Are you worried that this is just a trend?*

"I think trends are a byproduct of markets and that's why artists should have a healthy scepticism of the market. I counsel

young artists all the time that just because someone is paying you does not mean that you are successful nor that they will pay you forever."

Artists exist in and outside of the market. The market doesn't determine your conviction. You can opt in or opt out, as we've seen with a generation of Ghanaian artists, such as Ablade Glover and so many others. They existed way before there was any boom in the international market and they were supported by professionals, a small group of them kept each other going. So I don't fear markets, I fear artists that might be miscalculating the sacrifice that's required of them."

*Being outside the country, do you still feel an integral part of the artistic community?*

"I do! Ghana is home and I am a full-blooded Ashanti. My father said to me at maybe six or seven years old, 'son, I just want to tell you, if the entire Ashanti Kingdom is destroyed today and you are the only single living Ashanti, then the Ashanti Kingdom lives.'"

That was his way of explaining who I was and so I've grown up with that knowledge. I'm so fortunate and elated to be alive and making art right now and that I am in so many conversations with so many Ghanaian artists and I can be a resource to them and they can be a resource to me."

I am also fortunate to be in a position where people bring artists to me or artists reach out to me themselves which I really appreciate. When artists do reach out to me, I do look at their work. I can't say I speak to every one because I just don't have the bandwidth, but if I look at the work and it seems that I can be helpful, I schedule time and we speak and we develop a mentorship."

Ghanaians have always been creative going back thousands of years. Being weavers, sculptors and carvers is just in our culture, but the art industry is a new pathway to a professional life. I think there's some infrastructure that artists like Amoako Bofo and I can help lay down in order to make that transition a bit easier."



**We are witnessing a generation of Africans that are the most connected and informed that we have ever been at any point in history and I think there is a cultural revolution at foot, not just in contemporary art but in literature and music, theatre and entrepreneurship.**



**It's the perfect platform for any country that is democratic, young, ambitious and has some proximity to the West and Ghana fits the bill for all of those.**

I've had conversations about how to bring an art supply store to Ghana. I was hearing how difficult it can be sometimes to get art materials and I'm fortunate to serve on the board with the CEO of a major art supply store so I've started a conversation on how it might be possible that they look at Ghana."

*Do you have any advice for younger artists?*  
"Ghanaian parents who value education encourage you to work hard, study hard, be a good person: all of those things are true. I think the principle difference in the space of contemporary art is that you don't make any money if you are mediocre whereas if you are an accountant and you are mediocre, you will still have a salary and that's true in lots of professions.

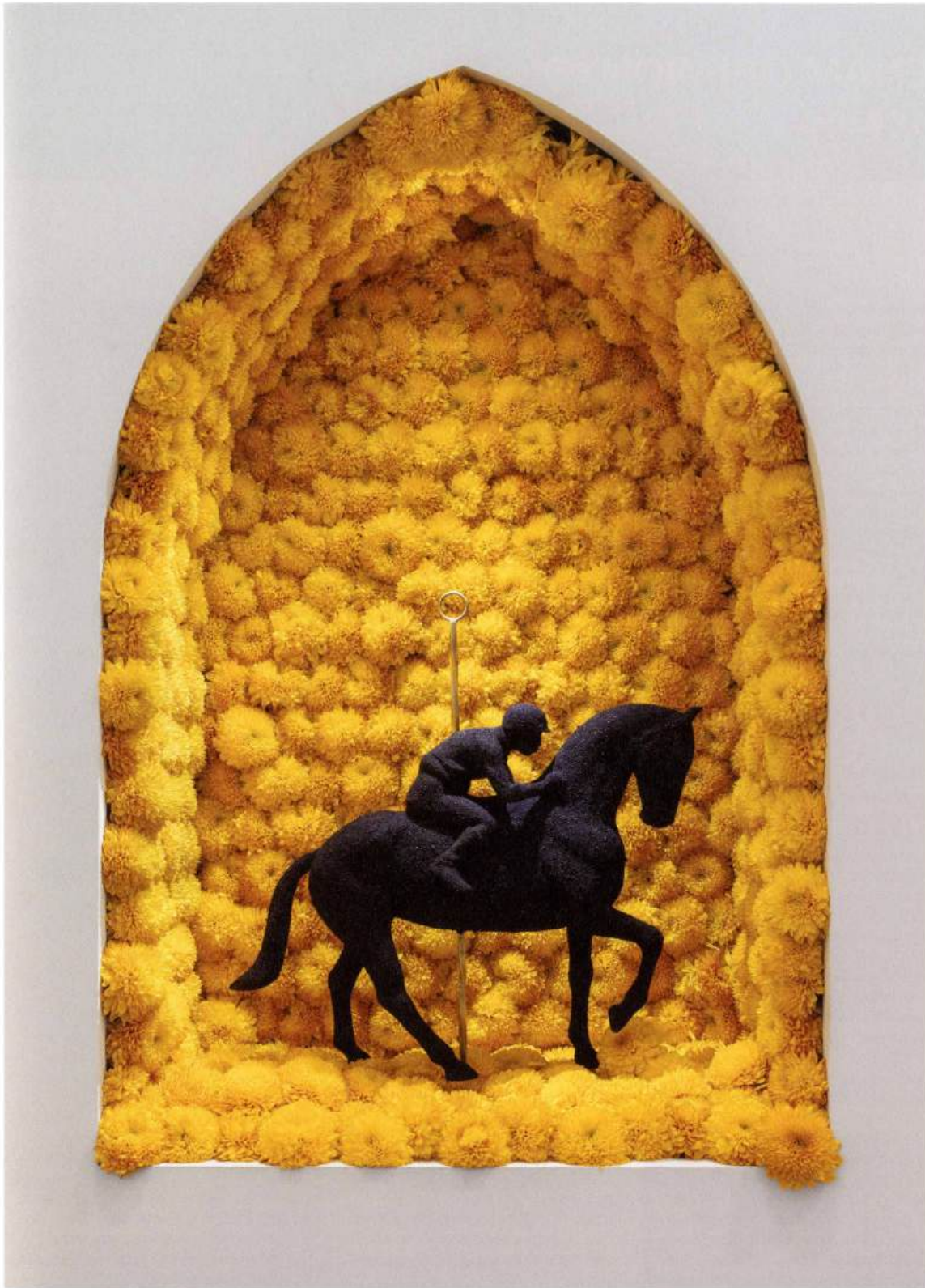
We are self-employed and the risks are very real, I don't want to gloss over that and tell people to jump headfirst but I don't think a plan B is good, I don't think playing it safe serves you well.

You need to have a strong stomach for poverty and live your life where art making is the centre of your universe and that's a hard thing to do: wake up every day and commit yourself fully to just making art.

You've got to try and be the best and that's not to say that every artist with a career is the best, we know that's not true, but I mean you just have to work really hard and understand that you can be a really hard working, talented, ambitious artist and still not be able to sustain a living.

That is a space I was in for twenty years and knowing that that is a reality and making peace with that is important.

What troubles me is that the reality is dire in terms of the economy and employment for young people coming out of university. If you don't have connections, you can be very qualified and underemployed. I do have some concerns about people that might be attracted to the success of contemporary artists and the attraction to a lifestyle. There does seem to be an element of playing a lottery ticket with a career and I think that's dangerous. If you can't commit to a lifetime of art making, then you should probably do something else."



Noah, Trevor, "For Artist Derek Fordjour, What Happens in the Studio Stays in the Studio," *InterviewMagazine.com*, November 16, 2023

# Interview

STUDIO VISIT

## For Artist Derek Fordjour, What Happens in the Studio Stays in the Studio

By Trevor Noah

November 16, 2023



*Derek Fordjour, photographed by Brandon Hicks.*

To Derek Fordjour, the stakes are high in art. "There are a lot of paintings in the world," he remembers a graduate school professor telling him. "Why do we need another one?" Ever since, the Ghanaian-American artist has made sure his work toys with the big questions, and his newest show, which opened last week at Chelsea's Petzel Gallery, is no exception. Titled *SCORE*, it's an exploration of the parallel meanings of "score" in Fordjour's work—to excavate, to compose, to compete—through sculpture, paintings, and performance art in collaboration with dancer Sidra Bell and banjoist Hannah Mayree. It's his most personal, autobiographical show yet, and as he tells his friend, the comedian Trevor Noah, who called Fordjour from Minneapolis, "It's in that space between real life and the unreal that we create."

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TREVOR NOAH: D, what's going on, my man?

DEREK FORDJOUR: Brother Trev. Thank you so much.

NOAH: Oh man, come on. You know it's my pleasure.

FORDJOUR: I know how much you move around the world. Speaking of which, where are you in the world now?

NOAH: I'm currently in Minneapolis. The home of Prince, another artist. I feel like it's fitting that I'm speaking to you from this place.

FORDJOUR: I mean, what a long shadow. I think about George Floyd now when I think about Minneapolis, and that was never the case, so I'm happy to be reminded about Prince.

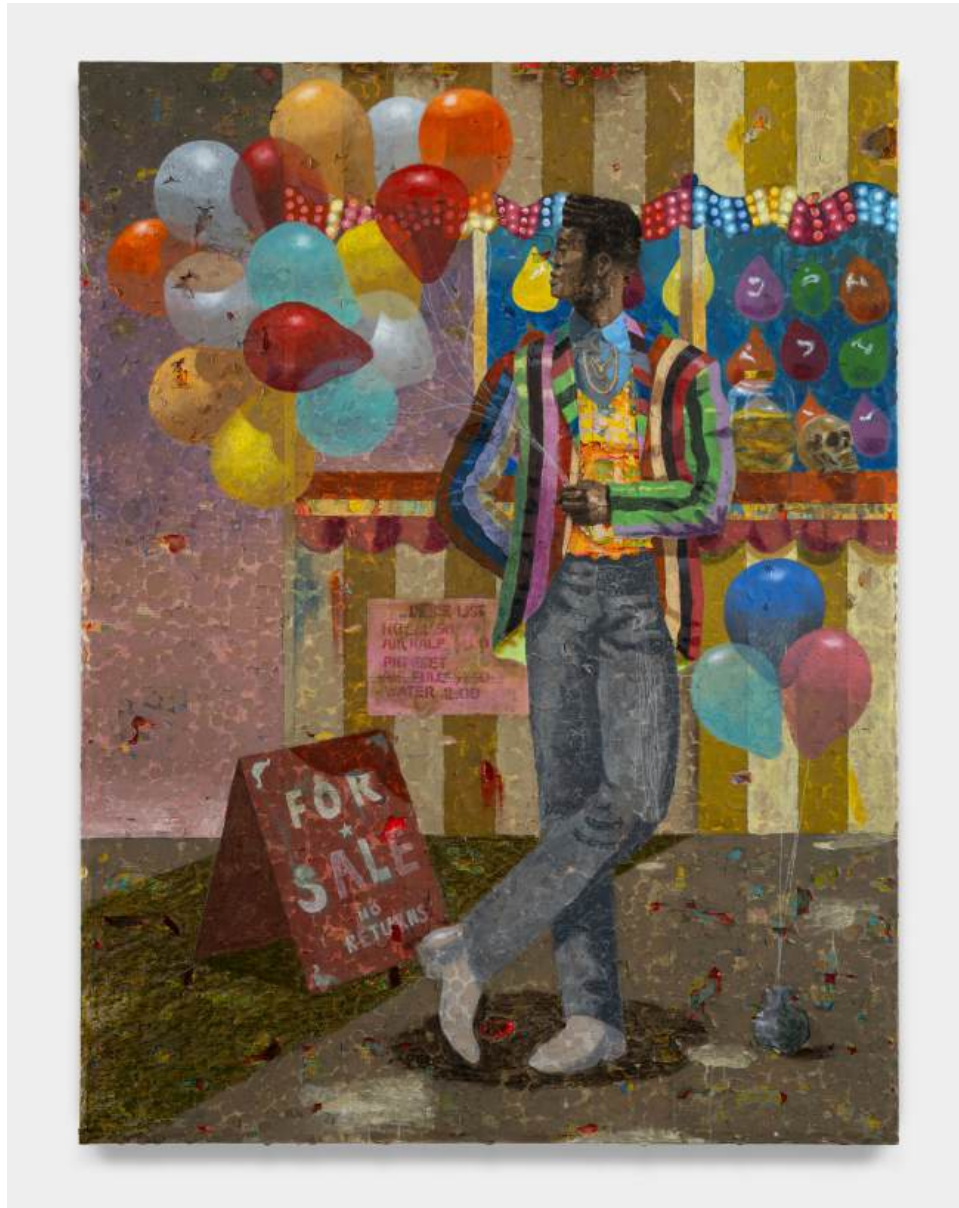
NOAH: Oh, damn. It's the paradox of the Black experience in America. It's the pinnacle of success and the ability to completely shape the world, and on the other hand, it is the subjugation and oppression of a people... It's pretty wild when you think about it.

FORDJOUR: It's wild and it's ever-present. So we can never get lost in the revelry of Prince and his genius. There'll be a disruption at some point.

NOAH: I only realize it now that I said it out loud, but that's almost exactly what your work does. It's both a celebration of the Black experience and its excellence and power, and at the same time, it's an examination of everything that Black people have had to experience. How's your show coming along? Are you sleeping?

FORDJOUR: Look man, the show is buzzing now and it's not done. So it's going to come down to the wire. You and I are both pretty cool-headed fellows, but all these last-minute shenanigans are really just nerves. I'm 20 pounds heavier than I need to be. It's all this chaos that I create for myself. Big shows always come down to the wire for me. I'm talking to my therapist about this now, why I just can't seem to land the plane without drama.

NOAH: I almost feel like I can give you an answer for that but—



*CONFIDENCE MAN*, 2023

FORDJOUR: No, I want your answer. It's a lot more affordable.

NOAH: So here's what I think. Because art isn't a fixed location, there is no way to determine whether or not it is complete. If you've built a building, I can go through a checklist and I can tell you that it's complete. If it does not have windows, the building's not complete. But with art, the missing window might literally be the reason it is art. So I actually wonder how you maintain any type of sanity. I'm shocked that you even think you're landing the plane. I feel like you're flying and you're just dropping passengers off at an airport and then taking off. You don't even land. They just have to jump out.

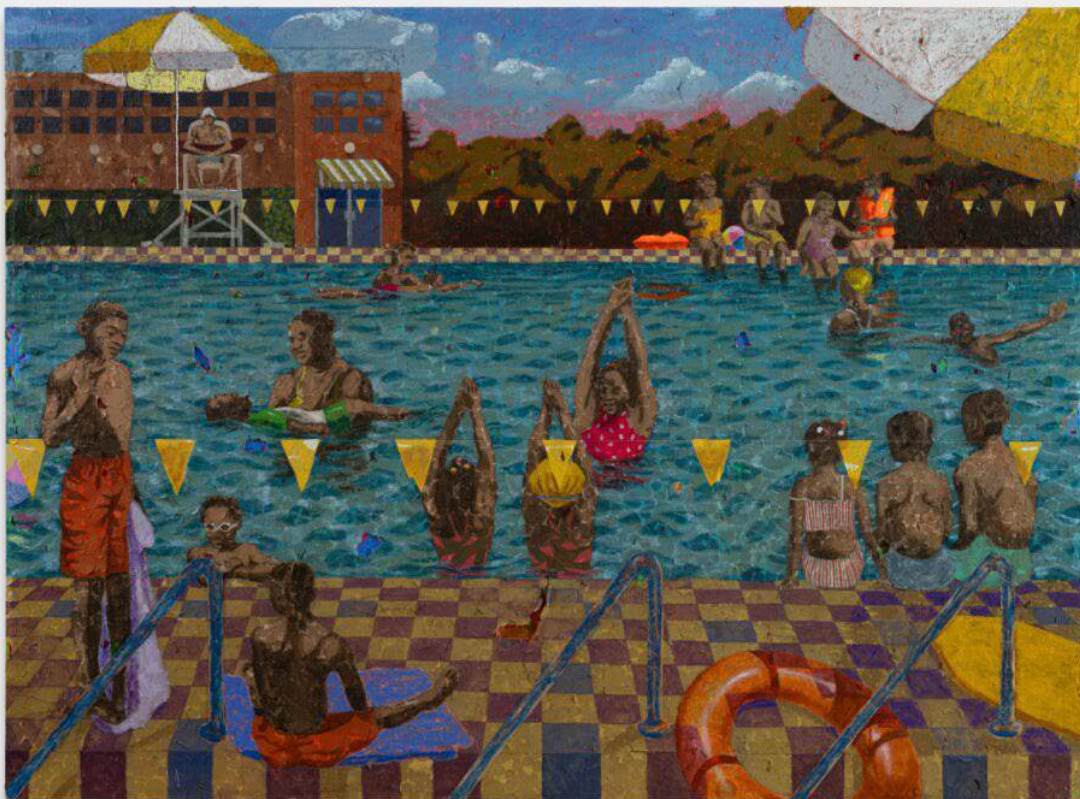
FORDJOUR: First of all, that is the case I make for every late deadline I arrive at. I really feel very little shame about missing deadlines, which is a problem for everybody that works around me. But you're right, it's so wonky and unpredictable. Do you know when a set is done?

NOAH: No, I don't. This is why every artist needs constraints. It's never finished. There are times when I've done a standup special—in fact, this happens every time. I'll record the special and then in the weeks leading up to its release, I find new ideas for the jokes that I put out. I'm like, "Damn, I could have done it like that." Do you ever think of something else you could have done with your paintings after you've put them up on walls and they're no longer accessible to you?

FORDJOUR: All the time. I don't even like to spend a lot of time around completed works. Maybe this is true for you too, but I feel like I have to have two modes of consuming an artwork. One is the critical, which happens in my studio. I just want to improve it. I want to shape it. But that's a creative hat. When it leaves, I have to put on a different hat. I have to become a spectator with everyone else. Because if I keep the critical hat on, I may kill it for everybody. I've had to mature enough to understand that the conversations in the studio don't belong in the street.

NOAH: Yeah. You're the chef sitting at the dinner table lamenting the fact that you sneezed into the soup, and we're eating the soup going, "We were enjoying this until you told us that."

FORDJOUR: You just worked on your feet. The sneeze, that's what made that a joke. So to me, your comedic brain is always working. You didn't say, "I'm going to make a joke." Do you think in terms of comedic potential, or is that a reduction of how your brain works?



*Swimming Lessons, 2023.*

NOAH: No, I think my brain works in an incongruous way. I think every artist's brain does. It is not working in tandem with the world, and that's what I think art comes from. The world is colliding against your brain in a way that makes it vibrate differently from other people's.

FORDJOUR: I just saw you in New York at the Beacon Theater, and because I know you, one of the things that's great about watching you is that the audience is actually getting a real piece of who you are. You don't really become someone else on stage. You're a private person, but you're really honest up there. I believe that my artwork has to be authentic, too.

NOAH: The thing is, I don't think that somebody who becomes another character for their art is any less authentic. But for me, it's a little less sustainable. You want to exist in the space that you're in for as long as possible. Your new show at the Petzel Gallery—*SCORE*, right?

FORDJOUR: Yeah.

NOAH: Let's start with that. Why *SCORE*? The word "score" could literally mean seven different things to seven different people.

FORDJOUR: Exactly, and that's what attracts me to it. So I have a big birthday next year. I'm on the precipice of 50, and I'm looking back on the score of my life and I do think about score in all these ways. I am building a choreographic score with a choreographer, quite literally. I had a friend who said, "You got married last year. You scored the girl too," which is not something I had really thought about, but it really is the score of my life. So I'm making the most personal works I've made, but thinking about how those moments are accessible for other people. That's what *SCORE* is about.

NOAH: I love that. I feel like you've unintentionally taken it back to its original setting, because if I'm not mistaken, the word "score" actually comes from old Norse. It was how they would count things by marking sticks, like notches, before numerals. But I love the imagery because in many ways you're notching. You're actively chipping into the artwork, you're cutting away. And you're marking time, you're marking your progress in the image as it moves. I don't know why I found that so perfect.

FORDJOUR: I love that you taught me that. This is so damn Trevor Noah, to go to the Nordic origins of the word. This is one of the most attractive features of my relationship with you, that we're both genuinely curious people. But I have to ask you, why this tireless intellect? Where does that come from? I even looked you up like, is this guy a scholar?

NOAH: That's so funny. I think I grew up in a home of intellectual curiosity. Till this day, my mom will ask me random questions. She never stops. She'll see a bridge and she'll ask me, "How did they do that?" And I think it's obvious. And then she'll go, "Explain it." And when I'm forced to explain it, I realize that it's not obvious and I've taken something for granted. So I'm always trying to believe that I don't know anything, because I don't.

FORDJOUR: I love that you cite your mother because you really can't inherit an intellect. I'm sure she was aware that she was shaping you through that constant engagement.



*Flock*, 2023.

NOAH: I don't even think so. I think it's innately her.

FORDJOUR: Okay, that's fair.

NOAH: But you do the same thing. I've yet to see a single artwork of yours that is not attached to a deeper story of a time that has passed, or that currently exists, or a time that never was. For instance, the jockeys in one of your previous artworks. It goes into the history of Black horse riders in America and the idea of the commodity in horse racing. It's something I've always loved about your art, that it always feels like it's moving through time. I remember I went to Florence and—

FORDJOUR: Wonderful place for paintings, by the way.

NOAH: We were on an art tour, and one of the things they showed us was a style of art. I'm sure you're familiar with it. I don't remember the name. It was almost 3D and felt like it was moving, and it told a story. The historian told us that those used to be the movies of the time. That art would move around from city to city, and people sometimes even pay to see how the battle unfolded or how a great wedding took place. And I thought the same thing about your art.

FORDJOUR: Wow.

NOAH: I've always wanted to know, why do you think almost every single one of your pictures is moving from something and *towards* something?

FORDJOUR: That's really kind and such a big and wonderful question. I mean, something has to be at stake. My investment has to be something greater than where this painting is going to hang or what someone is going to pay for it. Those things don't get you through what it takes to make an artwork. I remember in a graduate school critique, a professor once said, "There are a lot of paintings in the world. Why do we need another one?" And that's the question you need to be answering when you make a work. Am I moving the conversation forward? We've heard a lot of jokes. Do we need another act? In my live show, *ARENA*, which I did with Sidra Bell, we have an anthem, and you have a joke about anthems.

NOAH: Yes.



*Twinkle Town Marines, 2023*

FORDJOUR: But you're really asking a deeper question about how countries deliver their anthems, and you're poking fun at nationalism. It's a really smart joke because it really is asking a deeper question about patriotism and propaganda. Am I reading too much into that?

NOAH: No.

FORDJOUR: I want to know what your attraction to that joke was and why.

NOAH: So I found myself intrigued by the reinforced labels we give ourselves. People will say, without a blink of an eye, "I am an American, I am a South African." But are you? If you move, are you still? If you don't live like that, have you ever been? There's a deeper understanding of how national identities are formed, and an anthem is the perfect encapsulation of that. It's a nation trying to reinforce an idea that it has of itself.

FORDJOUR: There's an absurdity to it.

NOAH: Yes. And at the same time, a completely functional normalcy to it. What I think is absurd is how we don't reexamine our norms as time goes by. We just keep them the way they are.

FORDJOUR: Listening to your answer makes me understand why we both do what we do. I can't speak for you, but it's said that design solves a problem and art asks a question. So art is about the question, it's not about the answer. It's about the opportunity to poke at a thing safely, like nationalism. Does comedy function that way?

NOAH: I think you've hit the nail on the head, and I think your art does the same thing. Art provides a safety blanket around a topic so that while it may be uncomfortable or conflict-adjacent, you can process it with a different side of your brain. Through your work, people are able to process a lot more information than they would about the real world if they were just *in* it. Sometimes art just provides you a margin. It provides you a little gap so that you can process and consume something that is very real, knowing that the thing you are consuming is not real.

FORDJOUR: And that gap is the opportunity for us, for artists, right? It's in that space between real life and the unreal that we create. Being in a theater under dark lights allows enough anonymity and distance to take the position of the entertained. I'll tell you, when I was younger, I used to be really funny before life got real. People used to say, "Man, you would make a good comic." And I used to say, "I'm too smart to be a comic." Now I realize I wasn't smart *enough* to be a comic. I actually learn every time I speak to you.

NOAH: That's funny. We're experiencing many of the same highs and lows. Every artist has the same vulnerabilities. Do people expect me to do more of the same? Do people expect me to create new? Is it too new? As a visual artist, how do you get over that anxiety about people now telling you that you are not creating a "Derek Fordjour work"?

FORDJOUR: That happens. I'm sure you have lots of people around you who say, "That's not you, Trevor."

NOAH: Yeah.

FORDJOUR: And that's a certain level of success because you've put enough work out there that people feel like self-appointed experts on your work. It's a compliment. Look, I was unsuccessful for a long time and nobody cared about any paintings I made, so I'm excited whenever people engage in the things that I make, no matter how they choose to interact with it. And I take the position of learning. You're going to see my works differently than I did. That's the gift to me, sincere engagement. It's like, you don't need everybody to love a joke. I mean, there's probably a consensus around where you want to land, but I don't think you require everyone that comes to your show to love everything you say. So for me, the theater of the public is where I can be humbled, listen, and learn, because the way I look at a painting now is different from the way I look at it in five years. I remember you once telling me how your work on *The Daily Show* ages. It's important. And I will say, I hope you're going to make a special out of what I saw at the Beacon, because this is a different Trevor. It allows people to get a lot closer to you than they got on television. I can't wait for you to share it.

NOAH: I appreciate that. We'll put out a version of it at the end of the year, actually.

FORDJOUR: What's it called?

NOAH: I'm thinking of a title right now. Maybe we'll chat about that.

FORDJOUR: Well, check with the Nordics. It's quite generative so far.

NOAH: Oh, amazing.



*Mayweather Catering Company*, 2023

# Memphis

MAGAZINE

October 18, 2023 8:00 AM

## From Hatred to Hope

The Brooks exhibit "Black American Portraits" embraces Black power, love, and joy.

by Abigail Morici



Print



*Derek Fordjour; Highstep Double, 2019, oil pastel on newspaper, mounted on canvas, 64 × 84 in. Collection of a Friend of the Brooks, © Derek Fordjour.*

From news stations to social media, these moments of pain and suffering persevere in an endless and instantaneous scroll, with nothing preventing them from resurfacing at any given moment. Yet these images are hardly representative of the entire Black American experience, and in 2020, in the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) sought to intervene and inject into the mainstream consciousness images of Black joy, power, and love.

Full of portraits of Black sitters, spaces, and subjects, the exhibit, "Black American Portraits," has made its way to the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, having opened in August. As a majority-Black city, Memphis needs this, says Brooks executive director Zoe Kahr: "It's so important to see every Memphian reflected back in the museum."

Though this exhibition originated in Los Angeles, the Brooks has included additional pieces to lend the experience a Memphis touch. An Augusta Savage sculpture is on loan from The Dixon Gallery and Gardens, and works by Jarvis Boyland, Derek Fordjour, Catherine Elizabeth Patton, Jared Small, Ernest Withers, and the Hooks Brothers Photography Studio punctuate the gallery walls. "We wanted to highlight talent in Memphis and show it in a national context," Kahr says.

With 129 pieces of art in total, the sheer number of works, encompassing a variety of media and spanning over 200 years in history, is in itself a feat. "One of the things that struck me about this show and taking it here is just this idea of abundance," says Patricia Daigle, the Brooks' curator of modern and contemporary art. "So there's this idea about being prolific, and the impact of what it means to see this many portraits of Black people in one space."

The gallery itself is divided into three themed sections: power, love, and joy. "For me, those three terms are broad enough and open-ended enough that I think you could really explore it further with the works in the exhibition," Daigle says. "I didn't want to focus on something really specific, but I wanted to ground visitors in the visual experience. ... A lot of us think we understand what power looks like or what love feels like, but one thing you'll see in this exhibition is that these are really complicated concepts and emotions. And they're presented through a Black lens."

"We're not trying to present an image that's like a rose-colored-glasses view of the past," adds Efe Igor Coleman, Blackmon Perry assistant curator of African-American art and art of the African Diaspora at the Brooks. "But it's important to see that [power, love, and joy] existed and still exists, ... [that] people are able to find joy and love and power in periods of incredible difficulty or suffering."



*Sargent Claude Johnson, Chester, 1930, painted terracotta, 11 1/2 x 4 1/2 x 4 3/4 in., Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Gift of Mrs. William J. Robertson in memory of her father Adolph Loewi, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA.*



*Cat Patton, Unveil I from Study I: Sexuality, Sensuality, and Selfseries, Collection of a Friend of the Brooks Catherine Patton.*

## Power

From a circa 1800 portrait of an unknown sailor by an unknown painter to a painting completed this year by Calida Rawles, the works in this exhibition bring the past, present, and future into conversation with each other. Tintypes from nineteenth-century studio photography harken to the abolitionist period, when Frederick Douglass—the most photographed person of his generation—championed photography for its accessibility and its ability to allow the sitter to control their own portrayal, especially in a time when negative stereotypes and caricatures proliferated.

“There’s great power that you can have when having control over how you’re presented,” Coleman says. “Something that’s exciting for me about that is also that you own your own image, which for Black folks, owning yourself, owning your own presentation, like literally being able to hang an image of yourself, is really important.”

With the works culled from numerous moments in history, Daigle adds that the viewer is able to witness the full scope of this meaning of ownership, a fraught term in American history. “Thinking about the Civil Rights Movement, the abolition movement, our present day with the Black Lives Matter movement, and other civil rights movements that are of our time, [the ‘Power’ gallery space, in particular] deals a lot with images of self-possession and knowing, claiming one’s identity.”

The exhibition itself presents very little text; Daigle says this decision encourages the viewer to embrace the visual experience fully and allows



*Artist not recorded, Untitled, late 19th century, tintype, 3 7/8 × 3 1/2 × 3/4 in., Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Ralph M. Parson*

the portraits to speak for themselves. "Just having such a rich visual history," she says, "really conveys the importance of image-making, which I think is at the core of this show. That's really where this power lies, in that legacy of having these images that artists are still continuing to make or reusing or reimagining contemporary issues using historical images."

"For the show to come to Memphis and for the Brooks curatorial team to decide that they are going to include local Memphis artists and Memphis-adjacent artists like me, I think points right back to why I do service work in Memphis and why I love Memphis." Derek Fordjour

Renee Cox's *The Signing*, for instance, re-imagines the signing of the Declaration of Independence, with a completely Black cast. Genevieve Gaignard's photograph, *Trailblazer (A Dream Deferred)*, features a biracial woman in an antebellum dress, carrying a painting of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. The contemporary photograph hangs beside a set of antique tintypes.

The juxtaposition of the modern and the antique is intentional. The exhibit was hung in the "salon style," where works are placed in groups of different sizes, next to and above one another, rather than in a linear procession. The salon style originated in Paris in the seventeenth century, and with portrait-making also having Eurocentric ties, the original LACMA curators made sure to include sculptures that reference African art. "It's an interesting and wonderful celebration," Coleman says, a celebration that is as diverse as the Black American experience.



Renee Cox, *The Signing*, 2017, digital chromogenic print, 36 1/2 x 99 1/4 x 3 in., Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Gift of Amar Singh, © Renee Cox, digital image courtesy of the artist.

## Love

The salon style also makes the gallery space feel more domestic, Daigle says, as if the works are arranged in a way one might decorate their own house. As it happens, she says, portraits also "have a root in the domestic space, and that's something several of the artists are looking at in their work. ... There is some degree of feeling like you're entering this kind of space where people seem familiar or you might feel this kind of connection in a way you might with, like, a family photo album."

After all, Daigle says, "Images help to really make us feel like we know someone. Things like Instagram make us feel like we actually know people, but this isn't anything new and I hope that this exhibition shows us that we still live with those legacies today of how we consume images, but this is not a new history."

In the "Love" gallery space, especially, images of heroes who have since passed — like Chadwick Boseman and Kobe Bryant — remind the viewer of those whom we hold in high regard without really knowing them. Other images in this space offer intimate insight into families, both chosen and biological, granting the viewer access into private moments shared by loved ones.



Jarvis Boyland, *Expectations*, 2019, Collection of a Friend of the Brooks Jarvis Boyland.

Memphis-born Jarvis Boyland's painting, *Expectations*, is one such piece, a portrait of himself with close friends Cameron Clayborn and D'Angelo Lovell Williams, whose piece *Daddy Issues* happens to be in the exhibit as well. The three completed a residency in Skowhegan, Maine, together, Boyland explains, and all are either from Memphis or have a relation to the city.

"I was thinking about the complicated tensions that I have been imbued with growing up in Memphis," Boyland says of the piece, "and the different gazes in that painting, I think, indicate something about community or the difficulty to communicate among a group or between two or more individuals."

Completed in 2019, *Expectations* is now a part of the Brooks' permanent collection. Rich jewel tones luxuriate on the canvas, melting the tension among the three figures into an intimate yet beautiful moment. "Black' just can't even begin to describe all of the many shades and hues that I see when I look at Black flesh," Boyland told Tre'vell Anderson of *Out* magazine in 2019. "So, I try to render the flesh [by] sort of really looking at it, really feeling it, and really making it all a compliment, complimenting the people [pictured]."

Since 2019, Boyland, now based in L.A. where he saw the original LACMA exhibit, says his perception of his work has shifted, but then as now, he aims to reflect his reality, even as it shifts to accommodate his personal growth. "That's really the nature of my work, that it's subject to change," Boyland says. When he arrived in L.A., for instance, he says, "I was refusing to paint people [his typical subject matter]. But ultimately, I've returned back to dealing with figurative matters. It's because I care about people, period, and more so I care about queer Black men."

Similarly, Memphis photographer Catherine Elizabeth Patton tends to shoot portraits because, as she says, "people are compelling subjects. ... People come with human experiences that inform the way they show up in front of the lens." For her piece within this exhibition, though, she was the subject. *Unveil I*, she explains, is part of a series of self-portraits, wherein a veil obstructs Patton's face before eventually being removed "as a representation of the transition from hiding from vulnerability to embracing it."

"This was the first time I had ever been my own sitter," Patton says, "but I felt that the subject matter was so personal to me that I couldn't ask anyone else to embody what I felt was my sole responsibility to express at the time."

Like Boyland, Patton had seen the exhibit at LACMA. "I had only seen these works on computer screens and in books, so at that point I was just taking everything in," she says, and now that her work is on display in her hometown, "it feels so good. I'm honored to share space with so many outstanding artists I look up to. Deana Lawson and Carrie Mae Weems are both women I admire in this space, so to see their work and take a few steps to find my portrait nearby [is] really gratifying."

## Joy

While curating the exhibit, Daigle and Coleman knew they wanted to put their own Memphis flair on the traveling show, not just to represent and reflect Memphis faces, like those of Patton and Boyland, back to viewers, but to remind Memphians "that there is this really long, rich history right here," says Daigle. As complex as that history is, Memphis has always nurtured Black power, love, and joy.

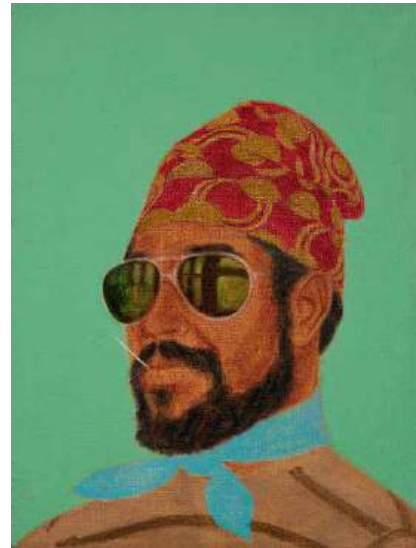
"So [the exhibition's] banking on that legacy and showing off that legacy, especially as we're part of this monumental national tour," Coleman adds. "[That joy] is historical because it's not just seen in contemporary work. We're seeing older works. So that's a greater kind of subtle intervention that I think [Daigle] is doing with our additions, is [to show that] Memphis has always been popping. But her biggest intervention that I really enjoyed was this shedding light on the extraordinary ordinary, like graduations, things we take for granted ... how much joy there is in the quiet moments."

A selection of photographs by the Hooks Brothers Photography Studio illustrates just this in the "Joy" gallery space. Established in 1907 by Robert and Henry Brooks, Hooks Brothers captured images of notable leaders like Booker T. Washington and Mahalia Jackson for the better part of the twentieth century, but perhaps more importantly, they captured ordinary life and the events that accompany it, from ballet performances to weddings to family portraits.

"Joy is such an expansive word," Coleman says, "and I think we usually associate it just with happiness, but it's complicated and it allows for so much nuance. ... Like, yes, having pain and sorrow is this kind of foil to experiencing joy."

When speaking about his *Highstep Double* that is featured prominently in the "Joy" space, Memphis-born Derek Fordjour recognizes a similar phenomenon. "I like to create works that walk the line between comfort and discomfort," he says. "You know, this is a jubilant work at first glance, but there's also strenuous effort and extreme athleticism. And I think that attraction to the pageantry of life rituals in the Black community, especially, is very compelling, but often it's informed by a certain level of desperation or resistance."

For the piece featuring two marching band performers in a back-bending high-step, Fordjour employed an equally arduous process of layering, gluing, and tearing thousands of small newspaper clippings, creating a "rich terrain" upon the canvas for painting. "I'm really interested in the notion of reuse and discarded elements," the artist says of his materials. "I started working this way when I was an impoverished artist. I had very little supplies and that's why newspaper was initially attractive, but as I continued to work, I enjoyed how sort of shabby the works are. That they could occupy a space as pristine as a museum felt very honest to me how I show up personally but also that larger cultural experience of starting from an under-resourced place and trying to add up to more, to sort of compete at life's game."



*Barkley Leonard Hendricks, Self Portrait, 1977,  
© Barkley L. Hendricks. Courtesy of the Estate of  
Barkley L. Hendricks and Jack Shainman Gallery,  
New York.*



*David C. Driskell, Jazz Singer (Lady of Leisure, Fox), 1974, oil and collage on canvas, 52 x 44 in. Jointly acquired by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, with funds provided by the Ford Foundation in honor of David Driskell and Christine Y. Kim on the occasion of Black American Portraits; and the Lucas Museum of Narrative Art, Museum Purchase, Los Angeles. © Estate of David C. Driskell, courtesy of DC Moore Gallery, New York.*

Today, Fordjour, who resides in New York City, serves on the Brooks' board and operates Contemporary Arts Memphis, a nonprofit that offers local high school students a no-cost summer arts-intensive fellowship and year-round mentorship. "I attribute my success to having grown up in Memphis," he says. Though he has shown internationally, this will be the first time his work is on display at the Brooks.

"With this show, now is probably the best time in history to have ever shown at the Brooks," Fordjour adds. "I think it's a really simple concept that is also very profound when you consider the history of representation for Black people, in any culture, but more specifically in art."

For Memphis, at large, this exhibition comes to the arts scene at a pivotal moment, as the Dixon will open its "Black Artists in America: From Civil Rights to the Bicentennial" on October 22nd and the Clough-Hanson Gallery at Rhodes College has its "Young, Gifted and Black" on display through December 9th. "It is a really wonderful moment to sort of celebrate Memphis," Daigle says, adding that the Brooks and Rhodes have cross-programmed events planned for the fall, with 10 artists overlapping in their respective exhibits.

In the meantime, "The excitement level for this opening is probably unparalleled," Fordjour reflects. "Just watching many of my friends who still live [in Memphis] on social media, people that have never

previously gone to the Brooks, or known much about their programming, they're engaged for the show. So I think it's a compliment to all the artists and their work, but also the Brooks. The museum should feel like the city, and it should be a resource for the city, and this show feels like a step in the right direction."

"The first iteration of this show, which I did see at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in L.A., I was not included," Fordjour adds. "And for the show to come to Memphis and for the Brooks curatorial team to decide that they are going to include local Memphis artists and Memphis-adjacent artists like me, I think points right back to why I do service work in Memphis and why I love Memphis. When everything is working right, we cheer for each other, and it's not common that, for a show that you weren't originally included in, a museum makes a decision to include you, but they did. I think that's special."

*"Black American Portraits" is on display through January 7th. For more information about the exhibition and its related programming, visit [brooksmuseum.org](https://brooksmuseum.org).*

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by Abigail Morici

October 18, 2023 8:00 AM

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## Fall Guide 2023: The Frist’s ‘Multiplicity’ Is a Groundbreaking Exhibition

‘Multiplicity: Blackness in Contemporary American Collage,’ which features 52 collage artists, is on display Sept. 15-Dec. 31

LAURA HUSTON HUNTER SEP 7 2023



*Airborne Double*, Derek Fordjour. Acrylic, charcoal, cardboard, oil pastel and foil on newspaper mounted on canvas; 60 x 100 in. Frances Fine Art Collection, courtesy of the artist, David Kordansky Gallery, and Petzel Gallery, New York.

In 1912, Pablo Picasso pasted a fragment of oilcloth onto a small oval-shaped still life. In 1979, The Sugarhill Gang spliced interpolations of disco hits into rap songs. The Frist Art Museum’s *Multiplicity: Blackness in Contemporary American Collage* draws a line straight through those two points and into the rich artistic tradition where it extends — collage and collage-informed art made by some of the most influential and relevant artists working today.

“This is the first major museum exhibition devoted to the subject, which I would argue is really understudied and undervalued,” says Frist senior curator Katie Delmez. Delmez has selected roughly 80 works of art made by 52 artists whose ages range from 30 to 80 for the expansive exhibition, which will span the Frist’s Ingram Gallery. Masterworks by long-celebrated powerhouses like Kerry James Marshall and Howardena Pindell will share space with pinups overlaid with celestial maps by Lorna Simpson, a salon-style installation of 21 junglescapes peopled with hip-hop luminaries by Lester Julian Merriweather, and digital amalgamations of Black visual culture from Lauren Halsey. *Multiplicity* is a wide-ranging, multifaceted feat, and its significance should not be understated.

“The notion of collage is very rooted in the African American experience,” *Multiplicity* artist Derek Fordjour tells me from his studio in

the South Bronx. "It's a way of putting old and new things together, or finding new life for old objects or old materials."

Fordjour is a native Memphian who has recently exhibited at both the St. Louis Museum of Art and The Drawing Center, and his art-making practice involves building up and scraping off layers of paint, pastels and charcoal into something that resembles the surface of an old billboard. Onto those rough terrains he composes figures that are, in many ways, superhuman. His work "Airborne Double," a 60-by-100-inch mixed-media work from 2022, depicts a pair of leaping drum majors in matching marching-band garb, seemingly suspended in midair.

"I really try to imbue the DNA of my work in contemporaneous notions of the Black figure, the Black entertainer, the Black athlete," he says. "But I want to weave in an undercurrent of discomfort, in the case of 'Airborne Double,' this notion of flying, which is kind of superhuman. And, you know, for me, that is a double-edged sword — that it can be very flattering to reference athleticism, to the extent that it transcends one's own humanness, but I've also seen that kind of superhuman quality used against a Black person in the court system, when you have a cop saying, 'I was afraid for my life, the guy was so fast.'"



*Uncle Scott*, Yashua Klos. Woodblock prints on archival paper, Japanese rice paper, acrylic, spray paint, colored pencil and wood mounted on canvas; 72 x 60 in. Collection of Marc Rockford and Carrie Gish, courtesy of the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York.

Another *Multiplicity* artist with a studio in the South Bronx is Yashua Klos, who has two works in the exhibition — "Uncle Scott" from 2022 and "The Face on Mars" from 2009. Klos, who was raised on Chicago's South Side, has a singular technique that incorporates woodblock prints instead of ready-made source material.

"I'm carving blocks of wood," he says, "carving into the surface of them in low relief, then rolling ink out over the surface, putting paper on top and then, with hand pressure, pulling prints from those blocks of wood. Those prints then become the source material

that are cut up and recombined to form the imagery."

The result is an unexpected mix of color and texture that gives Klos' work a timeless quality. The portrait of his uncle recalls the cubist still lifes of Georges Braque, who pasted trompe l'oeil wood-grain wallpaper onto charcoal drawings at the same time Picasso was making the aforementioned "Still Life With Chair Caning." But with Klos' contemporary, autobiographical subject matter, "Uncle Scott" is also a testament to artistic determination.

"I think there's always been this resourcefulness around African American cultural production," Klos says. "I've always seen a collage attitude in that. Hip-hop is a great example — with sampling, taking bits of a preexisting work of musical arrangement and slowing it down, or remixing it, or chopping it up and making a whole new genre of music. It's a very clear example of that resourcefulness in the present day."



*Holy Wars*, Jamea Richmond-Edwards. Acrylic and mixed media on canvas; 96 x 144 in. Bill and Christy Gautreaux Collection, Kansas City, MO. Courtesy of the artist and Kravets Wehby Gallery.

It was a similar kind of resourcefulness that led *Multiplicity* artist Jamea Richmond-Edwards to collage. The Detroit native and longtime art educator was formally trained as an oil painter, but she began making collages because she had a newborn baby, and was concerned that the oil-paint solvents and mediums wouldn't be properly ventilated in her home studio.

"I just naturally transitioned into mixed-media," Richmond-Edwards tells me from her studio in Maryland. "I recently started describing it as almost like scrying. Like cultivating a garden and just giving it what it needs."

Richmond-Edwards works with a fantastical palette full of brilliant colors that evoke *Yo! MTV Raps*, *Fraggle Rock* and Lisa Frank school supplies — all favorites from her childhood. Her massive "Holy Wars," from 2022, is an example of the scale that artists can work with in collage — at 96 by 144 inches, it reads like the kinds of classical history paintings Richmond-Edwards might have taught her students about. The artist depicts herself astride a white unicorn, galloping along a terrain of pink, yellow and blue cotton-candy clouds as flaming arrows whiz past and a volcano erupts hot-pink puffs behind her.

"This was my response to what really feels like spiritual warfare that's going on," she says. "So what I decided to do with it is to make myself a victor in it, because at one point, I felt like a victim. It's really allegorical to the adversity and uncertainty that we are inflicted with currently living in this particular time."

Memphis-based artist Brittney Boyd Bullock's "No It Ain't, Yes It Is," is both of this particular time — it was made in 2023 — and rooted in history. Bullock collages monoprints of black-and-white newsprint photographs depicting Black figures onto a canary-yellow panel. Each of the figures has been photographed from behind, and each is looking off into the distance. What they're looking toward remains ambiguous.

In a conversation from 2020 featured in the book *Black Futures*, artist Arthur Jafa discusses the theme of Black genius, which is central to his 2016 masterpiece, "Love Is the Message. The Message Is Death," the only work of video art featured in *Multiplicity*. "There's something to be said about [the] ability to be able to see beauty everywhere," he says. "It's something that Black people have developed. We've actually learned how to not just imbue moments with joy but to see beauty in places where beauty doesn't necessarily exist."

Fordjour recounts an early discovery of the kind of beauty Jafa describes. "One of the sources I collected many years ago was a postcard from Emancipation Day," Fordjour explains. "It was a painting of recently freed slaves. ... All they owned was what was on their bodies, but the clothes that they wore were stitched together from many different sources. The idea that they were sort of collaging together this new identity from the beginning — that previously an owned person that had no autonomy and now the, you know, potential to fashion your own self in terms of how you dress — it just sent my mind down so many rich paths around how deep and how far this goes, this sort of pulling together disparate resources to try and add up to something dignified."

"Pulling together disparate resources" could be *Multiplicity*'s subtitle. Fordjour calls it "collage logic," and it extends into the programming around the exhibition as well. The exhibition catalog includes artist biographies that were written by Fisk University students. Vanderbilt University is partnering with the National Museum of African American Music to host *Multiplicity* artist and Knoxville native Wardell Milan as an artist-in-residence. Fordjour will be working on public art projects on the Tennessee State University campus. Tinney Contemporary will host an exhibition of work by *Multiplicity* artist Lovie Olivia, and Fisk University's Carl Van Vechten Gallery will host a show of collages from its collection by 20th-century giants Romare Bearden, David Driskell and Sam Middleton. Plus, a daylong celebration of *Multiplicity* will take place at the Frist on Saturday, Sept. 23, featuring panel discussions with artists from the exhibition — including Richmond-Edwards, Olivia and Ewing, as well as Nyugen E. Smith, Paul Anthony Smith, Rashaad Newsome and more. And there are even more collaborative events that will be announced in coming weeks — visit [fristartmuseum.org](http://fristartmuseum.org) to keep up.

"I felt like it was important to meet people where they are, and to let the impact of the show spread beyond the walls of the museum," Delmez says.

Once you start looking at things through the lens of collage logic, it's hard to stop seeing examples of it everywhere — quilts made from discarded scraps, multicolored signs piling up along graffiti-covered storefronts, gumbo made from bits of well-seasoned seafood. And, of course, multigenerational exhibitions that bring all those big ideas together.

# carla



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Top: Derek Fordjour, *Jazzland* (2022). Acrylic, charcoal, cardboard, oil pastel, glitter, and foil on newspaper mounted on canvas, 77.5 x 117.5 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Daniel Greer and Jeff McLane.

Bottom: Derek Fordjour and Nurma Perrier, *The Legend of Black Herman* (performance view) (2022). Performance at David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, 2022. Performed by Kenrick Ice McDonald, Nubia Bowe, and Ricke Vermont, with an original score by Stephan Terry. Image courtesy of the artists and David Kordansky Gallery. Photo: Jeff McLane.

## Derek Fordjour at David Kordansky Gallery

March 26–May 7, 2022

Upon entering a tunnel papered in fading *Financial Times* newsprint, I was greeted by the sound of old-timey music and a perfectly blasé showgirl sitting under a crystal chandelier. From her booth, she directed me to a turnstile and through a curtain. Thus, the stage was set for Ghanaian American artist Derek Fordjour's first solo exhibition at David Kordansky Gallery, titled *Magic, Mystery & Legerdemain*. Exiting the tunnel, I encountered a bright gallery filled with large, confetti-like collaged paintings. Further inside, a fringed banner read "The Legend of Black Herman," promoting an actual magic show that took place in the gallery during the exhibition's run. Across the show, Fordjour used immersive spectacle and the theme of magic to explore the complexities of racial identity, privilege, and survival, casting a spotlight on illusions of racial equality and a smoke-and-mirrors system that benefits some to the detriment of others.

Fordjour's point of departure was the figure of the Black magician—specifically, the famed 20th-century illusionist Black Herman, whose performances combined conventional stage magic with traditions that evolved out of the African and South American diasporas: faith healing, Biblical stories, and African myths.<sup>1</sup> Herman toured during the Jim Crow era,

building a lucrative career selling his healing elixirs and practicing prestidigitation. Claiming to be immortal and most known for his three-day-long "buried alive" act, Herman's mystical fame exceeded well beyond his lifetime, with many believing his death was just another stunt. Like the larger-than-life story of Black Herman, Fordjour's subjects are often a blend of history and folklore.<sup>2</sup> Many of the paintings in the exhibition depict actual Black performers—historical magicians, jazz singers, Magic Johnson—grounding the fantastical, experiential elements of the show in fact (or at least in legend). Collectively, the visual narratives across the exhibition form an expansive definition of magic. One painting, *Cargo* (all works 2022), depicts Henry "Box" Brown, who escaped slavery by shipping himself from Richmond, Virginia to Philadelphia, a vanishing act that culminated in his freedom.

Fordjour's large-scale tableau paintings recall peeling vaudevillian event posters made to draw in wide-eyed audiences from a bygone era. The mixed-media works glow with an inner light, their collaged surfaces softened with charcoal, oil pastel, reflective foil, and newsprint. To create his paintings, the artist builds up cardboard, newsprint, and other materials like sediment on the surfaces and then tears away at them, exposing high-key underpaintings that vibrate optically. Deep fault lines sometimes run across the canvases, as in *Jazzland*, in which a long vertical crack swerves into the bodice of a singer's lavender gown, levitating

the imagined fabric and offering glimpses of hidden pink, lime green, and scattered bits of newspaper articles. Other paintings present various forms of Black performance and pomp: a group of cotillion dancers in formalwear bow and twirl in unison; an onstage magician pulls a hoop around his levitating assistant. Fordjour opens the collaged substrate of his canvases as if using the triumphs and toils of his labor in the studio to echo the triumphs and toils of his subjects.

An intimate backroom of the gallery featured a painted portrait of Fannie Davis, infamous for running numbers in 1960s Detroit; in *Seven Eighty-eight*, she sits in an armchair holding the phone receiver to her ear. A legendary antecedent of the Michigan state lottery, Davis' underground gambling operation provided for her family and circulated money within a community heavily impacted by redlining. The painting speaks to the sleight-of-hand needed to survive when white supremacy has denied livable wages, let alone vast generational wealth, to people of color.

For the duration of the exhibition, a live magic show played out in the gallery's back building, which was transformed into an ersatz theater. The wood-paneled foyer was filled with elements of Black cultural vernacular: vintage framed photographs of Black magicians, some hung slightly askance; a Pan-African flag; a table of herbs and books that ranged in topic from modern witchcraft<sup>4</sup> to tomes on famed Jamaican activist Marcus Garvey. Co-created by Fordjour and the artist Numa Perrier, the production

starred professional magician Kendrick "ICE" McDonald, who performed as Black Herman, and actor Nubia Bowe, who played both the magician's assistant and the ticket booth attendant at the exhibition's entrance. McDonald's Herman donned a bright yellow tuxedo and matching top hat. With campy showmanship and gospel-style singing, he staged classic feats of legerdemain as he told his life story.

The word "legerdemain," meaning sleight of hand, derives from the French *léger de main*, meaning "light of hand." In this show, Fordjour's light hand was revealing, nimbly exposing white supremacy's chicanery and carving out space for counter-narratives. Systemic racism is woven into the very canvas of everyday life, and its greatest trick is convincing a complicit white majority of its invisibility and immutability. Through the liminal space of the gallery-turned-theater, Fordjour combated this trickery with his own kind of magic, transporting the viewer like a rabbit pulled through a hat. Magic creates a space where binaries of real and artifice, possible and impossible, and truth and deception become blurred. Fordjour's spectacular excavation of artful deceptions, such as the numbers game and postal escape scheme, revealed how they acted as foils to racial inequity, many with a life-affirming spirit of levity. This show was a spectacle in the best way possible—an effusive, multisensory experience that provided the freedom to suspend belief, unravel deception, and celebrate legends—like the refrain McDonald's Black Herman sang for his

audiences: "But first you must believe."

1. Yvonne P. Chireau, "Black Herman's African American Magical Synthesis: Between folklore and vaudeville," *Cabinet Magazine*, Issue 26, Summer 2009, <https://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/26/chireau.php>.

2. Yvonne P. Chireau underscores the significance and specificity of folklore—a blend of fact and fiction—in Black American cultural practices: "For a people who have relied on the oral transmission of knowledge and culture as black Americans have, the spoken narrative of folklore is as vital as the written documentation on which many histories of African American religion are based. As argued by the historian William Piersen, folklore can function as 'moral truth' rather than 'historical truth' for those who recount it, giving evidence of a 'deeper' reality that endures in shared, communal recollections of the past." See: Yvonne P. Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 6.

3. Scott Simon, "Who Ran The Numbers Racket? Mom," *NPR*, January 26, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/01/26/688818257/who-ran-the-numbers-racket-mom>.

4. Fordjour brings together a constellation of magical, mystical, and religious cultural artifacts that signal the simultaneous emergence and existence of Black American Christianity and supernatural practices such as Conjure, rootwork, and Hoodoo. As Chireau contends, in African American spiritual traditions, magic and religion do not occupy a dichotomy of opposition. Instead, they are fluid, slippery, and congruent phenomena whose primary aims included everyday protection, healing, and explaining the unexplainable. See: Chireau, *Black Magic*, 4–9.

# HARPER'S

M A G A Z I N E

himself as our grandfather and handed me a photo of a man wearing caramel-brown bell-bottoms and a patterned silk shirt. My father stood with one hand on his waist and one leg on a footstool, the way colonial hunters posed with wild animals. He had short curly hair, a pencil-thin mustache, and my nose.

On the way home, when my mother popped her head out at the traffic light to adjust the broken wiper and clear the windshield with a hand towel, I thought about asking her why she had decided to take us upstairs. When we reached home, I no longer wanted to know. I slipped the photograph of my father in an envelope and forgot where I had hid it.

[Fiction]

## A FREE COUNTRY

By Eugene Marten, from *Pure Life*, a novel, which was published in May by *Strange Light*.

She waited for him in Baggage Claim wearing a cowboy hat and a white blouse and a Bluetooth earpiece. They'd met at a Step meeting in a church basement (#3: Surrender), exchanged numbers and spent four hours on the phone afterward. They'd rescued each other from drink, and then, tired of the semicircle of caffeinated confession and the fellowship's dismal 5 percent success rate, rescued each other from AA, retaining only the Serenity Prayer and some dependable slogans. Neither had lapsed since, though she also credited her clean time to the Supreme Being, of course, and to His subsidiary, the Big Pink, for which she was now an Independent Sales Director.

"Wherever you go, there you are," he said, snatching his bag from the carousel.

"Let go and let God," she said.

They kissed and held hands on the way to Short Term Parking.

Nineteen's girlfriend drove the black Camry she'd earned supervising a twenty-six-member unit with nearly fifty thousand dollars of production in six months. Next level, if she doubled production, was the pearlized pink Cadillac SRX SUV with sunroof, OnStar, seat warmers, a cooler in the trunk. Twenty-five hundred lipsticks a month. You could keep it for two years or opt for nine hundred dollars monthly instead, but at the end of the day, it was about neither car nor cash.

"Better put that in the backseat," she said, looking at his bag. The Camry had fifteen cubic feet of cargo space, but she'd retained the customer base she'd built as a Consultant and the trunk was filled with product, some of which had found its way into the faux-suede interior.

He did as she suggested and got in the passenger side. He preferred to be driven.

As an Independent Sales Director who wore the pin and enhancer and earned a Unit Volume Commission of 13 percent, Nineteen's girlfriend no longer had time for part-time telemarketing or UberX or online classes, but was still his nominal manager—the position itself was nominal—and she debriefed him in queue at the exit gate, a blacklist of unreturned calls and withdrawn commitments, from youth organizations, event managers, a non-profit with the word "hope" in its name; from a producer of what is called reality television, who'd courted Nineteen when the wheels were falling off and he was in the news, going bankrupt, resisting arrest, slurring his speech on air as a preseason color analyst, backing his Range Rover into a mounted policeman in Miami.

Fathering a daughter who wasn't returning calls either, who'd given herself a name he couldn't repeat even in thought.

He unbitted his tongue. "Anything else?"

"There's Akron next month." First pitch, possible autos after. "If you're still up for it."

[Argument]

## RAGS TO REICHSTAG

From a speech given by the Tennessee state senator Frank Nicely in April during a debate on a bill to make camping along highways a misdemeanor.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I haven't given y'all a history lesson in a while, and I want to give you a little history on homelessness. In 1910, Hitler decided to live on the streets for a while. So for two years, Hitler lived on the streets and practiced his oratory and body language and how to connect with the masses, and then went on to lead a life that got him into history books. So for a lot of these people, it's not a dead end. They can come out of these homeless camps and have a productive life, or in Hitler's case, a very unproductive life. I support this bill.

"Who ain't up for Akron." He couldn't resist being the occasional Somebody, and there would be nothing to refuse soon enough. Sometimes they even paid.

She gave a dollar to someone holding a cardboard sign at the foot of the on-ramp, yelled: "This doesn't make you a bad person." We are all carrying signs, she'd learned.

They took 480 East. Nineteen's girlfriend docked her phone and instructed the car to play what is called Adult Contemporary through its six standard speakers. A compromise. Her own tastes ran to Patty Loveless and Patsy Cline, and once upon a time, in pursuit

of a dream that did not require wholesale monthly minimums, she'd spent three years in Nashville, waiting tables, tending bar, renting a room in a house, then sharing it, singing to brown-liquor drunks and rowdies at open mics where only other singers and songwriters were listening. The Bluebird, the Orchid Lounge, someone's cabin in the Smokies ("Just you and me, writing songs, making music. No strings."). She'd miscarried, auditioned for the last season of *Star Search*, was passed over, moved to the other side of the bar, moved back home, was briefly, violently married, enrolled in flight attendant school, lost her job after 9/11, lost a hair salon, enlisted, was medically discharged after a nervous breakdown, reinstated by United, laid off again during the recession, drank all the while and by now had something to sing about but instead started going to meetings in church basements, discovered the Pink Dream (more often cause than cure), met Nineteen, and now drove a shiny black sedan you could talk to with eight-way adjustable seats.

Nineteen hated country music. He heard her sing only once, at a karaoke fundraiser. Faith, faded wallpaper, loss. Alcohol and tribulation had tempered her voice, not ruined it, and he'd wiped his eyes, though he cried easily these days.

She taught him to line dance. She'd been a fan of his when so was everyone else, and when everyone else wasn't. Her loyalty was unconditional; she knew what it was like to sing to empty seats.

"Hey stranger," she said, and why did she call him that? She asked about Florida and Doctor Q.

"We talked on the phone."

"You gave me your flight number."

"I was thinking maybe ... We talked."

"So let's talk some more."

He sighed. He was not used to her undivided attention nor did he want it now. "After this I can't afford him anymore anyway," he said flatly; he'd drawn his player pension early and was getting half of what he'd have gotten had he waited another ten years.

A pickup overtook them, swung in front fast and close with no signal. She flashed her brights, touched her heart, then touched Nineteen's hand. "Surrender doesn't mean giving up," she quoted, "it means coming over to the winning side," and he thought she was going to bring up the Lawsuit. Class action. Six thousand brain-battered former players versus the League, whose initials meant Not For Long, so they used to say, and Nineteen had been invited to participate. The neurologist who'd inadvertently referred him to Doctor Q had declared him eligible, but Nineteen re-

[Grievance]

## THE CITY THAT NEVER SLEEPS

*From complaints received by New York City's 311 helpline between February 2021 and February 2022.*

My neighbor is having loud sex and has kept me up for two days straight.

A sex machine goes off every ten minutes. The sound is reminiscent of a car starting.

I am a Christian woman. Help this girl stop having loud sex before God does.

She moans like a mangy hyena and slams the bed against the wall.

He keeps shouting that he is a sexual tyrannosaurus. Please make him stop.

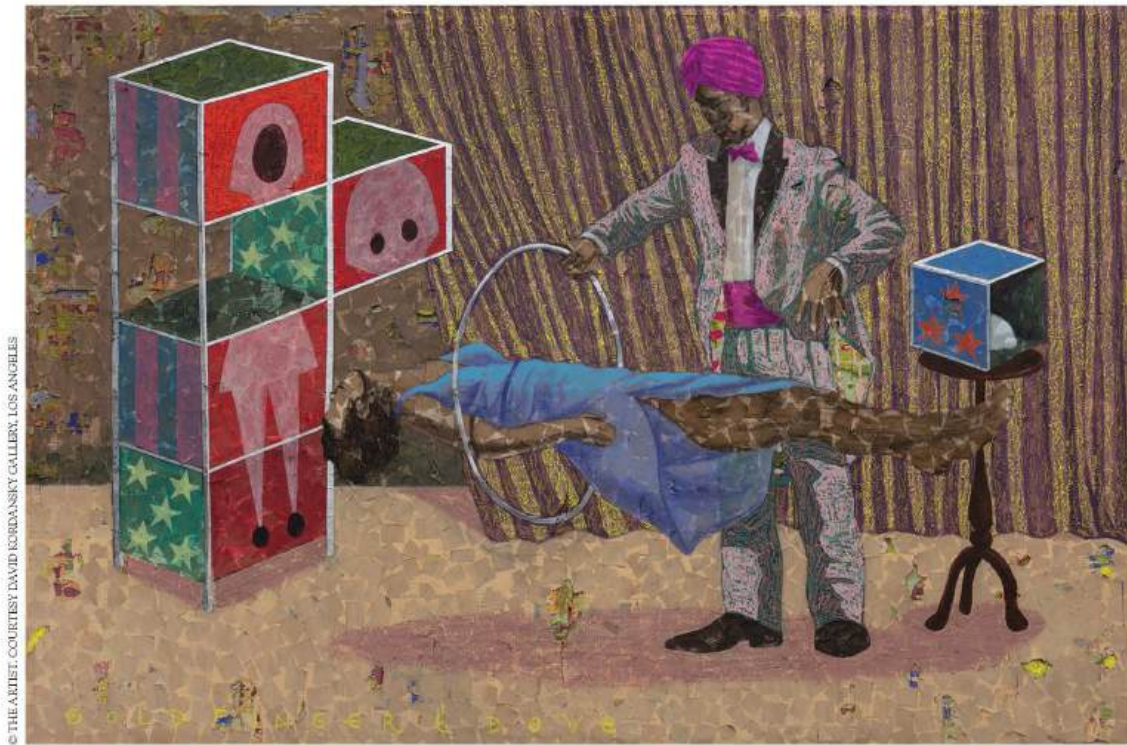
He took the Rhino pill from the gas station, and he has been having sex nonstop since 8 PM. I'm trying to get some rest. I have breakfast with my mother-in-law in the morning.

They're having sex in lobby. He is flexing like *American Psycho* and she is bent over laughing. Please address.

There's an orgy going on in the backyard, boobs and penises being flashed. People yelling and shouting. I have work tomorrow.

I hear moaning, screaming, pounding, slapping. I have the TV on, and still can hear them. But it's that I can feel their actions that is the most disturbing. Their pounding travels directly into my bed and sofa. I have stayed in a hotel just to get proper sleep and peace. This is out of control. My blood pressure has risen to "high" for the first time.

It's hard for a lonely neighbor to get a good night's sleep.



*Float*, a mixed-media artwork by Derek Fordjour, whose work was on view in May at David Kordansky Gallery, in Los Angeles.

refused to join and in this he was unequivocal. It wasn't just a game, never had been, and now it was under siege. He'd let his own son play, if he played. He was sure he'd known what he was getting into.

He expected her to bring it up and was going to mention the family at the airport preemptively, but then she said, "Incoming," and told her phone, "Answer call." She no longer said, "I have to take this."

Nineteen looked out the window. They were crossing the monumental overpass that spanned the river valley named by the Iroquois, beneath them business parkways, an old drive-in, the vast white dome that looked ominously science-fictional but housed an indoor driving range. The obligatory bike path. He heard his girlfriend talking to an Independent Beauty Consultant, or a Star Consultant, or a Star Team Builder about offspring units, wholesale purchase volume. He looked back inside, at what his suitcase shared the backseat with: wrinkle filler, lifting serum, spot reducers, toning lotion. The liniments of rejuvenation. She used them and swore by them and sold them, went beyond them to the knife, to

lower-lid blepharoplasty (they scraped the fat out of your eye bags), had undergone firming and augmentation—not that he was complaining, but he understood it wasn't just vanity; he knew as well as anyone that your body is never quite your own.

She was otherwise petite and wore sunglasses and from a distance passed for thirty.

"Remember what she said at Seminar," she said to whomever she was saying it to. Sisters in success. "It ain't front-loading, you just can't sell from an empty wagon." Her little-girl voice could harden into a kind of ruthlessness and Nineteen found this out of character but hardening in another way. He thought about putting a hand between her legs. Unit Volume Bonus, Unit Circle Bonus, Star Consultant Bonus—it seemed to have nothing to do with customers, but you couldn't use the P-word; she preferred to call it dual marketing. A free country. No one had a gun to anyone's head. He'd gone to the doctor of his own volition and if he wasn't sure what the plastic bag was dripping into his veins, it probably didn't matter anymore anyway. But to whom or what would he turn when it was empty?

"So there was this family in the food court, at the airport," he said carefully. The call seemed to be over. "They were going to Honduras."  
 "Not even a Red Jacket and she's talking pink suit." Smiling. "Silly bitch."  
 "Well, sort of Honduras."  
 She grew fond: "Such a sweetheart though. Honduras."  
 "Actually I think they said it was an island around there." He tried to remember. "Starts with an R."  
 "Aruba. No, that's..."  
 "Central America."  
 "Starts with an R." She instructed her phone to look up Honduras.

[Poem]

## GAP AND ERASURE

By John Latta, from the April issue of *The Brooklyn Rail*.

The lumbering bumblebee is out  
 Buttering up its bronze thighs  
 With pollen'd orbs of echinacea.  
 It's a period piece, a  
 Gap in the goldenrod, dud  
 Erasure against vetch-trifle'd embankments,  
 Hap what hap might. Toot  
 A coup I got 'promptitude  
 O' the toong' and I  
 'Misewell' make something of it.  
 Madder 'n a mad hen  
 Is how I been lately—  
 One summery day a redhead  
 Hopped off a blue bicycle,  
 Order'd a scoop of mocha-  
 Chip. Her razor smile. Period.

"Yeah, this family. They had this kid."  
 "Oh right, all those kids."  
 "No, they ... What kids?"  
 "Crossing the border."  
 "You're talking about Mexico?"  
 "Well, coming *through* Mexico, these kids. I mean like ten years old. Alone. Nine. Their parents are ... Is that where they're coming from?"  
 "Is *where* where they're coming from?" He struggled to hang on to his thread.  
 "Well they're poor. Starving? Like the ones you can sponsor once a month?" He tried not to see the ads, the barefoot brown lives you could save for the price of a cup of coffee a day. Changing the channel before the tears came. "You've heard about it. The President?" Her phone had become an infotainment screen. "Illegal alien children.' Really?"  
 "What? But *these* parents, this family I'm talking about, the son has diabetes."  
 "No jobs, gangs—just don't bring that shit up here, thank you. We're so lucky, you know. We should send money." Then she began to think Pink aloud. It usually went there.  
 "There's some kind of clinic down there."  
 "... and such beautiful skin."  
 "The parents, they think they might be able to cure him there. Or at least—"  
 "Authorized distributorships in Guatemala, El Salvador ..."  
 "Are you reading or driving?"  
 "... a free facial. I'd even spring for a starter kit. A woman can have an empty stomach but she's got to have her lip—" She sounded alarmed: "Your son has diabetes?"  
 "No, this kid! They're taking him to a clinic on this island! Roanoke or something." He knew it wasn't Roanoke. "They're using—"  
 She spoke to her phone.  
 Nineteen turned away. It had almost happened. He'd given himself a headache—or worsened the one that never quite abated. He looked at his own phone, then out the window again. The interchange was coming up and they were passing the vast tract of land where the world's largest indoor mall had once stood, where a portion of it remained, though not for long. Bulldozers, monuments of rubble. What would grow there? He'd heard rumors of an Amazon fulfillment center—order pickers trying to keep up with robots, miles of conveyor belts. Fourteen football fields. How about nothing instead? Leave it at zero, plant some grass; Number Nineteen, former real estate developer and erstwhile farmer, found a measure of relief in open spaces.  
 They segued smoothly onto 422. He would be on his farm in twenty minutes or so and he wondered if she'd mention selling it again.  
 "Roatán," she said suddenly and he looked at her, pretending to know what she was talking about.

## T THE NEW YORK TIMES STYLE MAGAZINE

T'S ART ISSUE

# The Historically Black College Reconsiders the Studio Art Program

After decades of being underfunded, H.B.C.U.s see an opportunity to expand their offerings and foster a new generation of artists.

By Adam Bradley  
July 8, 2022



Derek Fordjour's "Airborne Double" (2022). Courtesy of the artist and David Kordansky Gallery

The fourth edition of H. W. Janson's "History of Art," long the standard introductory text in art history courses, is over 850 pages long, with more than 1,000 illustrations, weighing in at over seven and a half pounds. It aims for the encyclopedic, "from cave paintings of the Old Stone Age to the latest video art." During the fall of 1992, when the artist Derek Fordjour was 18 years old, he lugged the book to class at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn with earnest intentions of pursuing an artistic career. The child of Ghanaian immigrants who had made a home in Memphis, Fordjour had absorbed his parents' work ethic and respect for education. But something was missing for him in that hefty tome: nearly the entire history of Black art in America.

"I was angry," Fordjour says. "I was an angry student because I really didn't see any models at that time, in the '90s at a major art school, that evidenced Black artists." He left Pratt a couple years later and eventually found his way to Morehouse College, the renowned historically Black

institution located in Atlanta. While at Morehouse, he took a cross-listed course at neighboring Spelman College from Professor Akua McDaniel titled "The History of African American Art," which introduced him to a vibrant but disparaged artistic tradition stretching back to the colonial artisans whose names are lost to time and forward to emerging artists, of which Fordjour now counted himself as one. "Morehouse set me straight," he says. "It said, 'Hey, you are part of a rich lineage of Africans in America who have been deeply invested in art making.'"



Derek Fordjour's "Double Wide Down" (2021). Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York

Without America's historically Black colleges and universities (H.B.C.U.s), that lineage of Black art making would be lost, or if not lost, then mostly relegated to myth and to memory. These institutions served — and still serve today — as keepers of tangible materials of culture and as training grounds for generations of artists and art historians, curators and conservationists.

The history of H.B.C.U.s stretches back to the 1830s, when white Northern abolitionists joined with free Black Americans to found the first three schools: Cheyney (1837), Lincoln (1854) and Wilberforce (1856). H.B.C.U.s increased in number during the Civil War and its aftermath, with the founding of Howard (1867), Morehouse (1867) and Spelman (1881). The Morrill Land-Grant Acts, first introduced in 1862 and expanded upon in 1890, compelled former Confederate states to provide educational opportunities for their Black citizens. Out of these acts, a number of new H.B.C.U.s were born, including some of the best known to this day: Tuskegee, Florida A&M, Prairie View A&M, and North Carolina A&T, the last of which now boasts the largest student body of any H.B.C.U. By the 1930s there were 121 H.B.C.U.s; there are currently 101. Though H.B.C.U.s account for only about 3 percent of colleges and universities in the United States, they have an outsize impact, producing nearly 20 percent of Black college graduates. Such success has come in spite of tremendous disadvantages: dramatically lower funding when compared to predominantly white institutions, and less support from state and federal government and from private industry.



Charles White's "The Contribution of the Negro to Democracy in America" (1943). Randy Duchaine/Alamy Stock Photo

But things are beginning to change. In 2020, the philanthropist MacKenzie Scott donated hundreds of millions of dollars to H.B.C.U.s with no strings attached, part of nearly \$6 billion directed to colleges, nonprofits, and charitable organizations. Scott's \$25 million gift to Alcorn State University, for instance, more than doubled the Mississippi school's endowment overnight. The past three presidential administrations have earmarked substantial federal funds to support H.B.C.U.s as well, with the Biden administration promising more before year's end. Enrollment is up, too. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, as college attendance as a whole has slumped, many H.B.C.U. campuses have seen increased interest — perhaps inspired by high-profile alumni like Vice President Kamala Harris (Howard), or prompted by a desire for refuge and kinship in the face of racist violence and political rhetoric.

The arts — in particular the studio arts — have a complicated history at H.B.C.U.s, where they are by turns celebrated and sequestered. Historically, many of the institutions have roots in vocational training, in agriculture and in trades, which left little time for creative pursuits. In more recent years, that pragmatic spirit has expressed itself in an emphasis on fields like business, economics and most especially STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics). Though H.B.C.U.s only enroll about 10 percent of Black students, they award 25 percent of all STEM degrees earned by Black undergraduates. With studio art programs being among the most expensive for a university to run, it is no wonder that some H.B.C.U.s have shrunk, consolidated, or cut their arts programs outright. That has led many aspiring Black artists to look elsewhere, particularly for graduate studies.

After graduating from Morehouse, Fordjour earned a master's in art education at Harvard University and an M.F.A. at New York's Hunter College. His H.B.C.U. experience, however, gave him purpose. "Hunter exposed me to ways of thinking and gave me a studio for three years, and I'm eternally grateful. But I would say my network and relationship to Morehouse and

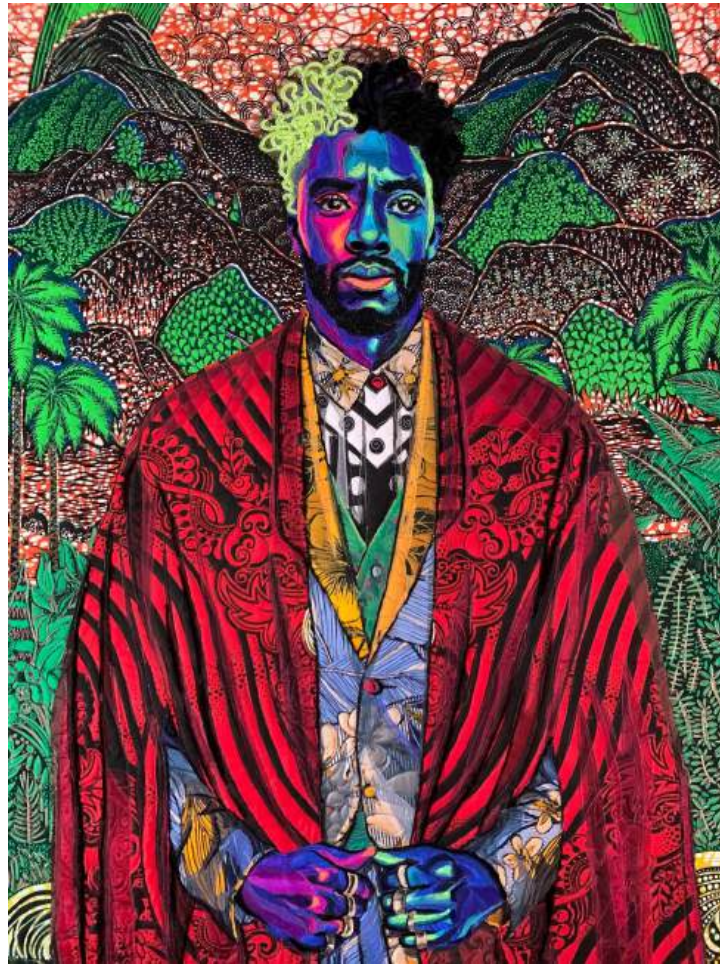


Hale Woodruff's "The Trial of the Amistad Captives" (1939).Credit...Installation view, "Rising Up: Hale Woodruff's Murals at Talladega College," High Museum of Art, Atlanta, June 9-Sept. 2, 2012

Spelman [where Fordjour did some of his course work] and that arts community has also really been central in my quest, because I'm always thinking about how I can make space for others," he says. "I think that's what you get from the H.B.C.U. education." Fordjour is in conversation with interdisciplinary artist Sanford Biggers (Morehouse) and painter Calida Rawles (Spelman) to make just such a space, aiming to restore a studio arts major to the Atlanta University Center (A.U.C.), as the consortium that includes Clark Atlanta University, Morehouse, Morehouse School of Medicine, and Spelman is named.

The crisis of studio arts programs is not unique to H.B.C.U.s. "Art departments are expensive. And I think that, given some of the limited resources, maybe administrations have other kinds of priorities in terms of social sciences and other things," the abstract painter William T. Williams says. Williams fell in love with painting as a high school student in New York in the 1950s, studied at Pratt in the '60s, then earned his M.F.A. from Yale in 1968. His experience at these prestigious and predominantly white institutions inspired him to imagine how Black artists might find some of the freedom and support he found at Yale outside of the formal educational system. Williams's vision birthed the artist-in-residence program at New York's Studio Museum in Harlem, which over the years has helped to foster the careers of Titus Kaphar, Simone Leigh, Kerry James Marshall, Julie Mehretu, Kehinde Wiley and many more. At 79, Williams is especially mindful of budding artists not afforded the opportunity to find their art. "There's an enormous amount of talent out there, and a lot of it goes unnoticed," he says. "A lot of kids never get a chance to develop it. Until they're exposed to what the possibilities are and put in a network where all those things are available, we as a country are losing a lot of talent, a lot of possibilities."

Bisa Butler could well have ended up as one such lost talent, an artist who didn't find her art.



Bisa Butler's "Forever" (2020). Credit... Courtesy of the artist

When she arrived at Howard in the early 1990s, she was on a full-ride scholarship to study architecture — a sensible major with a clear professional trajectory, something that pleased her father, a Ghanaian immigrant and community college president. Butler was a gifted student, but she resisted the conformity of the discipline: The measured gray and black lines on architectural paper were an affront to the unfettered palette of her imagination. Instead, she tried something different, embellishing one architectural assignment with bold colors, hanging phantom portraits on the walls of her imagined building. She spent hours on it. When she received her graded submission, she was shocked to discover that her professor had given her a C. Later that day in her English class, Butler couldn't suppress her tears. "More than just the grade," she recalls now, "I felt like they had rejected the part of myself that I thought made my work special." Her English professor, Carolyn Elizabeth Shuttlesworth-Davidson, took notice. When she learned of her student's stifled ambitions, she took Butler's hand and marched her across campus to the office of the dean of the College of Fine Arts, Jeff Donaldson, a co-founder of AfriCOBRA, the Chicago-based artist collective formed in 1968 and dedicated to defining the terms of a Black aesthetic. "This young lady wants to be an artist. Can you help her?" Shuttlesworth-Davidson said. Butler changed her major and spent the remainder of her time on campus exploring her gifts and honing her artistic craft. She moved from painting to working in what has now become her signature style of quilted portraits drawn from images of Black life across the decades. "Just her being there to see me and to listen to me helped redirect my life," Butler says.

Studying at the Howard art program in the '90s, Butler found instructors who inculcated a revolutionary pedagogy inspired by the tenets of AfriCOBRA: the so-called Kool-Aid color palette, bold hues inspired by those of African textiles; literal and figurative "shine," a luminous visual and intellectual quality; and "expressive awesomeness." "I thought that was so dope," Butler says. "They wanted our work to look amazing and to have that wow factor."



Harry Louis Freund's "Black Achievement, USA" (1968-69). Credit...Photo by Marie Stark-Farrow. Courtesy of Shaw University Archives

Beyond the academic and craft-driven instruction, Butler says, "there's a social education that HBCUs provide." At Howard, fondly known as "The Mecca," that meant a social milieu that included children of diplomats and celebrities, activists and intellectuals, and artists of all types. She recalls seeing both Tupac Shakur and the Notorious B.I.G. on campus regularly — not to perform but simply to be in the mix. Butler understood herself as part of both an aesthetic avant-garde and a rich tradition with roots in insurgent political movements. Under the direction of Black artists who had come of age in the freedom movements of the 1960s and '70s, Butler and her classmates were taught that "a huge aspect of the art was art for liberation, not just art for art's sake." Generations before, another Howard undergrad, the sculptor Elizabeth Catlett, found her form and her sense of political purpose. "Another aim I have," Catlett said, "is to take art to our people who do not go to museums and to do this we have to get art by our people into museums."

Catlett was living in Mexico in 1997 when Howard University made the decision to absorb the College of Fine Arts into the College of Arts and Sciences. The move sparked outrage among alumni and current students who understood the curricular and communal demands of the program necessitating its own institutional home. Among the students who staged a protest during convocation was an aspiring actor and director named Chadwick Boseman. "A bunch of students bum-rushed the stage and were speaking up, saying that we, the art students, need to have our needs recognized because it is a different style of education," Butler says. Those activist efforts were rebuffed, but just last year, a year after Boseman's death from colon cancer at the age of 43, Howard announced that it was reinstating the college under a new name: the Chadwick A. Boseman College of Fine Arts. The college, which offers courses in music, theater, and fine arts, is headed up by another prominent alumnus, the actress Phylicia Rashad, who is its inaugural dean. In the end, the students won out, thanks to their activism.

"Howard University fine arts students are encouraged to be politically engaged and engaged



Eugene "Eda" Wade's "Cramton Auditorium Mural" (1970), Howard University. Credit... Courtesy of the estate of Eugene "Eda" Wade

in the analysis and the representation of themselves and their African American community in their art. And they go out into the world with that engagement very much embedded in their psyches," says Dr. Lisa E. Farrington, an art historian and Howard alumna who served as associate dean of fine arts and director of the Howard University Gallery of Art. In her capacity as director of the Howard Gallery's significant holdings, she has followed an activist impulse of her own, working to expand accessibility to the collection through a variety of means. H.B.C.U. museums, Howard's prime among them, are rich repositories of Black American and Black Diasporic art, with works from Romare Bearden, Aaron Douglas, Sam Gilliam, William H. Johnson, Louis Malouin Jones, Jacob Lawrence, Norman Lewis and many others. At any given time, though, much of this work is not on view to the public. That is beginning to change. Extensive efforts in digitizing collections and strategic lending agreements are both important means of expanding accessibility. But the most pressing need for many of these museums is space, which is often in limited supply on campus. "Accessibility," Farrington says, when asked about her museum's needs. "If you don't have that, then you just got a lot of art in a closet."

Black American art is in the midst of a commercial boom, as evidenced most recently by the \$15.3 million sale at Christie's of North Carolina Central alum Ernie Barnes's 1976 "Sugar Shack." (The painting sold for nearly 80 times more than the presale estimate.) H.B.C.U. museums are feeling the impact of this widespread appeal in the form of frequent requests for loans. "We actually turn down more loan requests than we accept," Farrington says. When Howard does loan out work, as the university recently did to the Museum of Modern Art, New York, which borrowed several large Charles White works, or the city's Metropolitan Museum of Art, which took temporary possession of Edmonia Lewis's "Forever Free" (1867), the school works to negotiate favorable terms. In the case of the more than 150-year-old Lewis sculpture, the university bargained for restoration work, educational programming, and opportunities



Aaron Douglas's "Cravath Hall Murals" (1930), Fisk UniversityCredit...Fisk University, John Hope and Aurelia E. Franklin Library, Special Collections, Nashville. Photo: Courtesy of Cunningham-Adams Conservation



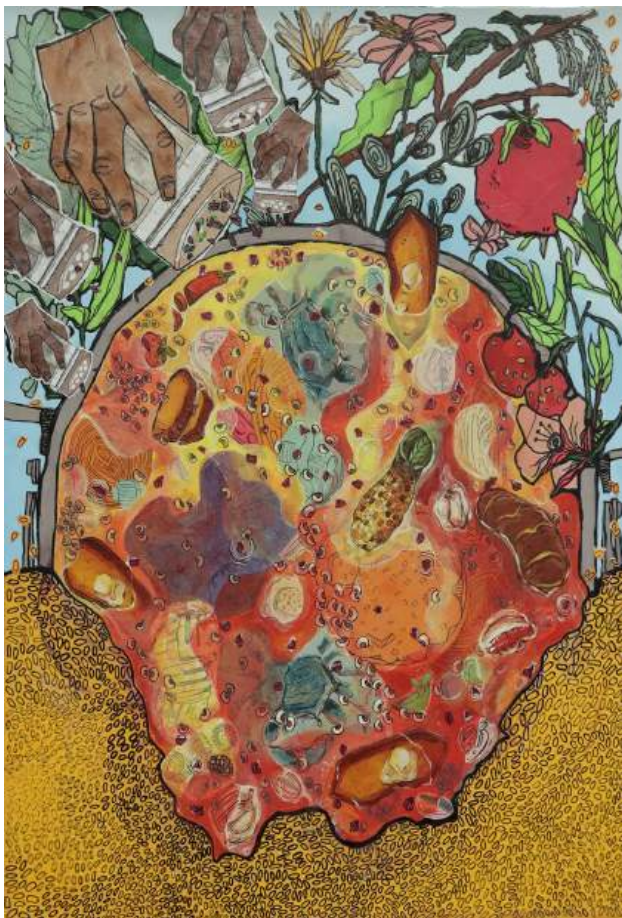
Aaron Douglas's "Cravath Hall Murals" (c. 1930), Fisk UniversityCredit...Fisk University, John Hope and Aurelia E. Franklin Library, Special Collections, Nashville. Photo: Courtesy of Cunningham-Adams Conservation

for Howard students. "In this climate where African American art is so popular, my concern is keeping the art collections at H.B.C.U.s safely and securely at the H.B.C.U.s," says Dr. Jon-tyle T. Robinson, curator of the Legacy Museum at Alabama's Tuskegee University. Robinson stresses the importance, too, of "having African American art conservators and art conservation labs on H.B.C.U. campuses that can care for them." To that end, she spearheaded the formation of the Alliance of H.B.C.U. Museums and Galleries in 2016.

This activist sensibility is a common thread uniting art programs across many H.B.C.U.s. "You ask our students, 'What do you want to do? Why are you studying art? Why is it important to you?' More than likely, they will tell you that they want to do something that is meaningful, they want to create some positive impact in their community or society," says Solomon Isekeije, professor of fine arts and program coordinator of the division of fine arts at Norfolk State University in Virginia. Norfolk State is home to a thriving undergraduate fine arts major and one of the last remaining M.F.A. studio arts programs on an H.B.C.U. campus, the master of fine arts in visual studies. Just across the Elizabeth River, the storied Hampton University, which claims the oldest H.B.C.U. museum — founded in 1868, it predates the second oldest, at Howard, by sixty years — recently shut down its undergraduate studio arts major. The program at Norfolk State, however, enjoys firm support from the administration and resolute leadership from Isekeije, who has made efforts to forge surprising connections, both on and off campus. "I

strongly believe that art does not thrive in isolation, that art has to be in the service of community," he explains.

Just last year, Isekeije and his students responded to a pressing need to serve their community. Tidewater Gardens, a public-housing project built in the heart of Norfolk in the 1950s and housing 618 units, was slated for demolition. A new mixed-income development with 700 units was promised to replace it, but with only 200 of those designated as low income, it would likely price out most of the former residents of Tidewater Gardens. Some tenants filed a lawsuit against the city, citing a pattern of segregation with a disparate impact on the Black population; the case was settled out of court. With phased demolition beginning in 2021 and completion scheduled for 2025, thousands of the housing complex's inhabitants were facing a life-changing transition.



Victoria Jensen's "Happy Meal" (2021) for Solomon Isekeije's project about Tidewater Gardens. Credit...Courtesy of the artist



Zane Killgo's "Tidewater Together" (2021) for Solomon Isekeije's project about Tidewater Gardens. Credit...Courtesy of the artist

When Isekeije was invited to sit on a committee to respond to community needs, he brought his students with him. "They're there to listen, to gather information," he says, "so when we go back to the studio, we can figure out how to create an artistic project to address people's concerns." Another definition of design, he tells his students, is "a solution to a problem." Isekeije's students conceived several. One of these, which they titled "Happy Meal," involved celebrating the foodways of the community. "One of the things that stood out to me and to my students was that even though the residents had these tiny little apartments, there were a number of residents who grew vegetable gardens," Isekeije says. "They would come together and have these

block parties where people would bring different types of dishes. Food brought people together. Gardening brought people together. Dance brought people together."

The other project the students conceived, called "Tidewater Together," involved memorializing the familiar geography of the neighborhood as a way of helping residents to mourn and to heal. Residents wrote down the names of the streets where they had lived, and Isekeije's students took those street names and created signs, which they collaged onto a signpost rendered on canvas. Once the materials had set, they tore the street names off by hand, figuratively manifesting the trauma of displacement. The team then reconstructed the street signs, this time in vibrant colors and clean script, signaling the promise of a new beginning. "We were trying to capture the experience the residents were going through at that time," Isekeije says, "and also to create hope for the future."

The future of Black art, at H.B.C.U.s and beyond, is inextricably bound up with its past. "It's important to remember that Black people have been making art for centuries," Fordjour says. He recalls an encounter with Ed Clark, the abstract expressionist from New Orleans's Storyville district, who attended the Art Institute of Chicago in the late 1940s and early 1950s before moving to Paris to study at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière. Fordjour was among a group of younger Black artists surrounding Clark at an exhibition in New York near the end of the older artist's life. He regaled them with stories of his many travels. "Man, you know what these Parisians would do when Picasso would walk down the street?" Fordjour recalls Clark saying. "They would drop their bread and clap for him." Fordjour was spellbound by Clark's words, but also unnerved. "In that moment, I realized that Ed Clark had lived at the same time that Picasso did," he says. "In my mind, Picasso and Rothko and all these other guys existed in some other universe. Because the Ed Clarks of the world had been so thoroughly segregated from the lineage of the artists we consider the greats. At the very moments when Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg and all these guys were working, Black artists were in their studios working, too. So this talk of moments is really about fame and fortune. But the work? We remain invested in the work and let the trends move around us."

# The New York Times

## *The Art World Loves Basketballs. And Hoops and Jerseys and Backboards.*

Fine art inspired by the sport is everywhere. One gallery filled nearly 5,000 square feet, and its curator said she "could do a Part 2 and Part 3 because there is that much work out there."



An exhibit of basketball-inspired art called "To the Hoop" at the Weatherspoon Art Museum in Greensboro, N.C., including "Akhet 1" by David Huffman and "Well Hung" by Suzanne McClelland. Martin W. Kane for UNCG University Communications, 2020

**By Andrew Keh**  
June 12, 2022

The basketballs are deflated, doused in spray paint or covered in 24-karat gold leaf. They're sculpted from porcelain, plopped in cement or layered into enormous pyramids. They're splashed onto canvases, carved into cheeky jack-o'-lanterns, flattened out like flower petals.

Stroll through galleries, museums and studios, flick through auction catalogs and social media feeds, and it starts to become obvious: The art world is increasingly strewn with basketballs.

"It's like the best sport ever," said Jonas Wood, who has become one of the world's most sought-after painters while making basketball a recurring theme in his work.

Titans of art who contemplated the sport in years past are having their work revisited in basketball-specific shows. Younger artists are engaging with the game as avid fans, wary skeptics or nostalgic adults. And the market is responding.

Consider a cross section of recent exhibitions: Last summer, drawings by the influential artist David Hammons, made by bouncing dirt-covered basketballs on paper, appeared at Nahmad Contemporary on the Upper East Side in a show called "Basketball and Kool-Aid." This spring, Jack Shainman Gallery in Chelsea presented basketball-themed paintings from Barkley L. Hendricks, who died in 2017, at an exhibition called "In the Paint."



The University of North Carolina at Greensboro women's basketball team visited the Weatherspoon exhibit, including the pieces "Church" by Victor Solomon and "Meditation on Team (Waves for Scottie)" by Kendell Carter with Dawn Altier. Martin W. Kane for UNCG University Communications, 2020

That was not to be confused with a hoops-oriented group show called "In the Paint" that opened this year at the Local Gallery in Toronto or another exhibition, also called "In the Paint," a few years back at the William Benton Museum of Art in Connecticut. The Weatherspoon Art Museum, in Greensboro, N.C., had its own basketball-inspired group

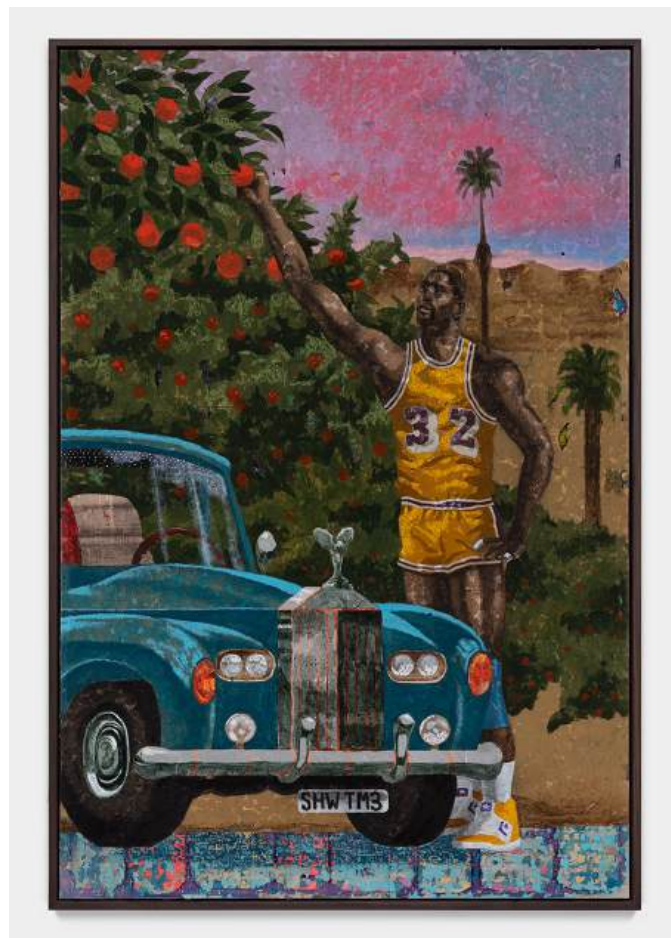
show, "To the Hoop," in 2020.

"We filled a nearly 5,000-square-foot gallery, and really I could do a Part 2 and Part 3 because there is that much work out there that is strong work," said Emily Stamey, the curator of exhibitions at the Weatherspoon, which experienced record-breaking attendance numbers in the opening weeks of the show.

The proliferation of basketball as both a subject and medium in art is the result of a convergence of multiple cultural currents and creative impulses, artists and others in the industry say.

The generation of artists currently reaching the height of their powers came of age alongside the exploding popularity of the N.B.A. over the past few decades, following the rise of players like Larry Bird, Magic Johnson and Michael Jordan. Even artists who are not outright fans of the game said they observed how deeply it penetrated society.

"We have grown up with the advent of the sports industrial complex," said Derek Fordjour, 48, who painted a portrait of Johnson for a solo exhibition this year at David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles. "So artists, as cultural observers, would of course be influenced heavily by such a dominant force coming into view."



"Birth of Showtime," by Derek Fordjour. David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles; Derek Fordjour

Fordjour and others also pointed to a gradual, belated diversification of art spaces and institutions — with a strong focus in the market in recent years on Black artists — as well as a general rethinking about what can be considered fine art, which has invited more ideas and influences from pop and street culture and mainstream commercial realms.

"The demographics of who's being seen is definitely changing," said Hank Williams Thomas, 46, who has drawn from the sport repeatedly in his work, which includes a 22-foot bronze sculpture of the Philadelphia 76ers star Joel Embiid's arm installed at the foot of the Brooklyn Bridge.

For artists, then, basketball can serve as both a powerful, eminently interpretable symbol and a banal object of modern American life.

"It's like painting a still life of a fruit bowl," the New York-based sculptor Hugh Hayden said.

But Hayden, whose solo show at Lisson Gallery in Chelsea last summer featured basketball hoops woven out of rattan and vine, conceded that basketball and fruit bowls could elicit different reactions.

"There is a huge waiting list," Hayden said about his basketball pieces. "I could make 100 basketball goals, and it would not satisfy the demand for them."

The sports-inspired pieces these artists saw in museums and books while growing up, to the extent they saw any at all, typically drew from baseball, they said.

But today, baseball's fading cultural relevance, and basketball's simultaneous ascendance as a cultural force, is plainly observable in galleries across the country.

"Baseball was the poetry growing up, and I can still get teary eyed when I see a baseball game," said Andrew Kuo, a painter from New York. "But my heart pounds when I see a basketball game."

Kuo had kept his fandom and art practice separate — "painting all day, then at night silk-screening Stephon Marbury shirts" — until the thrilling rise of Jeremy Lin with the Knicks in 2012 compelled him to address the game more directly in his work.

He compared the recent proliferation of basketballs in galleries — a snowballing dynamic combining inspiration, evolution, market acceptance and plain copying — to the way the Eurostep gradually took over the N.B.A.

"It's our generation growing into the people who make things," said Kuo, 44, who last year co-authored an irreverent, illustrated encyclopedia of the game, "The Joy of Basketball," with the writer Ben Detrick. (Kuo and Detrick have also contributed to *The New York Times*.)

Basketball, of course, has filtered into art for generations.

Keh, Andrew, "The Art World Loves Basketballs. And Hoops and Jerseys and Backboards.,” *The New York Times*, June 13, 2022, pp. D4-D5, and *NYTimes.com*, June 13, 2022



"Cinderella" by Hugh Hayden. Lisson Gallery; Hugh Hayden



"Rapunzel," also by Hayden. Lisson Gallery; Hugh Hayden



"Lin (Glasses)" by Andrew Kuo. Andrew Kuo

Andy Warhol included Kareem Abdul-Jabbar in a series of athlete portraits he made in 1977.

In 1986, Hammons, who is now 78, made a series of improvised outdoor hoops, some 30 feet tall, titled "Higher Goals," which he described to *The New York Times* that year as "anti-basketball" sculptures. (The art world stirred in 2013 when a frosted glass basketball goal adorned with crystal-laced candelabras made by Hammons in 2000 sold at auction for \$8,005,000.)

And any basketball sitting in a gallery exists at least circuitously in conversation with Jeff Koons and the basketballs he began suspending in fish tanks in 1985.

The editors of "Common Practice: Basketball & Contemporary Art," a book published last year, tracked basketball-related art as far back as 1913 in a lithograph called "Basket Ball Girl."

"There was art with basketballs in it almost since the moment basketball was created," said Dan Peterson, one of the editors. "But I think there's a noticeable uptick in the last few years."



A member of the U.N.C.-Greensboro men's basketball team visiting the exhibit at the Weatherspoon. The pieces pictured include "Well Hung" by Suzanne McClelland and "One of the Boys (Yellow Back)" by Esmaa Mohamoud. Martin W. Kane for UNCG University Communications, 2020

Stamey, the curator at the Weatherspoon, was thrilled by this surplus of work, from artists engaging the sport from almost infinite angles, as she assembled the museum's show.

The exhibition had work, for example, from the Canadian artist Esmaa Mohamoud, 29, who stitched N.B.A. jerseys into ballroom gowns as a means of interrogating the interplay of sports and gender roles in her childhood, and David Huffman, 59, who installed an enormous pyramid made out of 650 basketballs, connecting the grandeur and moral ambiguity of the modern game to that of the ancient Egyptian structures.

Elsewhere in the world, the London-based artist Alvaro Barrington has made basketballs sitting in cement-filled crates a recurring motif in his shows over the past year in London, New York and Los Angeles. At the Richard Prince exhibition currently on view at Gagosian Gallery in New York, a weathered basketball goal sits askew in the middle of a room. And later this month, the Cranbrook Art Museum in Detroit will open a solo show from Tyrrell Winston, who arranges basketballs and nets he finds into large-scale formations.

The growing interplay between fine art and fashion has put basketballs on the runway, too: The artist Josh Smith collaborated with Givenchy for their Spring/Summer 2022 collection to make a basketball jack-o'-lantern handbag, and other clothing with the same imagery, reviving a jack-o'-lantern piece he made in 2015.



The newly designed N.B.A. finals trophy by the artist Victor Solomon.Credit...Nathaniel S. Butler/NBAE via Getty Images

"Basketball intersects with so many subjects, points of view, different things we're talking about culturally and interested in," Stamey said. "That's what makes it such a rich topic and why so many artists gravitate toward it."

The N.B.A. is now backing this wave of work and engaging directly with the art world with increasing regularity.

The artist Victor Solomon has become a go-to collaborator within the league, making objects like stained-glass backboards and porcelain basketballs in partnership with clients like Kevin Durant, LeBron James, Nike and the Boston Celtics. The N.B.A. recently commissioned Solomon, in collaboration with Tiffany & Company, to redesign the trophy that the eventual champions, either the Boston Celtics or the Golden State Warriors, will lift this month.

Two years ago, the Cleveland Cavaliers took the unusual step of naming the New York-based artist Daniel Arsham as their creative director. A year before that, Arsham, 41, had installed a large fiberglass and plaster work, "Moving Basketball," inside the Cavaliers' home arena as part of a redesign by the team's majority owner, Dan Gilbert, that arranged more than 100 pieces from almost two dozen other artists, including Nina Chanel Abney and KAWS, around the building.

This month, Arsham will open a solo show, "Le Modular du Basketball," in Marseilles, France, turning the top floor of a Le Corbusier building into a gym-inspired art space with works that blend the visual language of the famed architect with the universe of basketball.



Daniel Arsham preparing for his "Le Modular du Basketball" installation at the MAMO Museum in Marseilles. Courtesy Daniel Arsham



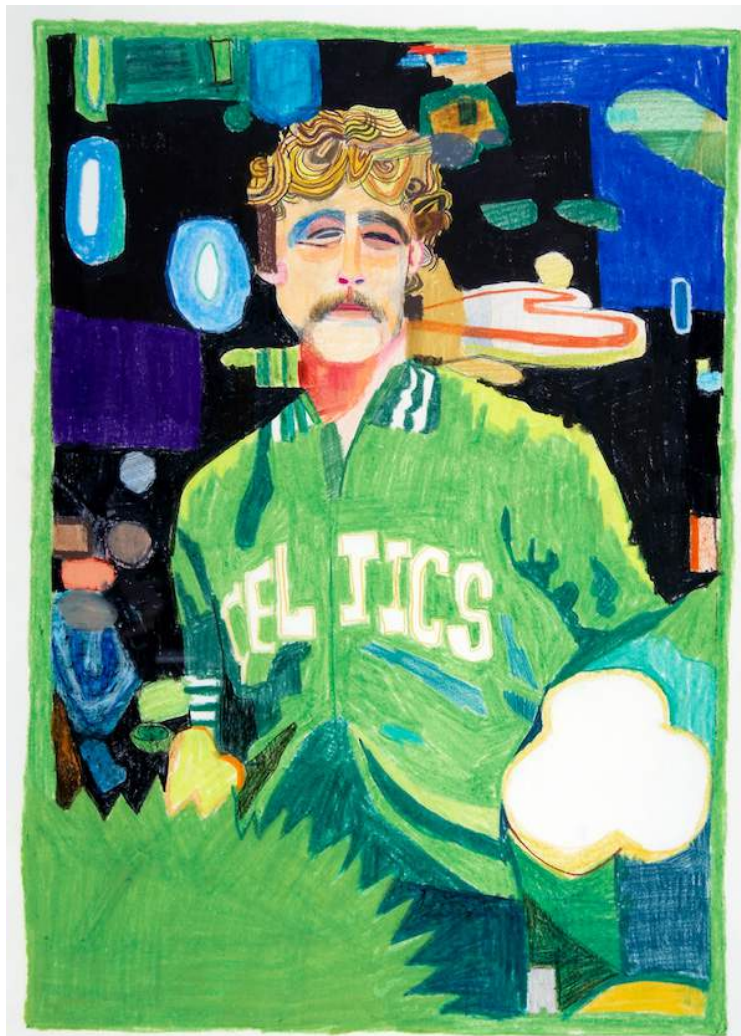
Courtesy Daniel Arsham

Wood, 45, is one of the art world's most ardent fans of basketball, mining the game and his own nostalgia for inspiration. He idolized Bird growing up and frequently played pickup games with other artists when he first moved to Los Angeles two decades ago. His studio today features two hoops, an enormous basketball-shaped throne and countless other basketball knickknacks.

"Basketball is rock 'n' roll," said Wood, who has season tickets for the Clippers and often finds visual material for his portraits in trading cards. "It's hip-hop. It's box office."

Marty Eisenberg, a prominent New York-based collector, owns several of Wood's paintings, including a portrait of Bird from 2004, which he likened to possessing a Babe Ruth card.

But Eisenberg is haunted by the one that got away: a painting of Chris Kaman, the hirsute former Clippers center, from Wood's first-ever solo show at Black Dragon Society in Los Angeles in 2006. Eisenberg missed the piece, and it was purchased by the California art dealer Jeff Poe. Wood's pieces today are often valued at six figures.



Birds Card by Jonas Wood. Jonas Wood; Courtesy David Kordansky Gallery

"Poe always hangs that over me, that he owns the Chris Kaman portrait," Eisenberg said. "That's one of Jonas Wood's greatest pieces. And at the time it was, what, a thousand dollars."

In the time since, the game has infiltrated all corners of the art world.

Last year, the renowned portrait artist Kehinde Wiley began selling basketballs featuring an image of his 2017 painting "The Death of St. Joseph" for \$175, to benefit his nonprofit art organization in Senegal. (A plastic stand for the ball is sold separately, for \$35.)

Hebru Brantley, an artist whose work has been collected by Jay-Z and Beyoncé, created graffiti-style basketballs recently for Wilson, the sports brand, while Mr. Brainwash, the French street artist, made "vandalized basketballs" of his own last year.

Even the Museum of Modern Art sells a basketball — designed by Marco Oggian, an Italian multidisciplinary artist — for \$119.

Amid all this, it can be easy to forget that the art world has not been completely overtaken by hoops enthusiasts, that there are scores of art lovers happily oblivious to the game.

Jack Eisenberg, an adviser at Art Intelligence Global and an avid basketball fan (and Marty Eisenberg's son), laughed as he recalled attending an opening in New York a few years ago and extricating himself from the party to watch a big college game.

"I told them, 'I have to go watch Syracuse versus Duke,' " he said. "And these people were like, 'What does that mean? I don't know what that means.'"

# HYPERALLERGIC

## Derek Fordjour's LA MOCA Mural Is an "Invitation" to the Museum

"Sonic Boom," named after a Historically Black College's famous marching band, "will have particular resonance in communities of color," the artist said.

by **Matt Stromberg**

May 3, 2022

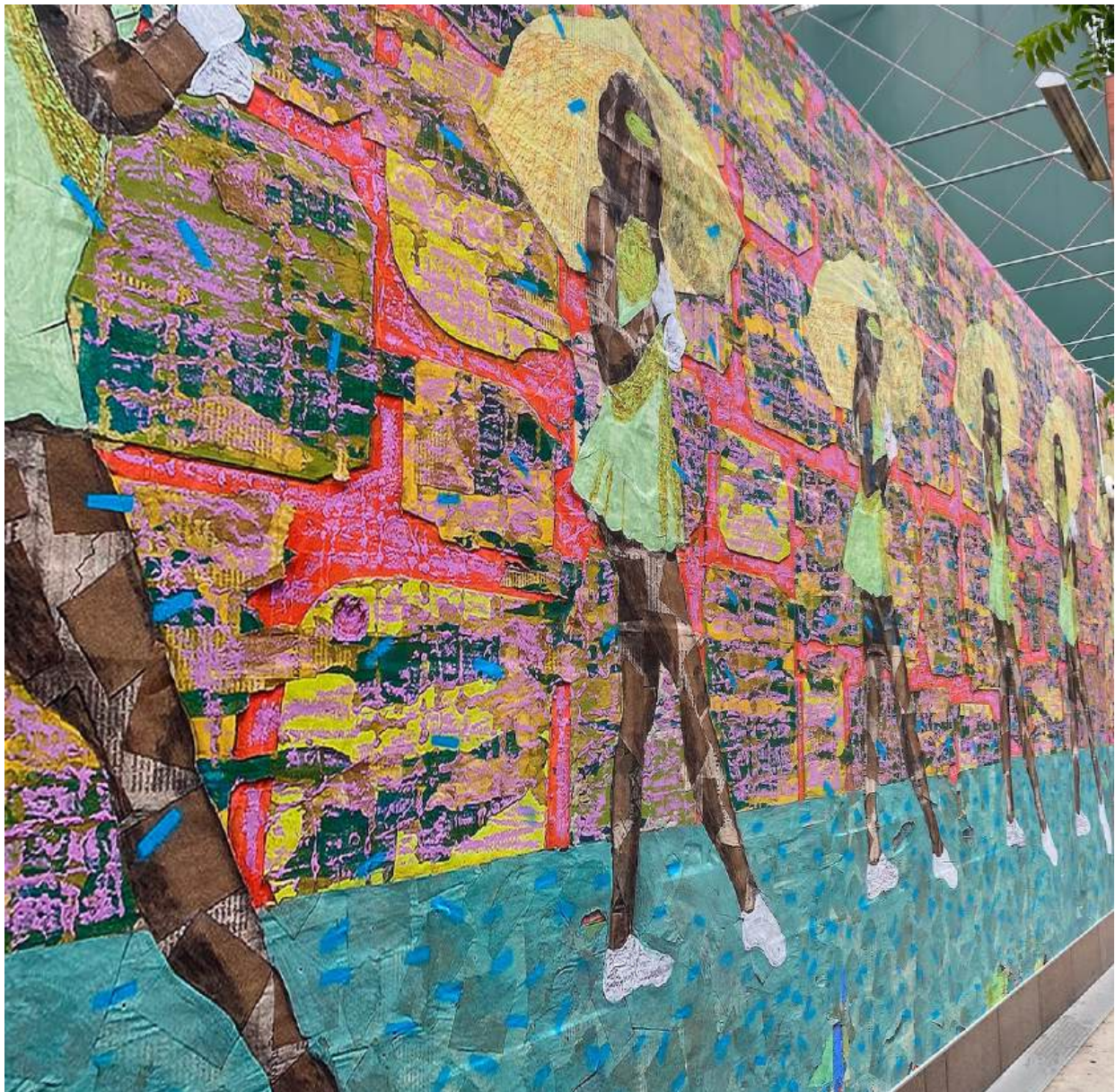


Installation view of Derek Fordjour's "Sonic Boom" (2022) (photo by Elon Schoenholz; courtesy the artist and the Museum of Contemporary Art)

Last Thursday, April 28, just before 11am, a group of museum-goers lined up along Grand Avenue outside of Los Angeles's Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), waiting for it to open. Behind them on the building's facade, another line-up — resplendent and monumental — echoed the phalanx of visitors. A parade of Black, uniformed drum majors and majorettes strides rhythmically across the wall against brightly colored and patterned backgrounds.

Derek Fordjour's mural for MOCA, "Sonic Boom" (2022), features reproductions of four paintings by the New York-based artist, blown-up and printed on vinyl wrap to cover more than 5,400 square feet of the museum's entrance wall. The work celebrates the marching bands of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), taking its name from one of Jackson State University's famous ensembles, nicknamed the "Sonic Boom of the South."

This is the first in MOCA's *Building Art* series, which will feature artworks on the facades of both MOCA locations — Grand Avenue and the nearby Geffen Contemporary — potentially including video and installation, according to a museum spokesperson. In accordance with the sustainability mission of MOCA's Environmental Council, launched in 2020, the vinyl wrap was printed in the US with aqueous inks and will be shredded and reused in future works by Fordjour after deinstallation.



The work celebrates the marching bands of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (photo Matt Stromberg/Hyperallergic)

When viewed up close, the magnified work fragments into a lively array of colors and shapes. But seen from across the wide street, its dancing bodies come to life. For Fordjour, the project offered an opportunity to connect with new audiences.

"We live in a world where it's still true that, for lots of people, an afternoon in the museum is not their first option. I'm interested in reaching people who might not otherwise consider going inside a museum," Fordjour told Hyperallergic. "It's also a wonderful way to activate a painting, to make a painting an invitation."



The work will be shredded and reused in future works by Fordjour after deinstallation. (photo Matt Stromberg/Hyperallergic)

Fordjour took this democratic approach to art when selecting the works to reproduce for the project. He sent a survey to all museum employees — including curatorial, education, and janitorial — asking them to pick from among four options.

"I wanted the work they chose collectively to be reflective of where they believed the museum needs to be in terms of outward facing messaging," Fordjour said. Their choice reflects "a collective desire to have something upbeat and hopeful" after two years of living through a pandemic.

The installation of "Sonic Boom" coincides with Fordjour's first solo show at LA's David Kordansky Gallery, titled *Magic, Mystery, & Legerdemain*. Through his signature collaged paintings, sculpture, and performance, Fordjour channels the theme of magic to examine moments from African-American — and African diasporic — history. The exhibition's highlights include a daily magic show performed by Kenrick Ice McDonald that reimagines the role of Black Herman, one of the first prominent African-American magicians.



Nubia Bowe and Kenrick Ice McDonald in "The Legend of Black Herman," a magic show that's part of Derek Fordjour: Magic, Mystery, & Legerdemain at David Kordansky Gallery (photo Matt Stromberg/Hyperallergic)

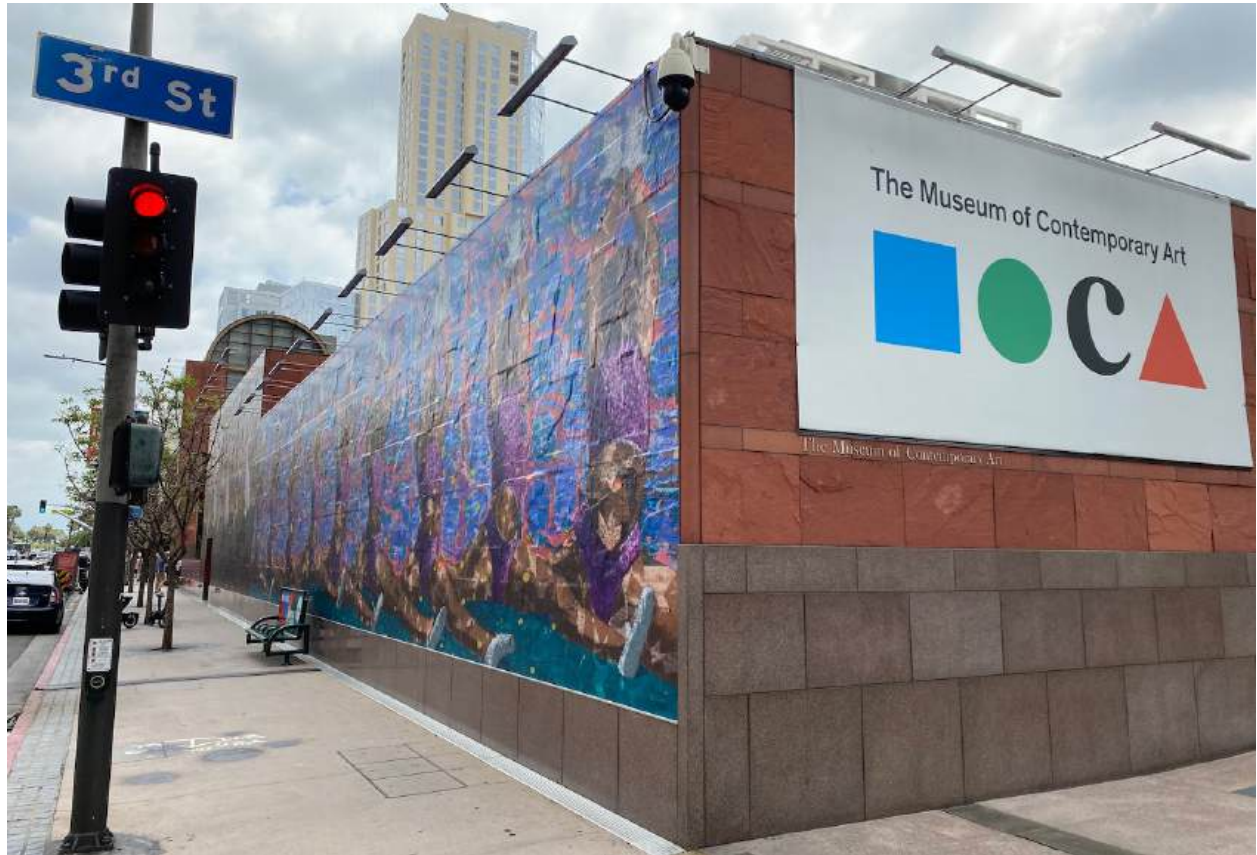
Fordjour's images of HBCU marching bands, reads a text on MOCA's website, "symbolize the daily performance of Blackness itself."

"Embedded there is cultural coding that will have particular resonance in communities of color," Fordjour said.

Last Thursday morning, Ernest McCray, an alumnus Howard University, an HBCU, was excitedly taking pictures of the facade from across the street.

"I really appreciate this. It holds near and dear to me," he told Hyperallergic. "The fact that it's so prominently displayed downtown, on an arts building, it says we're making progress."

As much as "Sonic Boom" holds a specific significance for those familiar with the traditions it depicts, Fordjour is also interested in how his works can cross boundaries, appealing to a range of spectators.



Installation view of Derek Fordjour's "Sonic Boom" (2022) (photo Matt Stromberg/Hyperallergic)

"Painting can be multiple things at the same time," the artist said, noting that viewers can connect with the "regalia and pageantry, the syncopation, separate from cultural context." He mentions that the Florida A&M Marching Band performed during the 2019 Rose Bowl, incorporating a predominantly Southern Black tradition within an Angeleno institution. "This is a way to bring together many different publics. That's what excites me most."

# CULTURED

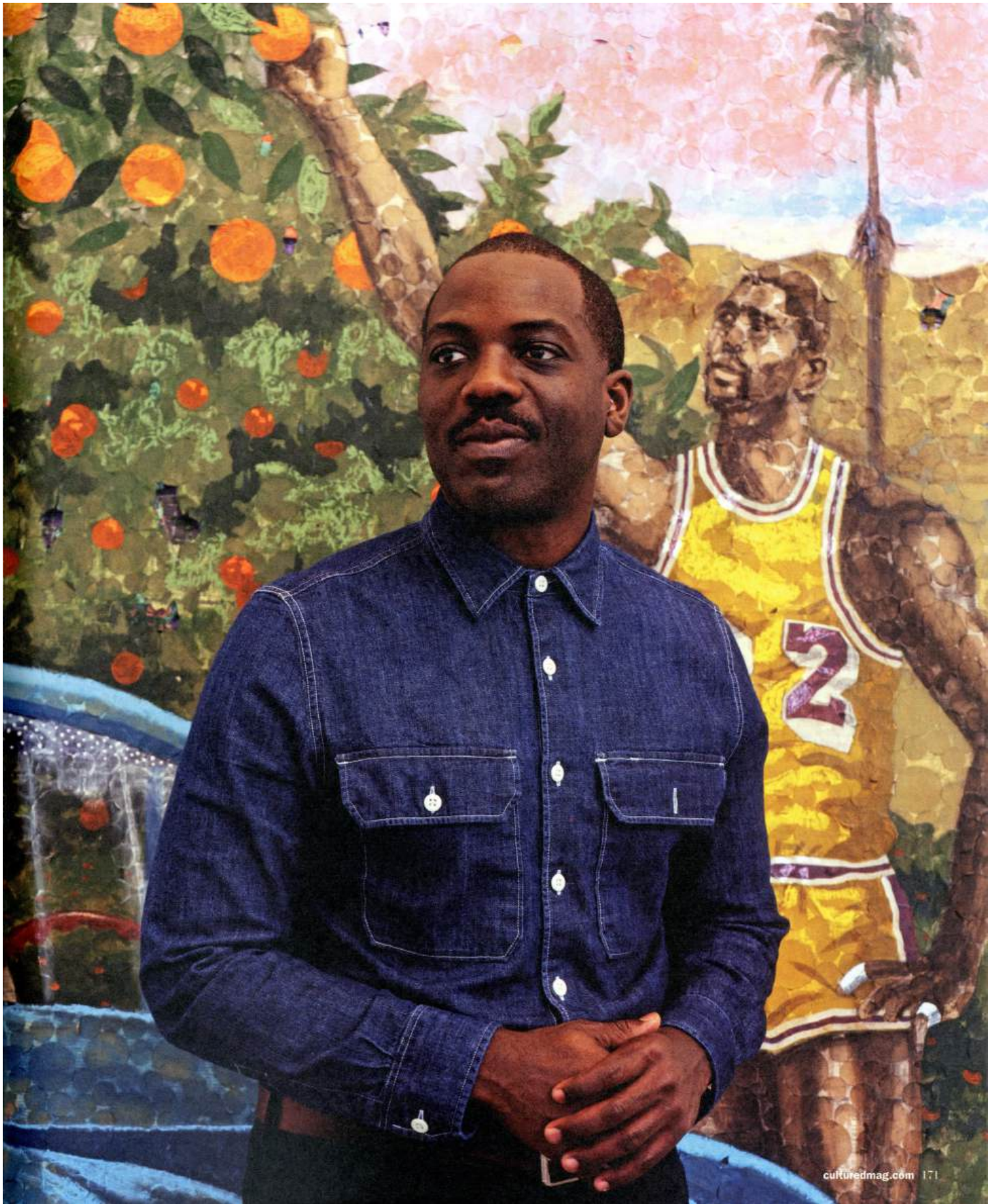
# For His Next Trick

Artist Derek Fordjour at David Kordansky  
Gallery in Los Angeles with his painting *Birth of  
Showtime* (2022).

Artist **DEREK FORDJOUR** will astound and  
amaze as he explores the history of Black magicians  
and other iconic figures in a multisensory takeover  
at David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles.

# Trick

BY TRAVIS DIEHL  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRANDON HICKS





RIGHT AND BELOW LEFT: PHOTO BY JEFF MCLEAN

You can't see Derek Fordjour's show at David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles without a token—at least, not without passing through a curving, chandeliered entryway, wallpapered with recent editions of the *Financial Times* (Ukraine, Putin, grain and gas in the headlines) staffed by a twentieth-century showgirl, who will press a token into your hand. What awaits behind the turnstile and curtain, though, is not the blockbuster movie magic native to Hollywood; more like the timeless magic of vaudeville and carnival. But that's not quite it, either—Fordjour's show crackles with something like the astounding, prosaic illusionism of Henry "Box" Brown, a former slave who shipped himself to freedom via the Postal Service.

"Box" Brown features in Fordjour's *Cargo*, one of a series of new paintings that pay tribute to historic Black magicians of all stripes. Many made their careers not without certain professional sleight of hand. Fordjour nods to the proclivity of Black performers for wearing turbans in the South, for instance, to pass as Middle Eastern, as J. Hartford Armstrong does in the painting *Float*, depicted pulling a hoop around the levitating body of his daughter Ellen. In *Birdman*, a portrait of famous magician and

tightrope artist Richard Potter, the figure is flocked by songbirds on the wire.

The figures thus honored are a bit like Fordjour himself, performing maniac feats with materials. He makes paintings with a signature way of layering painted cardboard, aluminum foil and the pale pink newsprint of the *Financial Times*. This last layer is the "skin" of rationality, racial pun intended, a newspaper for financiers—"traders," no less, although slaves aren't indexed there—pointedly painted beyond recognition. Fordjour sometimes tears through the surface into bright pockets of pigment beneath, the raw color beaming through like light. Past series have explored other aspects of the Black experience—churchgoing, for example, including gospel choirs and hardwood benches but also public funerals of the likes of George Floyd, whose gold-plated coffin Fordjour depicted in 2020.

The work in "Magic, Mystery & Legerdemain" continues that blend of virtuosity, meanness, ambition, and worldliness; heaven and earth, sky and street. In other words, the show surveys the outsized role of Black Americans in popular entertainment. The showgirl handing out tokens in the vestibule is echoed a dozen times by the women dressing

backstage in *Twelve Gates*, which Fordjour says reframes the trope that Black women are magical. Another fanciful history painting, *Jazzland*, stages the evolution of what many consider the only sui generis American art form, composed by former slaves on the masters' instruments. Instead of recapping this pat narrative, Fordjour's painting poses it as a question.

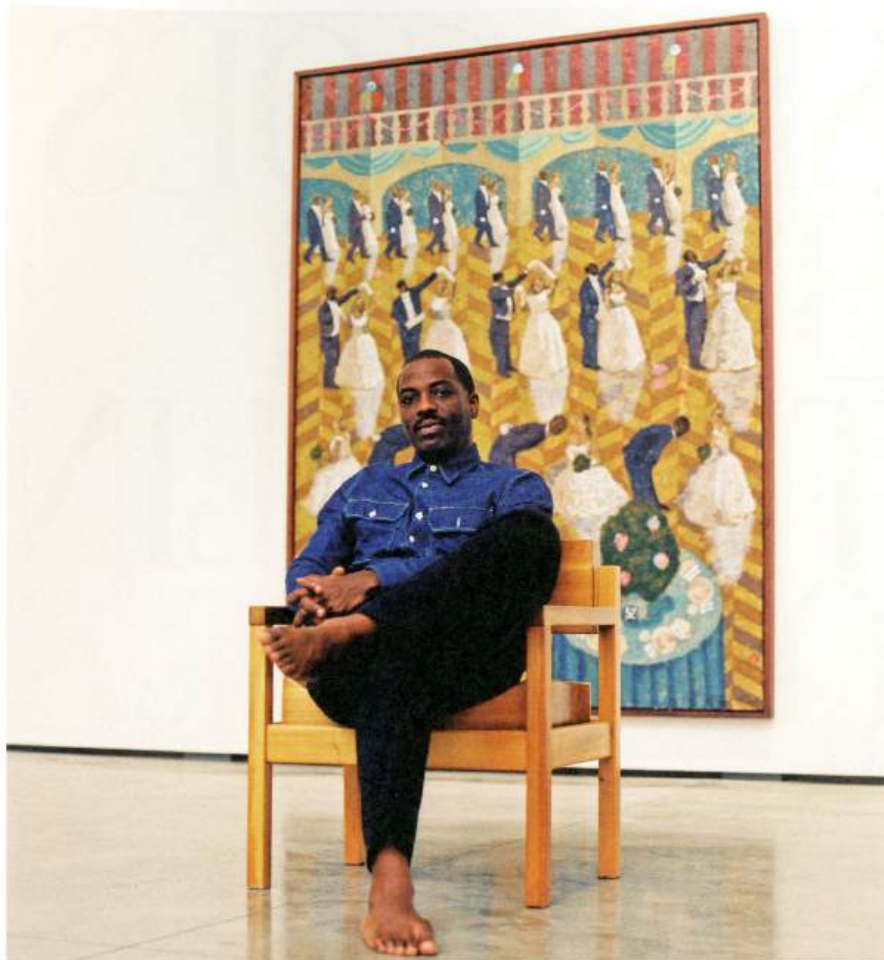
Then there's *Birth of Showtime*, a portrait of L.A. Laker Magic Johnson. Raised in the citrusless Midwest and newly arrived in the Southland, the star guard reaches in awe for a ripe orange on the bough, holding it airborne, palming it like a tiny basketball. For Fordjour, the moment is an allegory of when sport became spectacle. Johnson was the first of many Black basketball stars promoted as a rival to the white Larry Bird. Fordjour renders the ornament and grill of the waiting Rolls-Royce in sparkling tin foil against posterboard-orange shadows.

Fordjour also understands the bittersweet wages of fame. A small bust of a Tuskegee Airman in a leather helmet, one of the Black pilots in the famous squadron fighting for the United States in World War II, resembles a football player of the era. The Kordansky show features three sculptures

Fordjour with *Cotillion* (2022). Below and left: Installation views of *Birdman* (2022) in "Derek Fordjour: Magic, Mystery & Legerdemain" at David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles.

**"The figures thus honored are a bit like Fordjour himself, performing maniac feats with simple materials."**

that amalgamate casts of the bust, stacked into a sort of trophy and plated in copper, nickel or gold like a budget parody of the winners' podium. Their titles, respectively, dole out bitter advice: *Futile Ambition*; *Never Go Alone*; *Don't Bite the Hand*. These sculptures are on view alongside others that sever and recombine the codes of Black athletic prowess—stacks of three balls balanced on disembodied knees, larger coal-black portrait busts burdened with vintage medals. They're in a long, narrow side gallery, around the corner from the main space, facing a 35-foot-long painting of a Carnival procession through Salvador, Brazil. In other words, the juxtaposition of one more or less exploitative form of Black performance with a more spiritualized suspension of disbelief, the long train of the African diaspora reveling on its own terms. To get here, though, visitors pass through a final bit of theatricality: the white cube transmuted into a wood-paneled church basement, then decked out into a vaudeville theater, complete with rippling velvet curtains and the soft, final clinking of admission tokens—a stage upon which would play the abridged history of Black spectacle in the United States. Once a day during gallery hours, L.A.-based magician Kenrick "ICE" McDonald performs as Benjamin Rucker, aka Black Herman, a former assistant and student to a lineage of European illusionists who, along with their tricks, adopted their family name.



# Los Angeles Times

## Derek Fordjour examines magic, race and revelry in two L.A. art installations



Installation view of Derek Fordjour, "Sonic Boom," 2022.

(Elon Schoenholz / courtesy of the artist and the Museum of Contemporary Art)

BY LEIGH-ANN JACKSON

APRIL 19, 2022 6:06 PM PT

Standing in front of Derek Fordjour's mural "Sonic Boom," you can almost hear the drum major's whistle chirping and the drum line keeping the beat. The marching band and prancing dancers forming Fordjour's newly unveiled procession down Grand Avenue are just that lively.

The 5,400-square-foot mural currently blankets the facade of the Museum of Contemporary Art with vibrant colors and a sense of both exuberance and pageantry. It's part of the MOCA Building Art series of outdoor artworks and is one of two major installations Fordjour debuted in Los Angeles in late March.

Also on display in an exhibition at David Kordansky Gallery, the New York-

based artist's latest works display facets of African American culture that are steeped in tradition — from the widely celebrated to the obscure to the surreal.

Fordjour's inspiration for the MOCA commission was the Jackson State University marching band, known as the "Sonic Boom of the South." Watching the historically Black college ensemble perform in annual band competitions was a highlight of his childhood in Memphis, Tenn.

He presented the museum with four mural options — in addition to the HBCU band tribute, he submitted depictions of unsung African American rowing crews and horse jockeys, as well as portraits of Black males presented in the style of urban memorial murals. He wanted the entire museum staff to vote on the selections in order to instill in them a sense of personal investment in the final piece.

"Everyone from the head curator to the security and maintenance staff would have a voice in choosing which option they went for," Fordjour explains of his process. "I really wanted to make sure that we had diversity of opinion, lived experience and geography in the people that made this decision. I'm not there. This is *their* building. They really are the stewards of the experience."



Derek Fordjour's "Seay Memorial I" (2022), made of resin, fiberglass, acrylic, pigment, brass and natural hair. (Jeff McLane / courtesy of the artist and David Kordansky Gallery)

He enlisted still more Angelenos to help him stage "Magic, Mystery & Legerdemain," his ambitious ode to arcana at David Kordansky Gallery. The immersive exhibition, which runs at the Mid-Wilshire space through May 7, explores magic as it relates to race and American history. L.A.-based master magician Kenrick "Ice" McDonald, filmmaker Numa Perrier, floral artist Maurice Harris and other local creatives lent their talents to transform the typical gallery experience into something uncanny, eccentric and educational.

The show features paintings, sculptures and a live magic performance sparked by the artist's research into historic African American illusionists such as Richard Potter, Ellen E. Armstrong and Black Herman, as well as Candomblé rituals practiced by enslaved Africans in Brazil. This deep dive into the past was triggered by Fordjour's bafflement surrounding present-day events.

"I started thinking about magic as an allegory for privilege," he says. "You know the Kyle Rittenhouse verdict? The young man who murdered those people? He's out! I have friends who have done more time for far less than murder, so that felt like a magic trick. Like, 'Wow! How did he *do* that in plain view?!'"

"There is something about my vantage, as a Black person living in this society, where the rules just seem to change conveniently in ways that affirm the white supremacist structure in which we operate. Magic was a perfect way to discuss some of this."

To begin his journey through the looking glass, as it were, gallery visitors must first push past a thick, velvety curtain and step into a dimly lit vestibule. There, pages from the Financial Times line the walls and ceiling. Think of it as a behind-the-scenes reveal — the artist's signature painting style is achieved by applying rich, saturated colors atop layers of cardboard and that same newspaper's pale pink pages.

A small black-and-white television mounted on the wall plays vintage footage of a televised performance by magician Frank Brents. Below it, a podium holds an upturned top hat filled with a fresh floral bouquet. Here, again, the artist offers a sneak peek of what awaits beyond the entryway. Each week, Harris creates a different "floral portrait" inspired by the exhibition's paintings. The two collaborators have dubbed the podium space "the Top Hat Residency."

"I was interested in how a floral arrangement can interact with the illusion of a magic trick or create the spark that magic does," said Harris, the owner of the Echo Park floral design studio Bloom & Plume. "I've been pulling in stems like allium because they have a firework quality to them, James Storie orchids because they're flowy but explosive, and I've been drawn to a specific palette of roses because they mirror the color vocabulary that I often see in Derek's work."

The paintings on display beyond the antechamber play on themes of spectacle, public perception and sleight of hand. The first piece, "Cargo," is a tribute to Henry



"Cargo," by Derek Fordjour (2022). The painting is made from acrylic, charcoal, cardboard, oil pastel and foil on newspaper mounted on canvas. (Daniel Greer / courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery)

"Box" Brown, an enslaved Virginia man who famously mailed himself in a crate to abolitionists in Philadelphia.

In "Cotillion," prim debutantes and their tuxedo-clad partners dance around a ballroom, representing Fordjour's view of the centuries-old rite as a sort of illusion in which middle-class Black families enshroud their challenging social circumstances in order to create a moment of grandeur.

"Birth of Showtime" depicts Lakers legend Earvin Johnson Jr. in the early days of his basketball fame. The subtext here is that the NBA star's nickname was "an invention of the white gaze," as Fordjour puts it. "He didn't name himself Magic. His mother did not name him Magic. A white male reporter did," he says. "I found that to be really interesting because this idea of magic in Black people, through the white imagination, is something that persists."

In keeping with the show's experiential approach, Fordjour is also staging a live magic show honoring Black Herman (born Benjamin Rucker), whose 1925 book inspired the exhibition's title. At 2 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays, visitors can file into a small theater constructed to evoke elementary school auditoriums or church basements. There, modern-day magician McDonald portrays Herman in a 20-minute production written and directed by Perrier. Along with Nubia Bowe, who plays his assistant, he creates onstage illusions while acting out highlights of Herman's fantastical exploits.

Perrier infused "The Legend of Black Herman" with elements that range from kitschy to sensual, adding notes of vaudeville, carnival acts and church sermons. A solemn usher, a suited organist, melodramatic narration and glitzy costumes all help set the mysterious tone.

"I want the audience to lose themselves in the magic and, just for those moments, let it overtake them," she says. "I want them to feel the sense of wonder, pain and seduction that's all inside of the show."

Suspension of disbelief is key when delving into any magician's world, but Herman's more so than others. Fordjour was drawn in by Herman's over-the-top claims of learning magic from a Zulu tribe and by stunts like his famed "buried alive" trick, wherein he appeared to inter himself for three days prior to a performance, then rise and lead awed onlookers to his stage show.

"He was a little bit of a hustler, in my opinion," Fordjour says. "I liked that I didn't know how much of Black Herman to believe and not believe."

"That's the crux of the [magic] show. Numa and I worked to really foreground the question: Are you going to allow *me* — as a Black man — to deceive you in plain sight? Are you going to afford me that?"

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## Derek Fordjour

What: "Magic, Mystery & Legerdemain"

Where: David Kordansky Gallery, 5130 W.  
Edgewood Place

When: Tues-Sat 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Through May

7. Magic performances by Kenrick "Ice"

McDonald, 2 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays

Contact: (323) 935-3030,

*davidkordanskycastle.com*

What: "Sonic Boom"

Where: MOCA Grand Avenue, 250 S. Grand  
Ave.

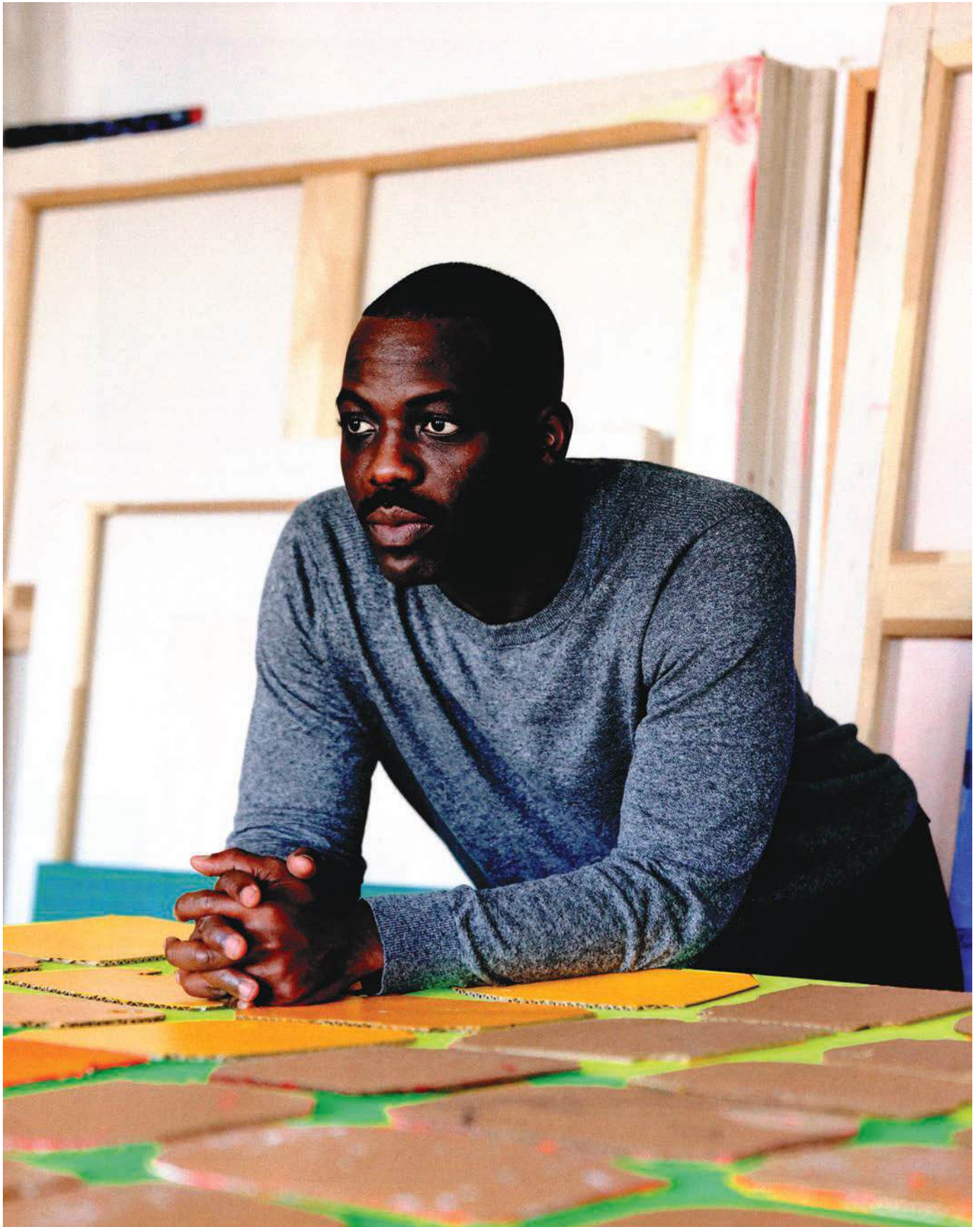
When: Ongoing

Contact: (213) 626-6222, *moca.org*

# Derek Fordjour

## The Sporting Life

*Interview by Charles Moore Portrait by Jason Schmidt*





**L**ong after his childhood peers abandoned their artistic pursuits, Derek Fordjour remained committed to artmaking. The Morehouse and Harvard graduate eventually earned his MFA at Hunter College.

His creative process is rooted in a multimedia approach. The artist transcends his medium, for there's great value, he explains, in allowing the viewer to establish their own relationships to his work. The possibilities are far-reaching across media as diverse as painting, sculpture, and most recently, a puppet show all featured within a single exhibition.

With his layered paintings and textured grounds, found objects, vibrant colors, and newspaper mounted on canvases, Fordjour seeks to build worlds, much to the delight of his audience. He cites Kerry James Marshall, William Kentridge, and Louis Bourgeois as a few of his sources of artistic inspiration, emphasizing his appreciation for artists who grapple with difficult questions in their own artistic practice. Fordjour, too, seeks to imbue his paintings with a sense of urgency; setting out to create works that he believes should exist.

Gamesmanship and the politics of access and representation are integral to his practice, which particularly manifest in works like *Regatta Study* (2020) and *Half Mast* (2018). *Regatta* explores rowing, a sport with abysmally low levels of Black participation, largely due to lack of access—a cultural legacy, while *Half Mast* is reminiscent of Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) and Faith Ringgold's *American People Series #20: Die* (1967).

*Half Mast* offers a vivid snapshot of New York City, a panorama of urban chaos, the visual noise and multitudes of people swarming city streets, captured in the confines of a single composition. The canvas adroitly alternates between the serenity of a painted crowd, a well-worn trope in western painting, and the inherent threat faced by each individual citizen involuntarily exposed to the precarity of public safety. Law enforcement, civilians, students, the teddy bears and balloons of makeshift streetside memorials appear choc-a-bloc in a densely packed picture plane. Despite the illusion of painted space, the reality of the message is clear: in Fordjour's world, no one is safe. Everyone contends with vulnerability, individually and collectively.

**Charles Moore:** I see you attended Morehouse, and later Harvard, prior to doing your MFA at Hunter. How did your earlier educational path affect your MFA experience?

**Derek Fordjour:** I suspect that having had prior experience with research and writing is a compliment to the kind of criticism and analysis that is routine at a place like Hunter. It also provided a methodology for intellectual inquiry within my studio practice. Morehouse indelibly shaped my sense of self, cultural awareness and clarity of purpose.

**At Hunter, Nari Ward was your thesis advisor, what was it like to work with him?**

Nari Ward is an invaluable resource to me. I cherish him as a friend and mentor. When I first began to dabble in sculpture at Hunter, it was Nari who really helped me understand how to think constructively about objecthood, the power of material and conceptual rigor in the life of an object. His advice ranged from the metaphorical to the practical. We also had several discussions on the woes of storage.

**Say more about your relationship to storage.**

When I was in school, I had a habit of throwing things away because space was limited. I really



think I came to artmaking as more of a process artist. I was more invested in the time I spent inside of an artwork actually making it. In fact, there's a cognitive theory that explains this perfectly, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's concept of "Flow"—which basically says that everything else in life falls away and all that matters is the present experience of creating in real time. The process was something I prioritized over the end product. Very often, after an installation, I would want to throw things away.

Nari would say to me, "No, man, you can't toss that stuff." As a student, I could not bear the thought of paying extensive storage bills—can you imagine how traumatic that was to hear when I was barely covering rent? Nari explained the importance of keeping things in perpetuity, and if you look at his career, he has artworks that are exhibited 25 years, 30 years after they were made or originally shown. I had to change my relationship to the things I produced and mature to accept proper stewardship as part of my work. I credit Nari for that shift.

**What does it mean to you to be a steward of your work and respect it?**

Most of my experience with art came from making it. I am a bit obsessed with everything about that process and I have been for most of my life. What I knew less about was what happened to my work when it left my studio. In fact, for years, when my work mostly went unsold, I would leave pieces on the street. I found it encouraging that someone found it meaningful enough to take home. It wasn't until I started buying small works that I could afford that I developed an appreciation for the experience of collecting and living with art. It was quite an enlightening experience that showed me the other side of the coin.

**And, as an artist who collects the works of your peers, tell me about the types of works and artists that draw your interest.**

I should say that I collect modestly and the motivations are fairly personal. I like to collect artists at a critical stage of development, both recent MFA graduates without representation that I might have come into contact with, or artists later in their careers that might have been overlooked for years. The work is great and still affordable.

I also like to have work around that teaches me or inspires me. I often admire artists who work in ways very different from me. My first love is painting, but I also really appreciate assemblage, photography and sculpture. I have some works in my studio by artists who were early mentors and friends. It's a way of having their loving and supportive energy with me daily.

**Let's talk about your own work. You've often referenced your choice of material, such as newspaper and cardboard, because of limited resources at the time you started working with those materials. Your work is rooted in the process of layering, which seems to be more conceptual. Now that you are no longer in a time of austerity, why have you chosen to continue working with the same materials?**

I realized that my temporary condition was a permanent situation for many people. Ingenuity borne out of an under-resourced circumstance was a signature feature in Black and Brown communities all over the world. So, to a great extent, choosing to work with limited means was a way to try and connect what I was doing in the studio to the diaspora.

Furthermore, there is this belief that it is possible to achieve the universal through the specific that interests me. A few years ago, I was giving a talk at Bezalel Academy in Israel, and I was explaining this way of working with limited means. The entire crowd started saying the same word in Hebrew to me from the audience. They had a specific word for this and I learned about a group of Jewish artists who had also worked with newspapers nearly a century earlier. This moment was so instructive



for me because a process that felt so personal was connecting across cultures and brought into focus more global movements like Arte Povera. So, by initially working to connect to my local community, I was also creating linkages that then connected my community to other communities and to historical movements as well.

**Tell me more about layering.**

Sometimes I enter the studio with a set of predetermined ideas. There are other times that the idea emerges from the making itself. Layering happened this way for me. Initially, it served a practical need. As I continued to work, the surface proved to be quite generous and introduced a broader range of mark making, including incisions, tearing and scraping. Layering fundamentally changed my relationship to surface texture and greatly expanded my vocabulary.

**Are you still primarily using the *Financial Times* as your newspaper of choice?**

Yes.

**To me, the *Financial Times* carries a duplicity of association. On the one hand, it is widely available and inexpensive as a material, but the intended audience and content is associated with wealth and whiteness. How do you reconcile these two?**

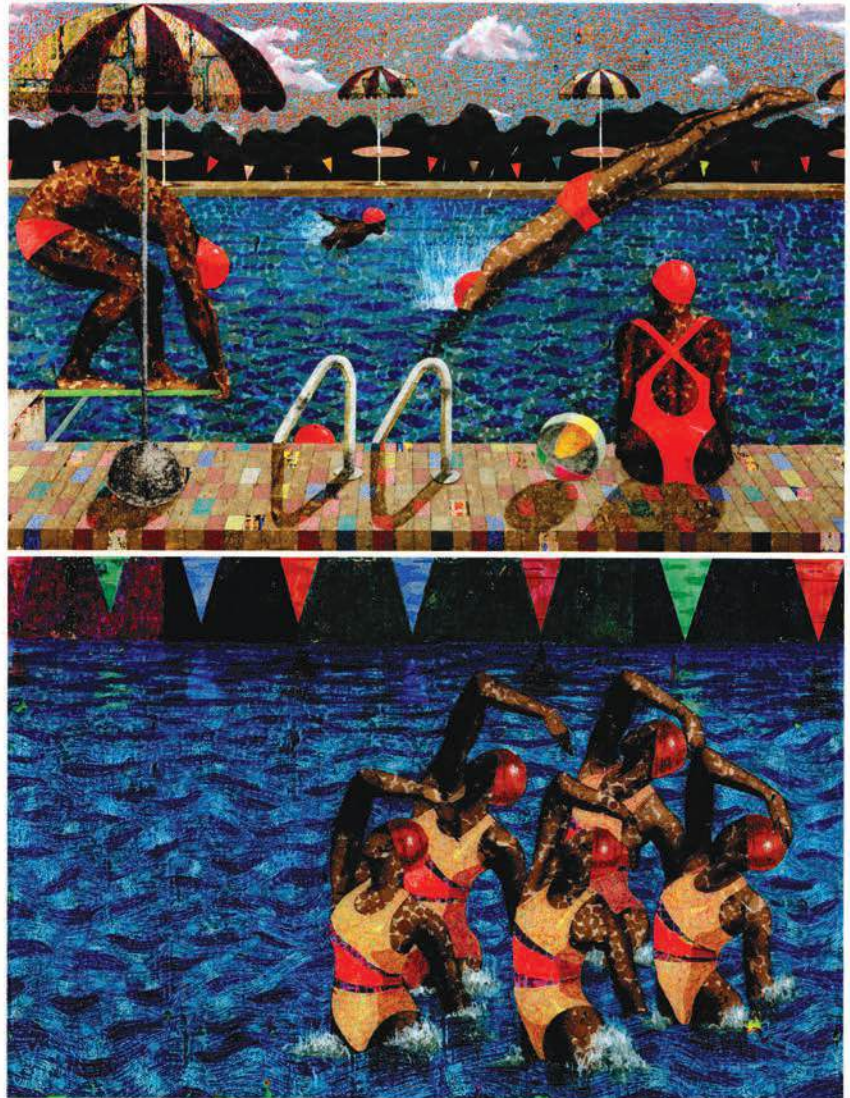
I am attracted to both of those ideas. The universality of newsprint is appealing. And its decreasing popularity creates an archival aspect as well. The conspicuous branding of the salmon pink tint of the paper also creates a warm color ground that functions like an underpainting in traditional canvas painting. The economic status of the readership is secondary, but indeed still relevant.

**Fascinating! Tell me more.**

I think about the work that I make in the studio with the same importance a chef might place on choosing ingredients. I visited Japan a couple of years ago and found that some of the best restaurants are in the countryside. You discover that the chef is maybe a second or third generation chef that has been serving the same dish that his father and grandfather did, and that, in fact, they've been harvesting the same fish from the same pond, also owned by a second-generation farmer. The meal started with the pond. And so, not to be lofty, I believe that the ingredients that go into each work are important and if they carry significance for me, that becomes a crucial starting point before I build anything pictorial.

**Can you talk about your process from idea to finished work?**

I begin works from many disparate entry points. I am impacted by every single experience I have, from reading an article to something as benign as a walk down the street. There are other times my work might begin with something as ethereal as a dream, but there is a kind of subconscious



organization or synthesis that happens in a lucid state that is effortless. I also like to imagine that I'm part of a larger canonical conversation that's been happening for centuries in painting. There are times when I'm interested in what needs to join this larger discourse, what paintings don't exist that should. I tend to be very intentional about what I want to accomplish when I set out to make a work, but I also learn a great deal from the end result.

**Speaking of paintings that don't exist that should—sportsmanship is often a theme in your work. I'm especially interested in niche sports like rowing. Turning to one of my two favorite works of yours, *Regatta Study*: Why do you think it was important to depict that**

**particular sport which has such low numbers of Black participation?**

I'll tell you, since you also spent some time in Cambridge: In graduate school, I wanted to join the row team because I thought this would be an interesting challenge for me. I walked down to the boat house one morning and expressed interest in joining the row team. The captain politely says, "Okay, meet me back here tomorrow morning at 7:00 am. You'll need to swim two miles." And with that, I was out. I simply wasn't that good of a swimmer at that time.

**I figured that was it. You can't even take lessons on sculling or even sailing if you can't pass the swim test.**

Yes. You must pass the test. And this is true in



so many areas of society that shut out entire communities of people because of historic legacies of inequity and exclusion. Ironically, my attraction to rowing was intertwined with my love of painting. I always loved Thomas Eakins's late nineteenth-century row paintings. There was a romance to those works that was outside of my world, and that morning at the boathouse I learned a bit more about why.

**So that got you thinking about access.**

Exactly. It wasn't that he told me I couldn't join the team or that he was at all inhospitable. He just told me what I needed to do in order to qualify. And it was not a seemingly unreasonable ask, either. I think of the myriad of standardized tests required to enter colleges, various professions and even working-class vocations like the postal test or firefighter's exams. Much of why I was unable to perform was a matter of cultural inheritance, zip code, wealth inequality and legacies of racism. My boathouse experience prompted me to examine more closely the economics around collegiate sports. Unsurprisingly, I found predictable patterns of disparity that were troubling. So that image of *Regatta Study* poses questions. I wanted to consider patterns of under and overrepresentation within society.

**In your artist's talk at CAM St. Louis during your 2020 show *Shelter*, you referenced the "commodification of bodies" in auction systems. What are your thoughts on auctions?**

I'm interested in how bodies like mine participate in capitalist systems of profit. Across industries: music, sports, prison, education—black representation is most often grouped on the labor side of the equation and this fact is rooted in slavery and every successive system of oppression that existed in its wake. Modern day marketplaces replicate these same patterns. It's no surprise to me that the robber barons of the turn of the twentieth century are of the same demographic group as the tech pioneers of our time. Whether it's software or steel, one hundred years ago, or this year, who has access to capital and who can pass the test is largely the same.

**You could easily continue to work on canvas and be successful, for sure. What draws you to other mediums like sculpture and even performance, like the puppet show you did at your Petzel Gallery exhibition?**

Consider an analogy. Painting is the heartbeat of my creative body. My interest in other media: sculpture, performance, film, are limbs that share a lifeline directly to painting. In addition, I have also consumed lots of theater and literature. I enjoy travel a great deal also, and all these things feed into one another. Building an exhibition affords me the opportunity to engineer an experience that percolates with the same dynamic vitality that inspires me. It's how my mind and creative body work together and when you're in my show, hopefully you can feel my process as well.



**Impressive! Lastly, can you tell me a bit about your show in Los Angeles at David Kordansky Gallery that opens in the Spring?**

The title is *Magic, Mystery & Legerdemain*. I'm very excited about this show! I am working on an entire body of new paintings drawing linkages to magic. I am thinking about magic in all its many forms: voodoo, white magic, black magic, black girl magic, magical negroes, Magic Johnson, and orishas. I am interested in who has the power to deceive in plain sight, for whom we are willing to suspend disbelief.

**How does magic become an allegory?**

One of the many tools of a skillful magician is the art of clever distraction. I think about race this way. It is a construct—not actually real. Nevertheless, we are all socialized to participate in this grand illusion to suspend disbelief in order to be willfully deceived.

One of the magicians I've been researching says that everyone is walking around with a collection of stories they tell themselves—that's how we make sense of the world. He says what a magician does is to shoot the dart first and then paint the target. They rearrange the order of our stories and we believe them. I find this almost poetic as it pertains to the ways in which we construct belief and derive meaning. On another level, painting itself is an illusion. Needless to say, I'm having lots of fun making this show. ■

*Derek's solo show with David Kordansky Gallery opens this spring in Los Angeles.*

[@fordjourstudio](#)

# HYPERALLERGIC

## Derek Fordjour's LA MOCA Mural Is an "Invitation" to the Museum

"Sonic Boom," named after a Historically Black College's famous marching band, "will have particular resonance in communities of color," the artist said.

by **Matt Stromberg**

May 3, 2022

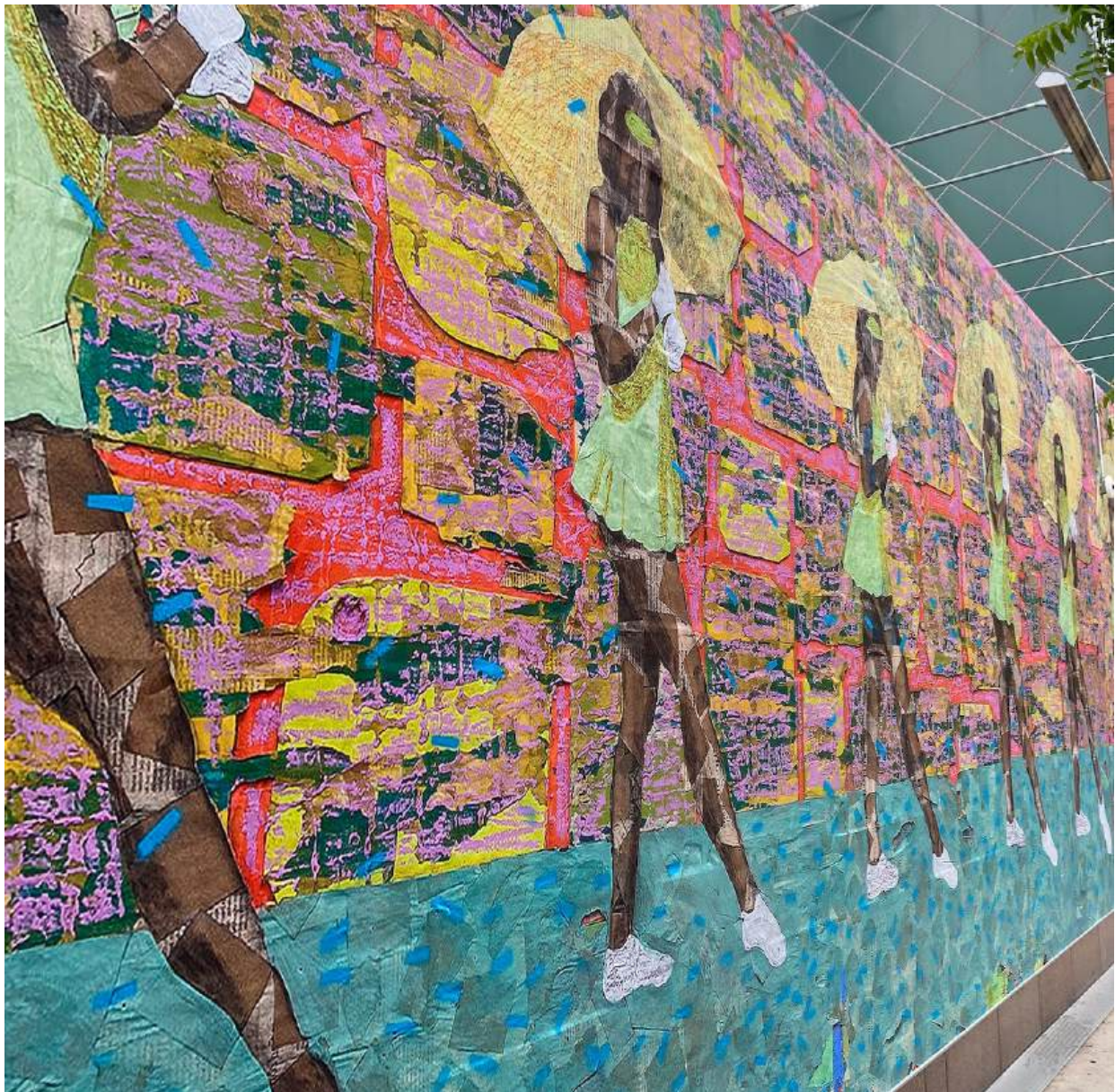


Installation view of Derek Fordjour's "Sonic Boom" (2022) (photo by Elon Schoenholz; courtesy the artist and the Museum of Contemporary Art)

Last Thursday, April 28, just before 11am, a group of museum-goers lined up along Grand Avenue outside of Los Angeles's Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), waiting for it to open. Behind them on the building's facade, another line-up — resplendent and monumental — echoed the phalanx of visitors. A parade of Black, uniformed drum majors and majorettes strides rhythmically across the wall against brightly colored and patterned backgrounds.

Derek Fordjour's mural for MOCA, "Sonic Boom" (2022), features reproductions of four paintings by the New York-based artist, blown-up and printed on vinyl wrap to cover more than 5,400 square feet of the museum's entrance wall. The work celebrates the marching bands of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), taking its name from one of Jackson State University's famous ensembles, nicknamed the "Sonic Boom of the South."

This is the first in MOCA's *Building Art* series, which will feature artworks on the facades of both MOCA locations — Grand Avenue and the nearby Geffen Contemporary — potentially including video and installation, according to a museum spokesperson. In accordance with the sustainability mission of MOCA's Environmental Council, launched in 2020, the vinyl wrap was printed in the US with aqueous inks and will be shredded and reused in future works by Fordjour after deinstallation.



The work celebrates the marching bands of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (photo Matt Stromberg/Hyperallergic)

When viewed up close, the magnified work fragments into a lively array of colors and shapes. But seen from across the wide street, its dancing bodies come to life. For Fordjour, the project offered an opportunity to connect with new audiences.

"We live in a world where it's still true that, for lots of people, an afternoon in the museum is not their first option. I'm interested in reaching people who might not otherwise consider going inside a museum," Fordjour told Hyperallergic. "It's also a wonderful way to activate a painting, to make a painting an invitation."



The work will be shredded and reused in future works by Fordjour after deinstallation. (photo Matt Stromberg/Hyperallergic)

Fordjour took this democratic approach to art when selecting the works to reproduce for the project. He sent a survey to all museum employees — including curatorial, education, and janitorial — asking them to pick from among four options.

"I wanted the work they chose collectively to be reflective of where they believed the museum needs to be in terms of outward facing messaging," Fordjour said. Their choice reflects "a collective desire to have something upbeat and hopeful" after two years of living through a pandemic.

The installation of "Sonic Boom" coincides with Fordjour's first solo show at LA's David Kordansky Gallery, titled *Magic, Mystery, & Legerdemain*. Through his signature collaged paintings, sculpture, and performance, Fordjour channels the theme of magic to examine moments from African-American — and African diasporic — history. The exhibition's highlights include a daily magic show performed by Kenrick Ice McDonald that reimagines the role of Black Herman, one of the first prominent African-American magicians.



Nubia Bowe and Kenrick Ice McDonald in "The Legend of Black Herman," a magic show that's part of Derek Fordjour: Magic, Mystery, & Legerdemain at David Kordansky Gallery (photo Matt Stromberg/Hyperallergic)

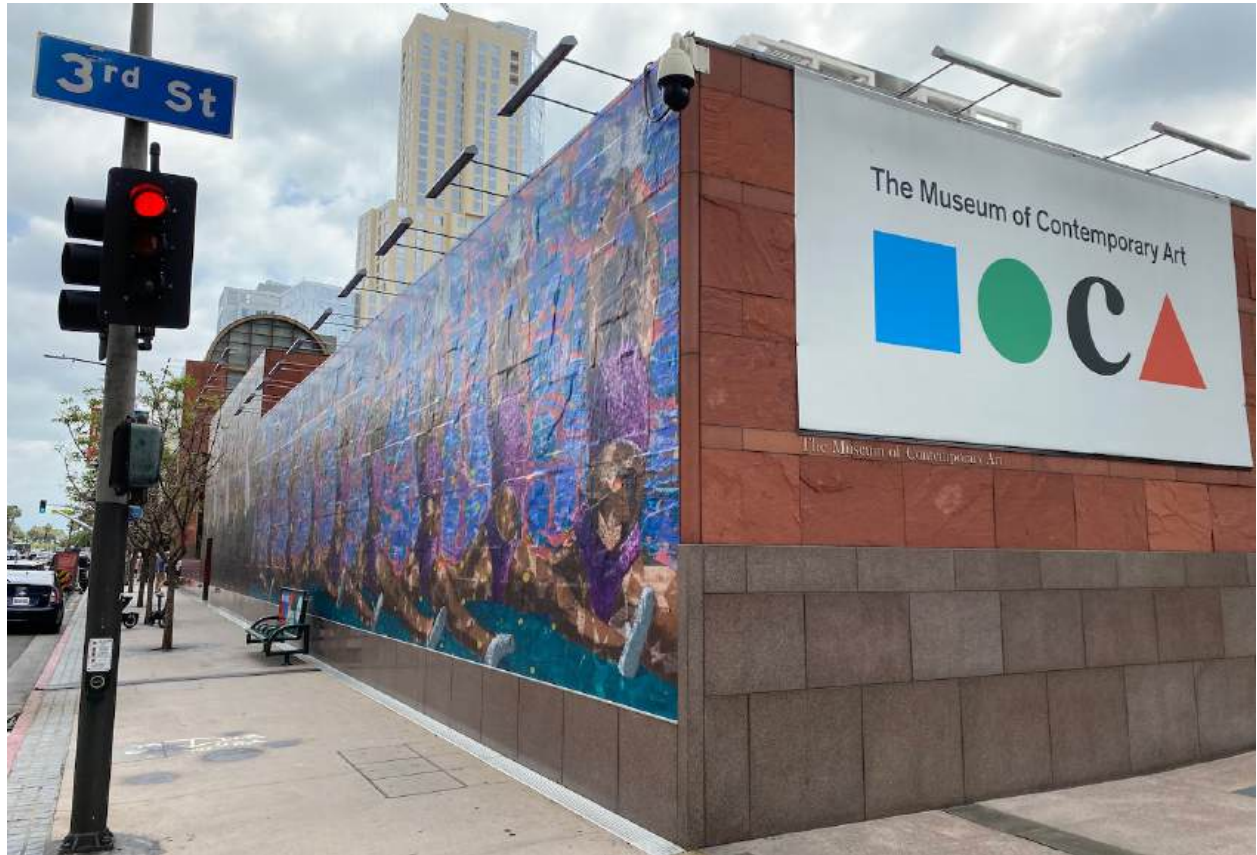
Fordjour's images of HBCU marching bands, reads a text on MOCA's website, "symbolize the daily performance of Blackness itself."

"Embedded there is cultural coding that will have particular resonance in communities of color," Fordjour said.

Last Thursday morning, Ernest McCray, an alumnus Howard University, an HBCU, was excitedly taking pictures of the facade from across the street.

"I really appreciate this. It holds near and dear to me," he told Hyperallergic. "The fact that it's so prominently displayed downtown, on an arts building, it says we're making progress."

As much as "Sonic Boom" holds a specific significance for those familiar with the traditions it depicts, Fordjour is also interested in how his works can cross boundaries, appealing to a range of spectators.



Installation view of Derek Fordjour's "Sonic Boom" (2022) (photo Matt Stromberg/Hyperallergic)

"Painting can be multiple things at the same time," the artist said, noting that viewers can connect with the "regalia and pageantry, the syncopation, separate from cultural context." He mentions that the Florida A&M Marching Band performed during the 2019 Rose Bowl, incorporating a predominantly Southern Black tradition within an Angeleno institution. "This is a way to bring together many different publics. That's what excites me most."

# CULTURED

## Derek Fordjour's Magic Is on Display in Los Angeles

Artist Derek Fordjour will astound and amaze as he explores the history of Black magicians and other iconic figures in a multisensory takeover at David Kordansky Gallery in LA.

**Travis Diehl**

You can't see Derek Fordjour's show at David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles without a token—at least, not without passing through a curving, chandeliered entryway, wallpapered with recent editions of the *Financial Times* (Ukraine, Putin, grain and gas in the headlines) staffed by a twentieth-century showgirl, who will press a token into your hand. What awaits behind the turnstile and curtain, though, is not the blockbuster movie magic native to Hollywood; more like the timeless magic of vaudeville and carnival. But that's not quite it, either—Fordjour's show crackles with something like the astounding, prosaic illusionism of Henry "Box" Brown, a former slave who shipped himself to freedom via the Postal Service.

"Box" Brown features in Fordjour's *Cargo*, one of a series of new paintings that pay tribute to historic Black magicians of all stripes. Many made their careers not without certain professional sleight of hand. Fordjour nods to the proclivity of Black performers for wearing turbans in the South, for instance, to pass as Middle Eastern, as Goldfinger does in the painting *Float*, depicted pulling a hoop around the levitating body of his wife Dove. In *Birdman*, a portrait of famous magician and tightrope artist Richard Potter, the figure is flocked by songbirds on the wire.

The figures thus honored are a bit like Fordjour himself, performing maniac feats with materials. He makes paintings with a signature way of layering painted cardboard, aluminum foil and the pale pink newsprint of the *Financial Times*. This last layer is the "skin" of rationality, racial pun intended, a newspaper for financiers—"traders," no less, although slaves aren't indexed there—pointedly painted beyond recognition. Fordjour sometimes tears through the surface into bright pockets of pigment beneath, the raw color beaming through like light. Past series have explored other aspects of the Black experience—churchgoing, for example, including gospel choirs and hardwood benches but also public funerals of the likes of George Floyd, whose gold-plated coffin Fordjour depicted in 2020.



Derek Fordjour.  
Photography by Brandon Hicks.

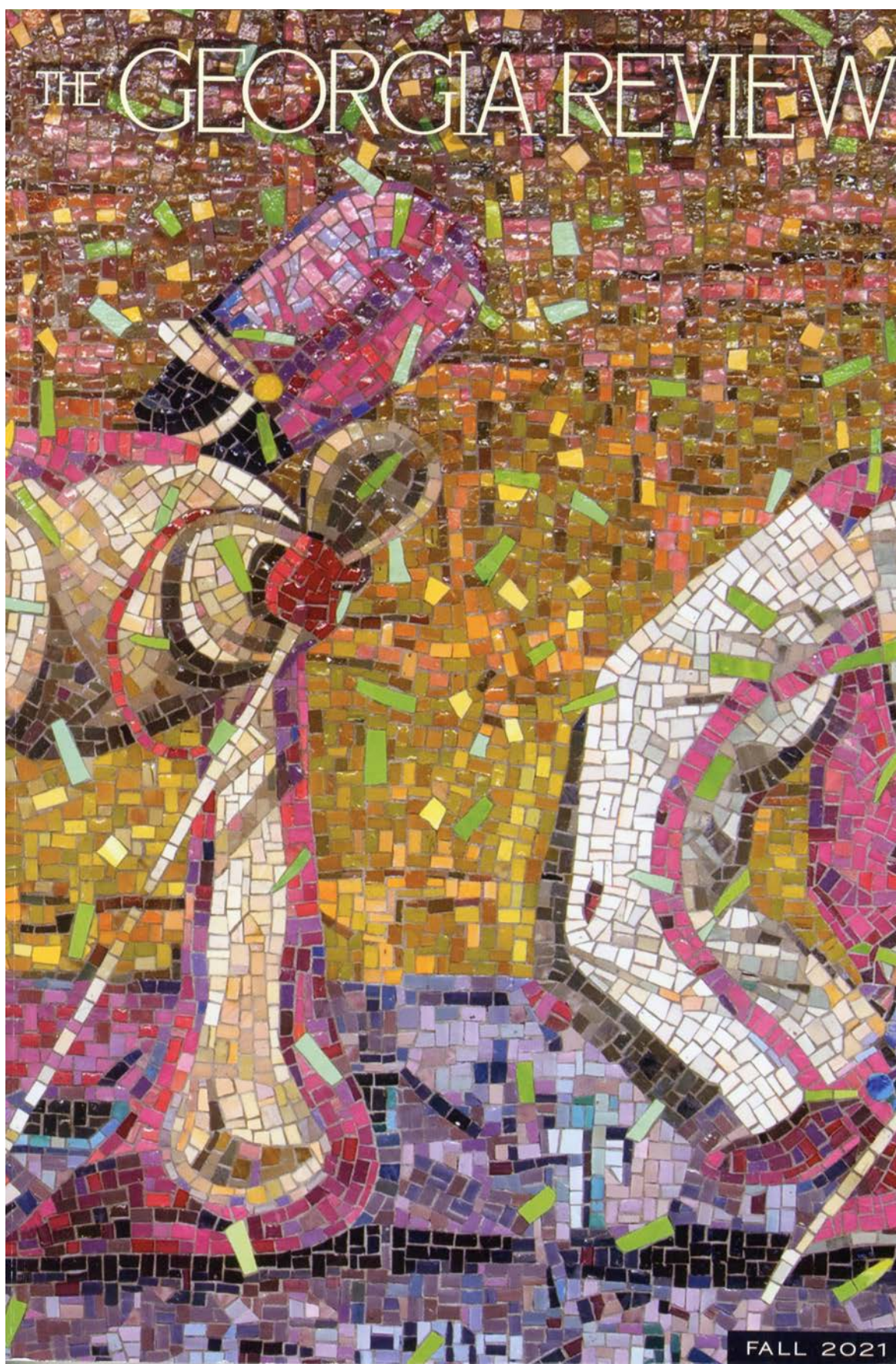
The work in "Magic, Mystery & Legerdemain" continues that blend of virtuosity, meanness, ambition, and worldliness; heaven and earth, sky and street. In other words, the show surveys the outsized role of Black Americans in popular entertainment. The showgirl handing out tokens in the vestibule is echoed a dozen times by the women dressing backstage in *Homage*, which Fordjour says re-frames the trope that Black women are magical. Another fanciful history painting, *Jazzland*, stages the evolution of what many consider the only sui generis American art form, composed by former slaves on the masters' instruments. Instead of recapping this pat narrative, Fordjour's painting poses it as a question.

Then there's *Birth of Showtime*, a portrait of L.A. Laker Magic Johnson. Raised in the citrusless Midwest and newly arrived in the Southland, the star guard reaches in awe for a ripe orange on the bough, holding it airborne, palming it like a tiny basketball. For Fordjour, the moment is an allegory of when sport became spectacle. Johnson was the first of many Black basketball stars promoted as a rival to the white Larry Bird. Fordjour renders the ornament and grill of the waiting Rolls-Royce in sparkling tin foil against posterboard-orange shadows.



Derek Fordjour with *Jazzland* (2022) at his David Kordansky Gallery exhibition in Los Angeles. Photography by Brandon Hicks

Fordjour also understands the bittersweet wages of fame. A small bust of a Tuskegee Airman in a leather helmet, one of the Black pilots in the famous squadron fighting for the United States in World War II, resembles a football player of the era. The Kordansky show features three sculptures that amalgamate casts of the bust, stacked into a sort of trophy and plated in copper, nickel or gold like a budget parody of the winners' podium. Their titles, respectively, dole out bitter advice: *Futile Ambition*; *Never go alone*; *Don't bite the hand*. These sculptures are on view alongside others that sever and recombine the codes of Black athletic prowess—stacks of three balls balanced on disembodied knees, larger coal-black portrait busts burdened with vintage medals. They're in a long, narrow side gallery, around the corner from the main space, facing a 35-foot-long painting of a Carnival procession through Salvador, Brazil. In other words, the juxtaposition of one more or less exploitative form of Black performance with a more spiritualized suspension of disbelief, the long train of the African diaspora reveling on its own terms. To get here, though, visitors pass through a final bit of theatricality: the white cube transmuted into a wood-paneled church basement, then decked out into a vaudeville theater, complete with rippling velvet curtains and the soft, final clinking of admission tokens—a stage upon which would play the abridged history of Black spectacle in the United States. Once a day during gallery hours, L.A.-based magician Kenrick ICE McDonald performs as Benjamin Rucker, aka Black Herman, a former assistant and student to a lineage of European illusionists who, along with their tricks, adopted their family name.



## Derek Fordjour

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### *A Celebration of Life*

#### INTRODUCTION

FOR Derek Fordjour, creating art is not only an act of individual expression, but also a catalyst for building community and transforming lives. A painter, sculptor, and installation artist whose work has been embraced by some of the most revered institutions of the U.S. contemporary art world, Fordjour is also notable in his commitment to making art as widely accessible as possible, whether through designing public art projects, helping shape a community program that supports people accused of minor crimes, or encouraging young artists in his hometown. His works often celebrate the traditions of communities, while also acknowledging the pressures individuals face in performing their roles therein.

Growing up in Memphis, Tennessee, as the son of parents who had emigrated from Ghana, Fordjour fell in love with art at a young age. The adults in his life nurtured this enthusiasm, and he found inspiration everywhere. As a child, Fordjour and his brother would explore the corridors of St. Jude's Children's Research Hospital, which adjoined the campus where their father practiced as an oral surgeon, and admire the colorful artwork that adorned the walls. Later, his high school art teacher became an important mentor, and Fordjour headed to art school in New York after graduating. Yet despite this early certainty about his life's passion, Fordjour's trajectory did not remain so linear, and only with years of life experience would he fully "find his voice" as an artist. He left college to return home and work for a few years, before enrolling at Morehouse College, a prestigious historically Black college in Atlanta. There, he found the sense of community and artistic tradition that his first entry into higher education had not provided. After graduating, he went on to earn a master's degree in art education at Harvard. He returned to New York and in his late thirties began an MFA in painting at Hunter College; by the time he received his degree in 2016, his solo shows were receiving significant criti-

cal attention. His work has been exhibited in venues including Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, Nasher Museum of Art, and the Whitney Museum of American Art, and appears in the collections of the Guggenheim Museum, the Studio Museum of Harlem, the Whitney, LACMA, and elsewhere. In 2018 he was commissioned to create an eight-panel permanent installation for the Metropolitan Transit Authority of New York City at the 145th Street and Lenox Avenue subway station, parts of which can be seen in this issue's portfolio. Fordjour is the Alex Katz Chair at Cooper Union and serves as a Core Critic at Yale University School of Art.

Fordjour came to prominence with his large-scale portraits of athletes and other performers; his MFA thesis was titled "An Aesthetic Theory of Gamesmanship." Whether painted alone or in groups, these subjects usually appear in the costume of those at the center of highly ritualized endeavors that provide audiences thrilling, often cathartic experiences—parades, sporting events, carnivals, and other iconic American traditions. But while the pageantry that these works depict in vibrant colors may be experienced on first glance as purely joyful or celebratory, Fordjour also explores the psychological toll exacted on the subjects in their quest for achievement and the systemic inequalities that Black Americans face even in these elite arenas, revealing a more complex portrait of the labor leading up to a crowd's delight. Fordjour notes that his interest lies less in the literal trappings of games or festivals than in the metaphors they generate, yet the visual details of football uniforms or feathered headdresses, winners' podiums or swimming-pool flags do hold resonance as magical objects within American visual vocabulary, with the power to transform those who encounter them. The paintings, virtuosic displays of Fordjour's skill and imagination, begin with layers of newspaper and colored paper patterned in repeating shapes being built up on top of each other. He then cuts and tears into these strata and develops a scene with acrylic paint, charcoal, oil pastel, foil, or even glitter as the composition demands, resulting in intricately textured, highly personal final canvases.

Fordjour's exhibitions themselves also offer immersive experiences, often featuring installations and performances that extend his paintings' themes. With *SELF MUST DIE* at the Petzel Gallery, Fordjour's latest, his interest in community rituals takes a new expression as he responds to the devastations of the coronavirus pandemic and the longer epidemic of racist violence against Black Americans that manifested so visibly in the murder of George Floyd. The show centers on a series of powerful paintings of Black funeral rites. As in his

other work, the subjects are often splendidly arrayed, whether in choir robes or vestments, or in the gorgeous suits and top hats of the six men in *Pall Bearers*, doing honor to the lives of the deceased they are mourning. *Pall Bearers* was inspired by George Floyd's funeral procession in Houston, where he was carried to his final resting place in a casket finished in gold. In the room where these paintings were displayed, visitors could view the works from a wooden church pew in the center of the room, painted with the traditional Christian commandment *Do This in Remembrance of Me*, a particularly poignant line in this context.

Even while maintaining a demanding studio practice and travel schedule, Fordjour continues to prioritize art education, especially opportunities for people to connect with art outside of traditional academic settings. In 2017, he and Shaun Leonardo were the first teaching artists to participate in Project Reset, a New York City initiative that diverted young people arrested for low-level offenses away from court and into a workshop setting where they could express themselves artistically and reflect on larger issues of justice and responsibility through dialogues about art. The program has expanded and is now provided in partnership with the Brooklyn Museum, with Fordjour and Leonardo continuing to serve as consultants. Fordjour also continues to advocate for arts education in Memphis, where he founded the Contemporary Art Memphis summer fellowship program for young artists, which will accept its first applicants this fall.

Derek Fordjour and I spoke on the phone in early July; highlights of our conversation (lightly edited by both of us) appear below.

C. J. Bartunek

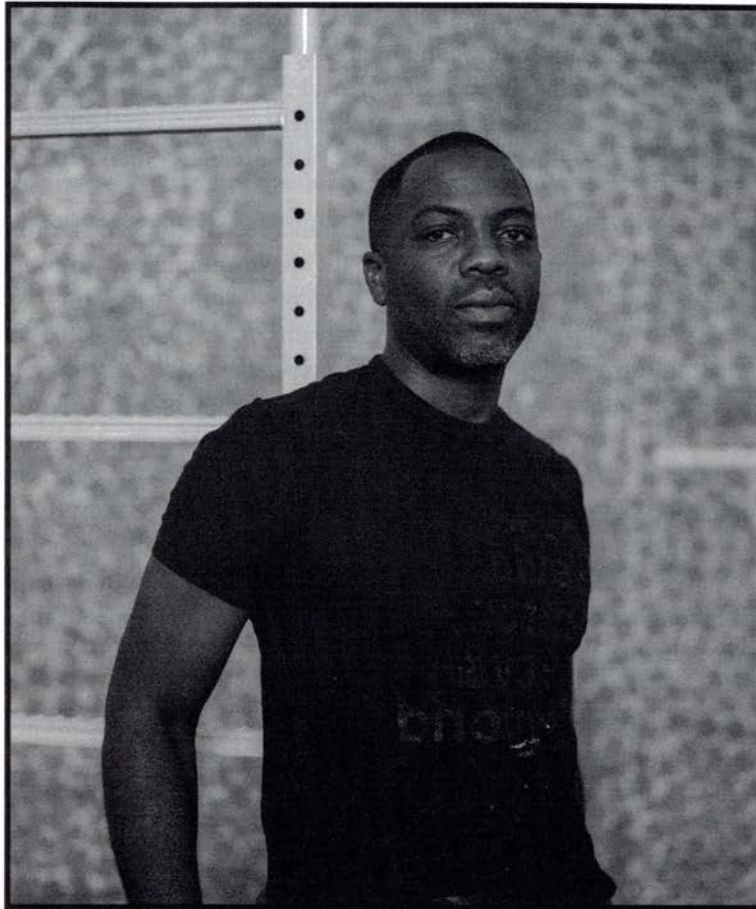
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C. J. Bartunek (CJB): We're talking soon after the Fourth of July, traditionally a time of various patriotic displays, though today complicated feelings around the holiday are more prominent than they've been in the recent past, and I was thinking about some of your paintings. In a *Daily Memphian* story about you, you mentioned the city's tradition of parades. For those who haven't experienced them, would you tell us some of your memories of the parades you saw growing up?

Derek Fordjour (DF): We had a big Cotton Carnival parade, and not only do I recall attending some of the parades in the city, but one of my best friends

DEREK FORDJOUR

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Derek Fordjour. Photo by Freddie L. Rankin II.

growing up was a guy named Paul Rice, and his father was the floatmaker for the city. They have this gigantic warehouse where they would store the floats throughout the year, and that happened to be one of the temporary studios where Paul and I painted together when we were in high school, and it was really just magical. At that age, just being around creativity of a grand, monumental scale was impactful, and also seeing that it was possible to have a creative life.

CJB: A clear thematic throughline in your work is the power of ritual and spectacle and the experiences of the people at the center who are enacting these often elaborate performances. With some of your new work in SELF MUST

DIE, we see a shift from apparently secular scenes of sporting events and parades to sacred traditions around honoring people who have died, including Black Americans killed by racial violence. Would you talk a little bit about that evolution? What commonalities or differences do you see between these profane and sacred traditions? What do they accomplish for their participants?

DF: There's no question that the year of 2020 and the stark focus on morbidities and death really had most of us around the world thinking about mortality. Beyond just an idea, there were the calls and the text messages and the posts of people who lost loved ones. There were deaths in my family, people close to us; I lost a dear friend. I thought about the preponderance of death as a norm. It's one thing, I think, to experience occasional loss; somehow that seems more bearable in comparison to this sort of onslaught of deaths. And so I was very much thinking about mortality and communities affected disproportionately by something as finite as death. That's where the words "self must die" came from. I really enjoy the opportunity to respond directly to the world I live in and to have art that reflects those times. SELF MUST DIE was an occasion in which I thought I could create something that reflected the somber mood and the preponderance of death.

CJB: These scenes are fittingly somber, but the paintings themselves are also very aesthetically beautiful and vibrant in their coloration; there's a sense of communal spirit or shared celebration of the lives of the people who have been lost.

DF: The rituals that memorialize a life that's come to an end are rooted in community. I often use uniforms in my work, often from sporting matches, but also in some cases from labor movements. This body of work was an opportunity to expand that into religious tradition. The choir, for example, and the choir robes, and the idea of achieving a sense of togetherness, some kind of ability to add up to this greater collective endeavor through song. That can become a balm for those who died, but also for the individuals who participate, who in many cases are from marginalized communities; those individuals and communities are able to corral a sense of power, and it's very often through the collective. I was able to ruminate on these ideas across the life spectrum.

I'd also say that in learning about Black funerary tradition, funeral homes in the United States are a post-Civil War development. Embalming fluid used in the war made it possible to preserve life for funeral ritual. In some of my

research, I found that very early on white undertakers were publicly disparaged for their work and as a result, formed a union to improve the low opinions of the work they did. But for Black funeral directors, it was the exact opposite. They became the center of the Black community. They were often well-to-do entrepreneurs, who helped fund churches and political candidates. So I was also very interested in how Black funerary tradition exposed some of the underlying racial and economic disparity that still persists today.

CJB: Before attending Morehouse College, you had been a serious student of art in high school and then enrolled for a time at the Pratt Institute in New York. What was your experience of continuing your education as an artist in a historically Black college? In what ways has your time there shaped the art you make or the views you hold?

DF: Attending Morehouse was pivotal and foundational for me. I started at the Pratt Institute, which was a fine school, but at the time I was there, in the early nineties, art history was taught in a book called the H. W. Janson *History of Art* that probably weighs ten pounds—I might be exaggerating, but it was a giant book—and I don't know if there were any Black artists in the entire book. I remember being so angry and frustrated. I really do think that the way we teach art history today is by comparison much more inclusive, but at that time, art history began in the caves of Lascaux, and you took a trapeze through Europe, and then early American artists, then up through Modernism. And nowhere in that course was there history of African American or African art traditions.

At Morehouse, I took a course at Spelman College, our sister school, with a professor named Dr. Akua McDaniel, the history of African American art. In that class, I learned about slaves who owned other slaves, because they were blacksmiths and metalworkers. I learned about African Americans who went door to door during the early nineteenth century painting the portraits of white families. Joshua Johnson is an artist we know of from that period. We also studied the early twentieth century and the WPA period and learned about artists like Edmonia Lewis and Augusta Savage. So I was opened to a world in which African Americans had continually contributed to the history of art in America and in the world. I felt connected to a very rich lineage and tradition. It really did take the chip off of my shoulder and compelled me to get to work in a serious way.

CJB: It certainly seems that you've paid it forward in becoming an educator yourself, and you've worked with students of all ages, from young children to adults.

DF: I've generally been interested in education beyond the school walls. Very early, as a young artist, I taught very small children, ages three to five. I also worked after-school and summer programs. Then, I worked with men in homeless shelters in Atlanta for a while teaching art. That was very interesting to experience how art functioned in the lives of people who were without homes or without housing security, asking those questions about whether or not it *had* a function. Was it necessary that all your base needs be met in order to experience and appreciate art? That was very informative. I've been active as a critic in MFA programs, and I'm actually starting a program in my hometown of Memphis for under-resourced high school-aged artists to help them in their college pursuits and to understand what it means to live a creative life, in the form of a sleepaway camp. I think I've been interested in what can happen outside of schools, because very often schools are privileged places, so I'm interested in what's possible beyond that.

CJB: From what you've said about your education and what I've read in previous interviews, it seems that your reading in various disciplines is important to your thinking about the art you're making. With *SELF MUST DIE*, you engaged with the writings of scholar Christina Sharpe and theologian James H. Cone, among others, for instance. What are you reading these days?

DF: [Laughs]

CJB: If you have time!

DF: I only laugh because I'm surrounded by books! I really have a healthy addiction to books and reading. I'll give you a glimpse of what I'm looking at now. There's a great book by Elizabeth Hinton that just came out called *America on Fire: The Untold History of Police Violence and Black Rebellion since the 1960s*. That's a really important read, because she's considering the role of violence in movements and how violence is framed when communities of color employ strategies that include violence. I also traveled to Brazil last year, and I have a great book by Pedro Figari from the Museum of Modern Art in São Paulo. It's in Portuguese, so I'm limited, but the pictures are really insightful. And then I'm reading a fantastic book called *Best! Letters from Asian Americans in the Arts*. It's a collection of writings from various artists in the Asian diaspora, and

the list of names is just incredible. Some of the artists I know of, like Anicka Yi or Lumi Tan, but there are many more that I don't know—such as Jessica Hong—it's intergenerational, which I really love. And then I have another exciting book on the writings of Mark Rothko. I have kind of short patience with art books, because they're often written by art historians or scholars—not to disparage art historians, but the artist's voice can sometimes get lost in the analysis. I'm really excited about opportunities to hear the artist's voice directly, be that through diaries or letters or other correspondence, because I relate very closely to their experiences. It really is a treat to be able to read the artist's voice in their own hand, so this book on Rothko is really informative. I'll stop there.

CJB: When talking about your art education at Morehouse, you said you gained a sense of working from a lineage. Are there certain artists who most stand out as who you feel you're in a lineage with?

DF: I'm often asked that question, but my source of inspiration is varied and vast, so I wouldn't be able to extract just a name or two. But I can tell you that there are several artists from the WPA era, artists like Aaron Douglas, who is very closely associated with the Harlem Renaissance. Speaking about Georgia, artists like Hale Woodruff, who has many of his works in the Atlanta University Center. He actually did these wonderful woodcuts of row houses there in Georgia; I was really moved by that work. William H. Johnson, from the same era. I like to draw sources from that period, given that so many of those artists were excluded from our canonical history of art. With my platform, I'm very deliberate about drawing direct ties to those artists. Of course I've been inspired by so many more in successive generations, but I think there's an opportunity to bring them into the contemporaneous dialogue.

CJB: That's fascinating. Thinking of the WPA era of art, this time when so many artists were employed to produce works for community spaces, you've created a number of public artworks yourself. What's on your mind when you're creating something like your work for the MTA or the Whitney, or perhaps other public pieces you've done?

DF: I think it's in keeping with my interest in education beyond the school walls. It's an opportunity to free art from the constraints of privilege that kind of dictate the customs and norms of art spaces. The public realm is an oppor-

Valentine, Victoria L., “Derek Fordjour Joined David Kordansky Gallery, His Explorations of Race and Identity Invoke Culture of Sport, Symbolism of Teams,” *CultureType.com*, February 1, 2021



## Derek Fordjour Joined David Kordansky Gallery, His Explorations of Race and Identity Invoke Culture of Sport, Symbolism of Teams

By Victoria L. Valentine | February 1, 2021

DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY in Los Angeles announced its representation of Derek Fordjour this morning. He will continue to be represented by Petzel Gallery where he had a major exhibition, “Derek Fordjour: Self Must Die,” last fall.

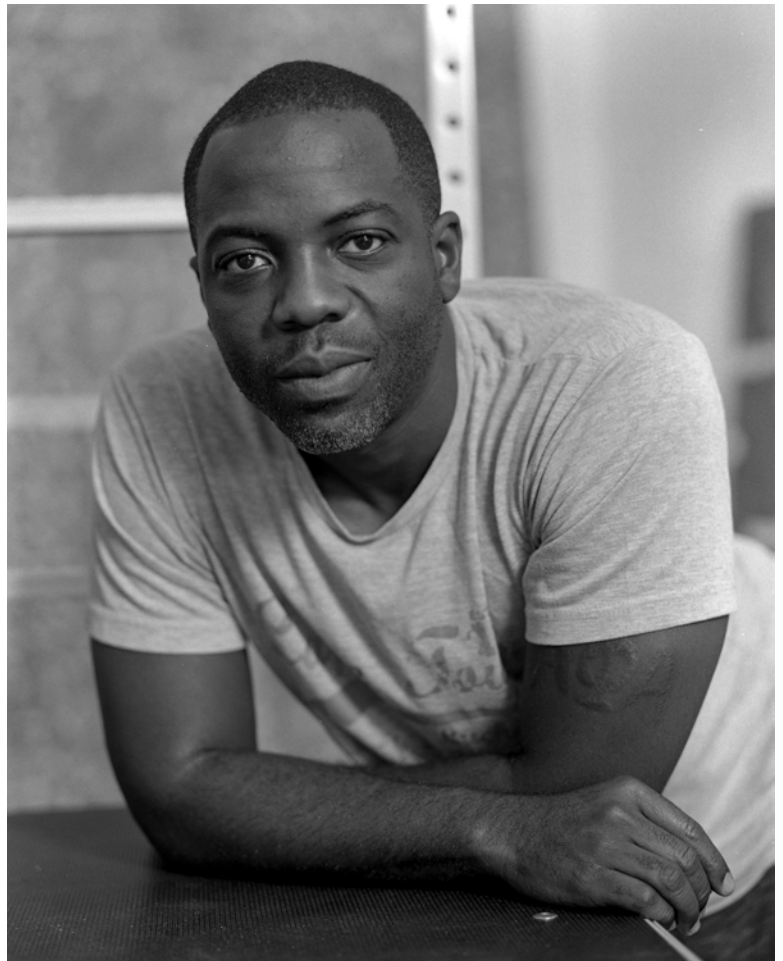
Fordjour expresses himself through painting, sculpture and installation. Employing layers of cardboard, newspaper, and paint, a complex visual materiality is present throughout his work.

Issues of race, identity, and inequality are central to his practice. He invokes the culture of sport and the symbolism of teams, uniforms, marching bands, and formations in his explorations of the power of the collective and the vulnerability, agency, and scrutiny that comes with visibility and achievement. Intense color and repetition are key elements in his work.

Recognition of Fordjour has risen sharply over the past few of years. In 2018, a pair of public art commissions were unveiled in New York—an outdoor installation at the Whitney Museum of American Art and a project with the Metropolitan Transit Authority. “Parade,” a series of mosaic works by Fordjour are permanently installed at the 145th Street subway station in Harlem.

Last year, the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis presented “Derek Fordjour: Shelter,” the artist’s first full-scale solo museum exhibition. An extensive profile in *The New York Times* coincided with his Petzel exhibition. His work has recently been acquired by a number of museums, including the Whitney Museum, Perez Art Museum Miami, Dallas Museum of Art, and Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University.

Born in Memphis, Tenn., Fordjour lives and works in New York. He studied at Pratt Institute and went on to earn an undergraduate degree from Morehouse College. He also holds a master’s degree in education from Harvard University and an MFA from Hunter College.



COURTESY FREDDIE L. RANKIN II / DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY, LOS ANGELES

“Derek Fordjour is one of the most inventive, distinct, and culturally relevant American artists working today. He’s created an immediately recognizable iconography and materiality that grapples with complex and urgent themes of identity, race, vulnerability, and grief,” Mike Homer, partner and senior director at David Kordansky Gallery said in a statement.

“Ambitious projects like *Fly Away*, a live puppet show experience, reveal an artist fearless in his pursuit to evolve and push his practice into new dimensions. We are honored to support his singular vision.”

David Kordansky represents more than 40 artists, including Fred Eversley, Sam Gilliam, Lauren Halsey, Rashid Johnson, Deana Lawson, and Adam Pendleton.

The gallery will present a new painting by Fordjour in a One-on-One online exhibition on its website in April 2021. Fordjour’s first solo exhibition with David Kordansky will open in spring 2022.

Felsberg, Kaylie, "How 9 Artsy Vanguard Alumni Have Become Leading Contemporary Artists," *Artsy.net*, November 15, 2021



## How 9 Artsy Vanguard Alumni Have Become Leading Contemporary Artists

By Kaylie Felsberg | November 15, 2021

The Artsy Vanguard is our annual feature on the artists to know right now, spotlighting early-career artists on the rise. Each year, the list is carefully curated by Artsy Editorial, drawing from hundreds of nominations from art world insiders, curators, collectors, galleries, and artists.

Ahead of the fourth edition of The Artsy Vanguard, which launches December 1st, we're taking a look at nine of the artists featured in past editions. Below, we offer a glimpse into these artists' practices and career milestones, demonstrating how they have gone on to become leading figures in contemporary art since being featured in The Artsy Vanguard.

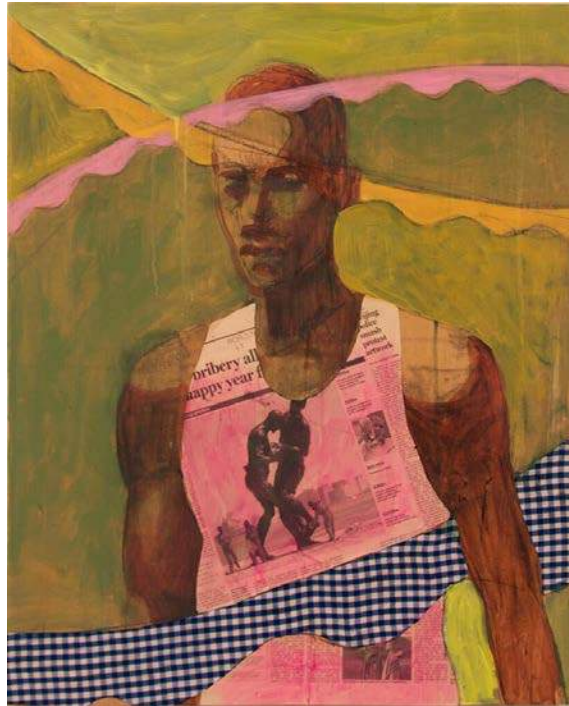
### Derek Fordjour

B. 1974, Memphis. Lives and works in New York.

The Artsy Vanguard 2019



Derek Fordjour, *Eight Hands Down*, 2019



Derek Fordjour, *Emergent Disposition*, 2015

#### About the artist:

Derek Fordjour creates heavily layered paintings that are often populated by uniformed figures such as cheerleaders, marching bands, and athletes. The colorful paintings, methodically built up with newspaper and cardboard, are celebratory as they evoke the cultural rituals and communal rites of passage of the Black community.

#### Career highlights after The Artsy Vanguard 2019:

In October 2019, Fordjour opened his first U.K. solo show at Josh Lilley in London. In January 2020, Fordjour's first full-scale solo museum exhibition opened at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis. This was followed by his first solo show with Petzel Gallery in New York, which included a dynamic puppet show experience titled *Fly Away* (2020); Petzel announced its representation of the artist in spring 2019. In 2020, Fordjour served as the Cooper Union's Alex Katz Chair of Painting. That year, his work set new records on the secondary market.

In February 2021, David Kordansky Gallery announced its representation of Fordjour, in collaboration with Petzel. Three months later, the artist's work made its debut in Asia with a solo exhibition, "Gestalt," at Shanghai's Pond Society, where Fordjour presented six new paintings that continue his investigation into community-occupied spaces. Also in 2021, the artist has been featured in group shows at the Brooklyn Museum and the Columbus Museum of Art.

The demand for Fordjour's work on the primary market has accelerated this year. At September's edition of Art Basel in Basel, David Kordansky sold a large-scale canvas of competitive swimmers in hot-pink bathing suits, *Open Swim* (2021), to a North American institution.

**The New York Times**

# A Puppet Festival Returns to New York, All Grown Up

Opening with five days of in-person performances, the International Puppet Fringe Festival NYC also includes streaming productions and an exhibition at the Museum of the City of New York.

By Laurel Graeber | August 10, 2021



The festival arrives Wednesday with over 50 shows and events, including a streaming production of the mythical tale “Lara — the Waters’ Charm,” by the Brazilian group Cia Lumiató. Diego Bresani

After more than a year of pandemic-related crises, Manuel Antonio Morán wanted to give a gift to New York. He envisioned something lighthearted and uplifting, but also thought-provoking and as varied as the city itself. The answer? Puppets.

But there’s nothing here to prompt sneers or eye rolling. The International Puppet Fringe Festival NYC, which arrives this week with over 50 shows and events, more than a dozen short films and five accompanying exhibitions, including “Puppets of New York” at the Museum of the City of New York, is far from a kiddie celebration.

“The wrong perception in the United States is that puppetry is just for children or to be used for education,” Morán, the festival’s artistic director, said in an interview at the Clemente Soto Vélaz Cultural and Educational Center, the programming’s Lower East Side hub. “That’s something I’m fighting every single day.”

This festival, which is offering 60 percent of its performances free (tickets to the rest are \$15 each), may help convince the doubters. Although Morán founded Puppet Fringe NYC as a biennial in 2018 — Covid-19 prevented its 2020 edition — this version is almost twice the size of the original and essentially a rebirth. Beginning on Wednesday with the first Puppet Week NYC, which comprises five days of live events, the festival continues through Aug. 31, mostly in virtual form, with shows from countries including India, Israel, Argentina, Spain, South Korea and the Ivory Coast.

It “represents the whole immigrant ethos of the Lower East Side, channeled through the lens of these other citizens that are puppets,” said Libertad O. Guerra, the executive director of the Clemente. The center is producing Puppet Fringe NYC with Teatro SEA, the downtown Latino theater Morán started in 1985, and Morán’s own agency, Grupo Morán.

This year’s festival will also have workshops in puppet construction, four of them for adults. And for those whose tastes run to the politically barbed or the comically risqué, two grown-ups-only puppet evenings are planned, one of them called the “Bawdy, Naughty Puppet Cabaret/Puppet Slam.”

“They’re including elements of burlesque,” Morán said of the slam, to be presented on Saturday by the Puppetry Guild of Greater New York. “There might be a little bit of skin,” he added with a laugh.



Derek Fordjour and Nick Lehane's puppet (called a man whose name is never known) from their 2020 production "Fly Away." Karsten Moran for The New York Times



Rolando, a puppet by Agrippino Manteo whose family immigrated to New York a century ago. They specialized in making complex metal-armored Sicilian marionettes. Karsten Moran for The New York Times

But perhaps this festival's most novel element is its partnership with the Museum of the City of New York, which will open its 2,500-square-foot exhibition with a sold-out celebration on Thursday evening. "Puppets of New York," which runs until early April at the uptown Manhattan museum, features photographs, videos, films and sets, as well as more than 60 puppets. They range from cardboard finger models designed by Penny Jones to José A. López Alemán's 12-foot-tall Titanya, the fairy queen from "Sueño," Teatro SEA's Afro-Caribbean version of "A Midsummer Night's Dream."

"The main argument of the show uptown is that the history of puppetry in New York City mirrors the demographics of the city," said Monxo López, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation fellow who curated "Puppets of New York." And, he noted, "many different puppeteers that reflect that diversity have not been as visible as others. It was important to tell that story of diversity, of visibility, of inclusiveness, in a way that also showed joy and possibility."

To that end, the exhibition includes not only designs by famous masters like Jim Henson and Ralph Lee, but also work by artists like the Manteo family, who brought complex metal-armored Sicilian marionettes when they immigrated to New York a century ago, and Derek Fordjour and Nick Lehane, whose 2020 puppet production, "Fly Away," featured a nameless young Black man.

"My strategy was that each object had to tell as many stories as possible," said López, who also collaborated with the author and curator Leslee Asch to organize "Puppets of New York: Downtown at the Clemente," a complementary exhibition on view through Sept. 30. It joins three other art shows that will be there through August: "Teatro SEA's International Collaborations"; "Murals of Puppetry Around the World," featuring Alfredo Hernández's paintings; and "Vince Anthony's Legacy," which celebrates the retired founder of the Center for Puppetry Arts in Atlanta, to whom the festival is dedicated.

The exhibitions reveal a synergy with the festival's live performances, which will mostly be presented outdoors. (All in-person events require registration and face masks.) Chinese Theater Works, which will deliver puppet dragons and the Chinese judge of the dead to the Clemente's plaza over four nights in "The Triple Zhongkui Pageant," will be represented by shadow puppets at the Museum of the City of New York. Also at both those locations will be Lamb Chop, perhaps the most memorable — and feistiest — sock puppet of all time, who appeared on children's television for 40 years with her ventriloquist co-star, Shari Lewis.

"She's the Velveteen Rabbit of puppets," said Lewis's daughter, Mallory Lewis, referring to Margery Williams's children's classic about a stuffed animal that becomes real. On Wednesday evening, Mallory Lewis and Lamb Chop will perform "The Shari Lewis Legacy Show," an interactive production featuring a new, pandemic-related ending. "It's a tribute to the first responders," she said in a phone interview.



The works on display in the "Puppets of New York" exhibition at the Museum of the City of New York include Bruce Cannon's marionette Lady Love Power (inspired by Diana Ross). Karsten Moran for The New York Times



Rick Lyon's hand puppet Trekkie Monster from "Avenue Q" and others in the exhibition, which opens Aug. 13, highlight puppetry traditions. Karsten Moran for The New York Times

Other family-friendly performances will take place all weekend. Bruce Cannon, artistic director of the Swedish Cottage Marionette Theater in Central Park, contributes his talents to the City Parks Foundation's jazzy production of "Little Red's Hood," to be performed in both English (Saturday) and Spanish (Sunday).

Besides this fairy tale, in which the Wolf stalks Little Red through Manhattan, Cannon will present his own "Harlem River Drive," a one-man homage, on Sunday.

"It explores how Harlem became Harlem," he said in a phone interview. While touching on serious topics like racism and the Depression, it also offers joyful music and multiple kinds of puppets, all operated by Cannon. They usually include a marionette inspired by Diana Ross — absent from the festival performance because it's in "Puppets of New York" — and two of Michael Jackson. (When was the last time you saw a moonwalking marionette?)

Deborah Hunt, a New Zealander living in Puerto Rico, will also examine a community's evolution in three performances of "La Macanuda," whose title, she said in a phone conversation, means "a large, friendly being." Hunt, whose work appears in the Teatro SEA exhibition, portrays the character in a puppet that encases her entire body. Accompanied by cutouts, scrolls and a smaller puppet, she enacts a wordless tale — essentially a statement supporting immigrants — in which La Macanuda rescues the victims of a city-destroying ogre. "She's a kindly departure for me," said Hunt, whose work often tends toward the macabre.

The Clemente's own neighborhood stars in nightly performances of "Los Grises/The Gray Ones," Morán's music-filled show about the community's elders, and Saturday and Sunday in "Once Upon a Time in the Lower East Side," which the center commissioned from the Junktown Duende collective, a troupe that creates puppets from recycled materials.

Its production is "centered around a tenement where waves of immigrants settled," said Adam Ende, a member of Junktown Duende. And it's "specifically about the history of immigrant puppetry."

While the show deals with gentrification and police brutality, it also illustrates the transformation of a blighted space into a community garden. And like Puppet Fringe NYC, it's a testament to strength amid hard times. "The struggle continues," Ende said. "And we're celebrating together, endlessly."

OCULA

# Derek Fordjour's Vibrant Interactions

A rising star in recent years, Derek Fordjour was certainly not an overnight success, but once he finally found his voice, the art world started paying attention, with that interest continuing to grow.

In Conversation with Paul Laster | Shanghai, June 23, 2021



Derek Fordjour. Courtesy the artist.

A painter, sculptor, and installation artist who was born and raised in Memphis, Fordjour was in and out of college for nearly a decade, first receiving a Bachelor's degree from Morehouse College in 2001. He earned a Master's in Art Education from Harvard University the following year, but didn't get back to pursuing a higher degree in painting until 2014, when he began an M.F.A at Hunter College and eventually finished school there in 2016.

Best known for his complex, intriguingly crafted figurative works concerned with issues of race, identity, and inequality, Fordjour credits Nari Ward and Carrie Moyer with guiding him through grad school, but it was a chance encounter with Kerry James Marshall some years earlier that helped him get his artistic career moving in the right direction. His first big break came when he was still in his initial year at Hunter with a solo show in Bushwick, which was followed by one-person outings in London, Los Angeles, and Turin.

A 2016 artist residency at the Sugar Hill Museum ended with a solo that included his first art installation (*Parade*, 27 July 2017–11 February 2018), which garnered critical praise from the New York press, and was quickly followed by a commission from the Whitney Museum of American Art to produce a large-scale painting for its Billboard Project, with the museum acquiring the mixed-media painting for its permanent collection.

The artist was on his way to greater opportunities, with solos at Night Gallery in Los Angeles (*JRRNNYS*, 2 February–2 March 2019), Josh Lilley in London (*The House Always Wins*, 4 October–16 November 2019), and Petzel Gallery in New York (*SELF MUST DIE*, 12 November–19 December 2020) providing space for his captivating concepts to blossom. In early 2021, the artist joined David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles, where he will hold his first solo exhibition with them in spring 2022.

Through these opportunities, Fordjour developed a complex process of painting. After applying colour to canvas, he glues on painted cardboard tiles and then wraps the entire surface in layers of newspaper, which he partially scrapes away. Adding another layer of newspaper cut into circles, strips, and squares, he dissects it while drawing with charcoal and painting on the surface. Creating a lively, layered field of figures and forms, his paintings convey carnivalesque characters, popular performers, and stylised sport subjects in an animated arrangement of colour and texture.

The allegorical relationship between the performers and art provides a philosophical context for his thinking, with the gamification of social structures and the inherent vulnerability of the individual becoming recurring themes in the artist's work. The six paintings in his exhibition *Gestalt* (15 May–2 July 2021) at Shanghai's Pond Society continue the investigation of these concepts, while also launching a new exploration of the gestalt, both as content and as form.

**PL** How did you develop your concepts for gamification of social structures and the inherent vulnerability of the individual, which you then began to explore and still continue to investigate in your work?

**DF** I was looking at cultural materials and found myself obsessing over athletes, even though I wasn't interested in the particular sport or celebrity. When that intersected with my own self-work, I realised that I wasn't comfortable with vulnerability.

I would never say that I was overwhelmed, nor would I publicly admit to failure. I had a false notion of self-presentation. When I finally came to realise the vulnerability that made me uncomfortable was also my power, it made sense as to why I was looking at athletes. They're vulnerable to the outcome of the game.

There will be a winner. There will be a loser. Something can go wrong. I started to explore that allegorical relationship with society and race and power and economics. It became the framework for which I can plug in all of the things that interest me.

**PL** How did you devise such a complex painting process?

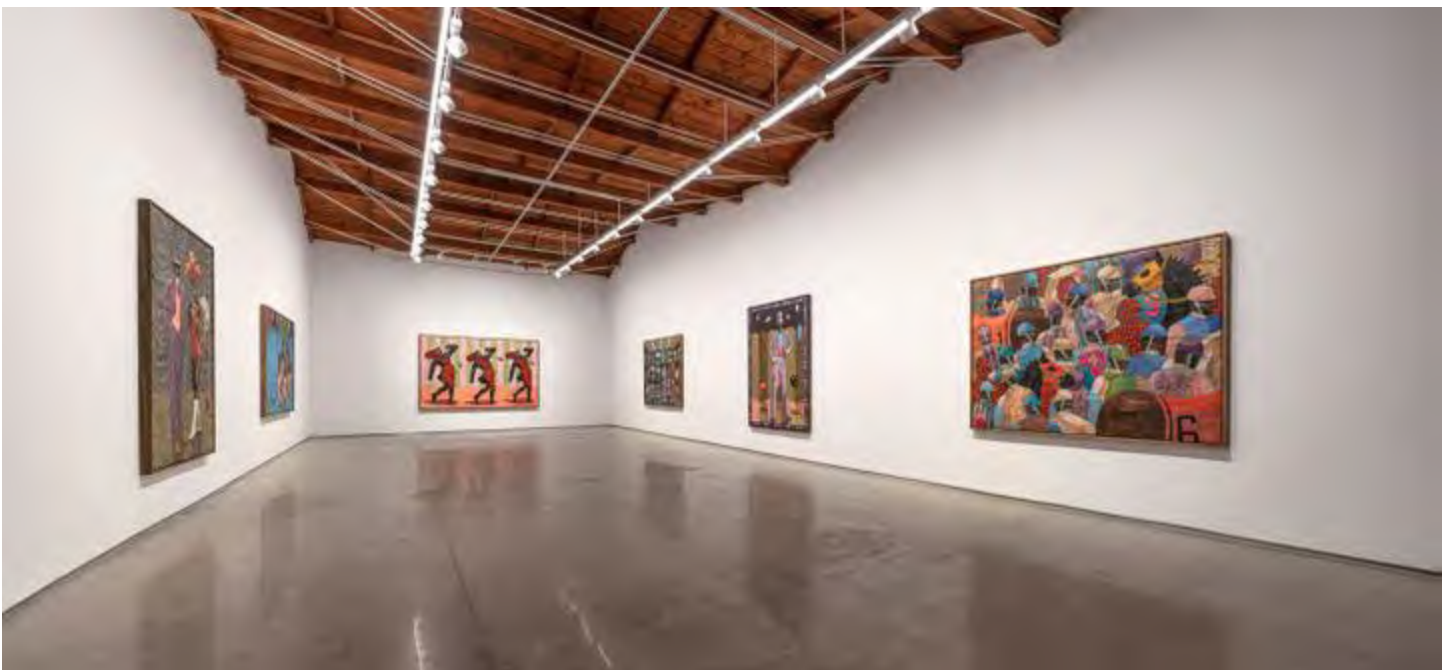
**DF** During tough times I worked with newspaper, which is a fragile material, but the joy of drawing on such a surface with vine charcoal freed me from the oppression of easel painting. I enjoyed how liberating it was.

It allowed me to start cutting, but then I had this hollow object that needed more support. Experimenting with ways to create more support ended up creating a new kind of surface. Now I react to something in every painting.

I never just deal with the whiteness of the canvas. I'm always reacting to an embedded history in the work. There are about ten layers on every surface. It has become quite a process, even though it's not something I purposely set out to do.

**PL** I know that you use the *Financial Times* for its pink colour, but does its content play into your ideas of commodification and racial inequities?

**DF** Yes, and you're probably the first person to make that connection. I made that decision when I was thinking about personal value and perceived value. The *Financial Times* is making an effort to differentiate itself from the pool of other newsprint with its distinctive colour. The idea of individuation—the desire to distinguish oneself in the face of being stereotyped or grouped—has a tension that I identify with.



Exhibition view: Derek Fordjour, *Gestalt*, Pond Society, Shanghai (15 May–2 July 2021). Courtesy Pond Society.



Derek Fordjour, *Downstage Busker* (2021). Acrylic, oil paint, charcoal, cardboard, newspaper, and canvas. 170.8 × 6.35 × 221.6 cm. Courtesy Pond Society.

**PL** What's your theory of optical colour mixing?

**DF** Again, as with so many things in my life, it was born out of failure. I'm a really impatient painter, but making an oil painting on canvas requires a patience for colour mixing. The way that I currently work allows me to break the rules and still achieve the optical richness that I want.

By working through various surfaces and allowing space for interaction, I can achieve a vibrancy. A lot of the colours in my work are situated next to each other. The eye does the work of putting them together.

**PL** The end result reminds me of pointillism, particularly Georges Seurat's *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* (1884–1886), which depicts figures flatly displayed in a staged scenario. Are modernist painters like Seurat an influence?

**DF** Yes. Not just Seurat, but also Pierre Bonnard, who had an amazing dry-brush technique, which is very rough, almost as though there is no medium in the paint.

I also like William H. Johnson, who makes ham-fisted, solid choices of colour, which work almost melodically. They have a saturation and proximity to each other that's almost a puzzle-like fit, which I love. I'm also inspired by Romare Bearden's collages and the pointillist patchwork in David Hockney's Los Angeles landscapes. I try to bring all of those things to bare in what I'm doing.

**PL** What's your philosophy of autonomy and control?

**DF** It's an expression of my own anxiety. As an artist operating inside an ecosystem that's profit-driven, I think about my vulnerability. Where is my agency there? If I'm relying on other entities to arrive at value that sustain me, I have to ask that question.

As a Black person in America, it's a conversation that we are all privy to and think about. As a citizen in a capitalist environment, you cannot help but consider your relationship to capital and economics. I'm interested in these relationships to power.

**PL** Let's talk about the paintings in the show, starting with *Capital & Labour* (2021), which depicts a well-dressed man and a showgirl. What's the message being conveyed through these characters?

**DF** I'm not sure that there's a message, but I am interested in how the viewer adds up the elements in the painting and the narrative they project onto that stage. The meaning of the work is really up to the viewer.

**PL** Does the painting *Collection of Evidentiary Facts* (2021), which presents a



Drake Foggio, *Half Mast* (2018). Exhibition view: Exterior view of Whitney Museum of American Art (24 September 2018 to present). Courtesy the artist and Night Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Ron Amstutz

room full of trophies and honours, visually express your theory of meritocracy?

**DF** Yes. There is no reason why I need three degrees to make a painting. What is that about? A lot of it is the hope that these degrees will add up to some greater value, which might inoculate me from the vicissitudes of my demography. That's really what's happening.

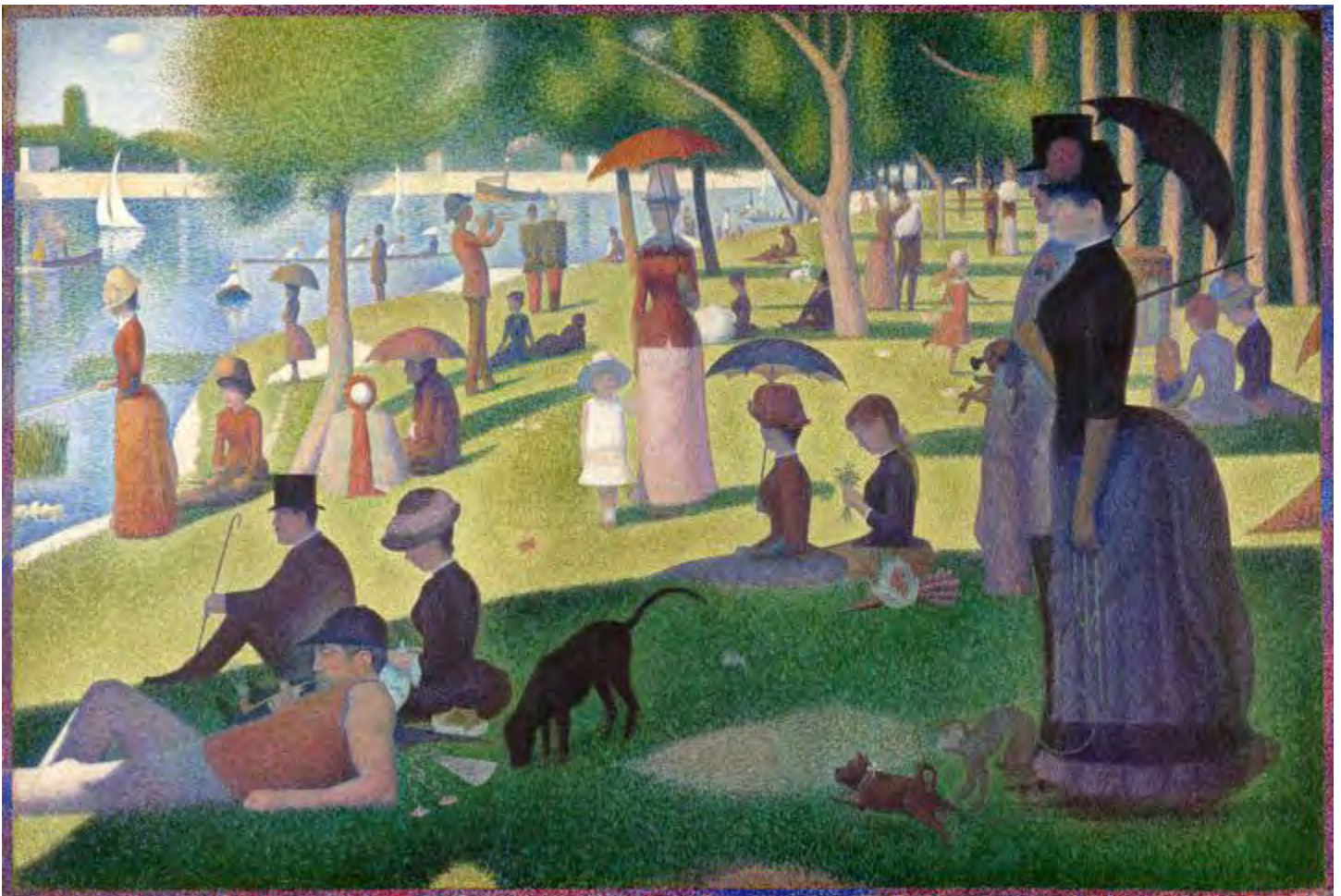
Unfortunately, at a traffic stop, the police don't ask for my degrees. I can't show them to a hostess when I'm asking to be seated at a restaurant. That futility is something that interests me. It's what drove me to make this painting.

I'm also interested in the universality of achievement, the artefacts of achievement, and the American ethos around winning. It's an opportunity to make reconsiderations about what that is. It starts with me, but I'm interested in how my experience can amplify these other more universal concerns that are possible from the paintings, too.

**PL** *Downstage Busker* (2021), with a performer being controlled by strings, seems to address the ideas of autonomy and control, but is it also addressing the concept of performing competency, of looking like you know what you're doing, of playing the part?

**DF** Right, I wouldn't disagree with that interpretation at all. The subject of the painting is probably an emotion. It's not exactly portraiture. It's really more about a feeling. If I had to create a self-portrait—not of my physical being, but of my emotional state—it might look like this painting.

**PL** This show, however, is about the theory of gestalt and, though all three of the paintings we just discussed express different principles of that theory, *Full Step Triad* and *Thalassic Quintet* (both 2021), which show three drum majors in the for-



Georges Seurat, *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* (1884–1886). Oil on canvas. 207.6 × 308 cm. Courtesy The Art Institute of Chicago



Derek Fordjour, *Collection of Evidentiary Facts* (2021). Acrylic, oil paint, charcoal, cardboard, newspaper, and canvas. 221.6 x 6.35 x 170.8 cm. Courtesy Pond Society.

mer, and five synchronised swimmers in the latter, present patterns and structures in even more obvious ways. What are you saying with these paintings?

DF I'm interested in how gestalt can address both form and content. There's a very real formal investment in how I build compositions and I think there's a real delight to it. As painters, we're always interested in the formal properties of a picture; however, what becomes interesting is how these compositional arrangements can also carry context.

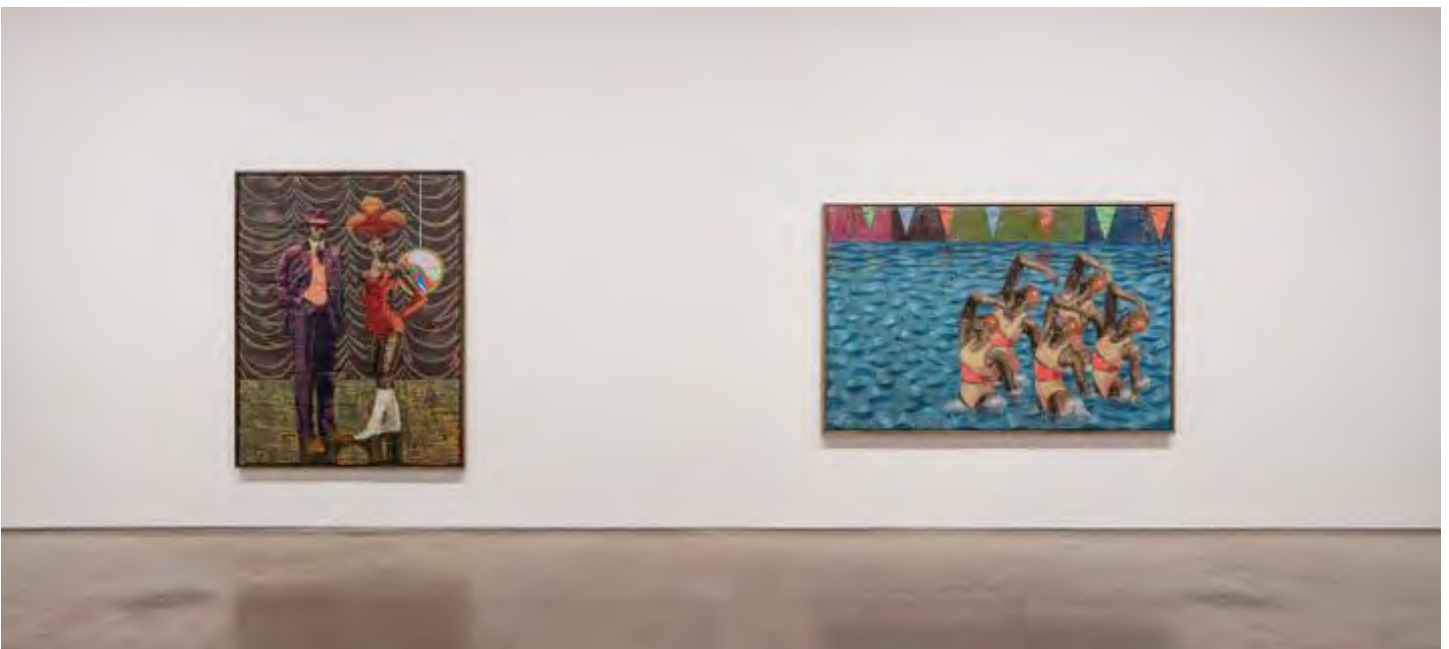
I'm reading a book titled *Minor Feelings* (2020) by Cathy Park Hong, which is written from an Asian American perspective, about power, autonomy, and assimilation, and it resonates with me. I ponder those things as they pertain to the principles of gestalt.

When you think about proximity, repetition, and the challenges of a marginalised person to indi-

viduate themselves from a group, there's this wonderful alignment between my formal concerns and the conceptual ones, particularly through bringing this conversation to China right now.

**PL** *The Second Factor of Production* (2021) returns to one of your favourite subjects, jockeys, who are massed together in a sea of colours and patterns. What's the importance of the jockey, both historically in America and in your work?

**DF** The painting is a consideration of Black labour, both presently and historically. The Black jockey was born out of slavery. When we had an equestrian-based society, in which it was fashionable for the plantation owner to ride up to the country club on a beautiful horse. It was an enslaved person that maintained that horse. As a direct outgrowth, enslaved people became the first jockeys.



Exhibition view: Derek Fordjour, *Gestalt*, Pond Society, Shanghai (15 May–2 July 2021). Courtesy Pond Society.

After they were freed, Black jockeys were able to win purses and achieve a level of wealth. Then, around 1905, when Blacks started migrating north and the race riots began, the public appetite for Black jockeys changed. They were extracted from the sport and that absence has remained until today.

I came into the world of art-making at a time when Black artists were viewed as particularly valuable commodity. The presence of the jockey in my work is cathartic for me. It expresses my skepticism of Black moments in America.

**PL** Although this show is centred on painting, sculpture and installation have become an equally powerful part of your practice. How have they helped expand what you do and the thought process behind it?

**DF** Sculpture is wonderfully inspirational because I don't readily regard myself as a sculptor. Going back to the years when painting was so arduous for me, one of the things that I did in my studio to make it a more joyous place was to go to an area to which I had no expectations. Because I was primarily a painter, sculpture had all the joy of discovery and freshness.

Installation is world-making. If I can capture all of your senses, I can make you believe in this other realm. I love artists like William Kentridge or Red Grooms, who can create a whole universe. I forget where I am. I'm engrossed.

The transformative power of world-making in art is something that I want to deliver to people. It's almost like an act of love to say change your realm, come in and leave it all behind... Take a ride.

**PL** If you had been able to create an installation for this current show, what might it have been?

**DF** Hah, that's not a fair question. Did I sign an agreement that required me to answer every question you asked? Because if not, I'm going to exercise my right to pass on this one.

I wanted to think of this exhibition solely as a painting show. I wanted the strength of the paintings to do their thing, so I didn't even allow myself to consider other media.



**ArtAsiaPacific**

# ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE: Interview With Derek Fordjour

By HG Masters | June 11, 2021



Portrait of DEREK FORDJOUR. All images courtesy the artist and Petzel Gallery, New York, unless otherwise stated.

Derek Fordjour's multimedia painted works and installations tap into the vernacular aesthetics of American cultural life—from carnivals to sporting events, the circus, church, and the theater. His compositions of Black performers and athletes draw attention to both singular figures and bodies engaged in collective activities. With vivid colors and unique textured surfaces, Fordjour's works highlight the roles that African Americans have historically been permitted to, or barred from, playing in specific social or cultural spaces. While drawing on the deep legacies of racism and segregation in the United States, his works also explore the tensions in American culture between an ethos of individual exceptionalism and the deep bonds forged within marginalized communities. In this conversation, the artist explains how he aspires to establish empathic connections with viewers in works that touch on historical and lived experiences, while remaining inspired by his own process of creative exploration.

**Several of your recent works shown in "SELF MUST DIE," at New York's Petzel Gallery, depict Black performers in circus or vaudeville acts, alongside athletes like the synchronized swimmers in *Cadence* (2020). Another series of works—*Pall Bearers, Eulogy, Chorus of Maternal Grief, Procession (After Ellis Wilson)* (all 2020), for instance—depict scenes of Black mourning. What are you exploring through this range of emotional expressions about the representations of Black bodies and Black communities in American culture, historically and today?**

My interest in performance stems from my own attempt to grapple with a deeply personal sense of vulnerability. This is a feeling I experience keenly as an artist sharing my work publicly, hoping to achieve a universal point of access through the uniquely personal. My last show, "SELF MUST DIE," was a direct response to the upheaval and sense of dread in the world around me. My embodied experience of navigating a world steeped in bias, predicated on complex systems of inequity, informs my worldview and guides my intuition, the catalyst of my desire to create. I try to abstain from sweeping declarations about Black life and instead amplify my humanity in ways that foster empathy and authentic connection—and that is connection to my larger community and connection to a viewer experiencing my work.

***The Futility of Achievement* (2020) combines elements from the world of sport, namely the trophies and jockey uniforms, and service labor, in the figure of the woman vacuuming the floor. Can we read this work as an allegory about the larger history of the struggle for African American equality in the US?**

In this particular work, the specific race of the figure in the foreground is less significant than her social position and relationship to the artifacts that surround her. The intimate nature of relations between sharply contrasting socio-economic groups is an invitation to consider the function and consequence of labor. *The Futility of Achievement* is almost cinematic—it offers the mise en scène of a broad landscape, populated with the spoils of victory. The presence of a lone actor prompts further considerations, some of which may involve questions of equity, race, and gender; others might not. I imagine that the life experience the viewer brings to this work will determine how and what they see here.

**Your process of making art is quite distinctive, beginning with cardboard pieces that you glue to the surface before adding and subtracting layers of color, newspaper, and other elements. How did you develop this layered way of working, and what does it allow you to do in terms of building a world through an image?**

My process developed organically. I was initially working on newsprint because it was most affordable. Tearing and cutting the surface created the need for additional support, so I mounted paper onto canvas, but I sliced through the canvas too. Ultimately I added cardboard to provide greater support, but over time I began to add contours and varying shapes to add greater opticality to the work. I was always concerned with erosion and fracture, even when I painted with oil on wood. I would use a dremel, drill, and sanders to affect the surface layer.

**How are your works displayed in "Gestalt" at Pond Society? Did you think about the show in different terms, because of the shift in cultural context from, say, New York/the US to Shanghai?**

This is, by design, a straightforward painting show, with six paintings sharing one room across three walls. The experience of the show is the conversation between works, seemingly disparate subjects born of the same set of concerns. With regard to the broader context of Shanghai, I wanted to present my work concisely. I think of it as an introduction of sorts and hopefully a dialogue with the Chinese public that will continue over time.

**Why did the figure of the jockey racing on a horse become important to you?**

In "Gestalt," the work *The Second Factor of Production* (2021) features Black jockeys and race horses. The legacy of the Black jockey in the institution of American horse racing is one that informs the politics of race relations even a century later. The attitudes towards the Black jockey at the turn of the 20th century was a direct response to Jim Crow laws and a backlash in public sentiment. After a decade of victories in the late 19th century, they were unceremoniously extricated from the sport, an absence that remains today. I invoke this history in response to the notion of Black moments, in the art world and beyond.

**When audiences are engaged by your works and want to know more about your practice, who do you tell them are the artists and other cultural figures that inspired or motivated you?**

I am motivated by the pursuit of catharsis, a desire to tell the truth and by my hope to edify humanity. To this end, I am infinitely inspired by human stories, literature, film, history, and more artists than I could ever list at once. The whole art historical cannon is an inexhaustible resource and its history continues to be written at the hands of artists all over the world working even now. I am humbled to trudge along in pursuit of something greater than ourselves.

**After the works of "SELF MUST DIE"—and also a harrowing year in the US (and elsewhere) on many levels—do you have a sense of the directions you're going next in your practice or things that you'd like to explore further?**

I am currently working on the next iteration of paintings for a major show next year in Los Angeles with David Kordansky Gallery. I am very excited about all there is for me to learn from this new body of work. I am also slowly developing a live performance that I will be happy to share when the time comes—it could be much sooner than later. We'll have to see!



DEREK FORDJOUR, *Collection of Evidentiary*, 2021, acrylic, charcoal, cardboard, foil, glitter and oil pastel on newspaper mounted on canvas, 165 x 216

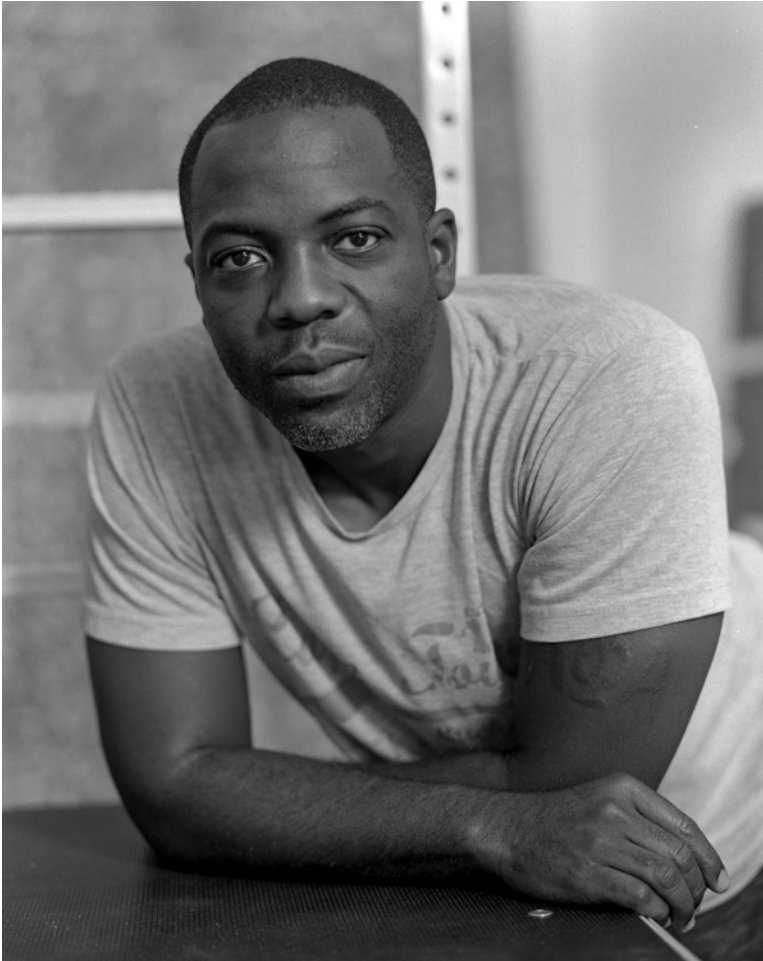


DEREK FORDJOUR, *Thalassic Quintet*, 2021, acrylic, charcoal, cardboard, foil, glitter, and oil pastel on newspaper mounted on canvas, 165 x 254 cm.

## ARTnews

# Derek Fordjour, Fast-Rising Painter, Gets L.A. Gallery Representation at David Kordansky

By Tessa Solomon | February 1, 2021



COURTESY FREDDIE L. RANKIN II / DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY, LOS ANGELES

With his career on the rise, Derek Fordjour, a critically acclaimed painter known for images which grapple with the complexity of race in American society, has joined a new gallery: the Los Angeles-based David Kordansky, which will represent him alongside the likes of Deana Lawson, Rashid Johnson, and Sam Gilliam, among others. The gallery will present a new, monumental piece by Fordjour online in April, followed by a solo exhibition there in spring 2022. New York's Petzel gallery, which has represented the artist since 2019, will continue to represent him.

In his multi-textured paintings, the New York-based artist often depicts Black athletes and entertainers whose successes are constrained by scrutiny over their race. While ostensibly celebratory—carnival and parade imagery pervade his art—Fordjour's work explores how navigating racist expectations can crush Black psyches.

"Derek Fordjour is one of the most inventive, distinct, and culturally relevant American artists working today. He's created an immediately recognizable iconography and materiality that grapples with complex and urgent themes of identity, race, vulnerability, and grief," Mike Homer, partner and senior director at David Kordansky Gallery, told *ARTnews*.

Fordjour's prominence has steadily grown since his breakout show in 2014 at an artist-run space in Brooklyn, followed by an exhibition at Los Angeles' Night Gallery. In 2019, one of his paintings sold for double

its estimate at Phillips, and at the Frieze art fair in New York, Beyoncé and Jay-Z bought his entire suite of paintings.

That same year saw Fordjour's first major museum show, at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, which featured portraits of basketball players, marching bands, and cheerleaders hung on corrugated metal walls above a dirt floor. Fordjour is of Ghanaian heritage, and the immersive structure intended to highlight the fraught circumstances of migrations.

His solo show at Petzel Gallery in 2020 was similarly elaborate, with a walk-in installation and a puppet show performed twice daily, as well as two new painting suites and a series of sculptures. The focus of the show was mortality, made more pressing by the intersection of Covid-19 and the Black Lives Matter protests sparked by the police killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor.

"As things expand and you have greater capacity, it becomes important to have a kind of spiritual practice of surrendering your ego," Fordjour told *ARTnews* last year. "You need an ego, but you also need to release it."

Valentine, Victoria L., “Derek Fordjour Joined David Kordansky Gallery, His Explorations of Race and Identity Invoke Culture of Sport, Symbolism of Teams,” *CultureType.com*, February 1, 2021



## Derek Fordjour Joined David Kordansky Gallery, His Explorations of Race and Identity Invoke Culture of Sport, Symbolism of Teams

By Victoria L. Valentine | February 1, 2021

DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY in Los Angeles announced its representation of Derek Fordjour this morning. He will continue to be represented by Petzel Gallery where he had a major exhibition, “Derek Fordjour: Self Must Die,” last fall.

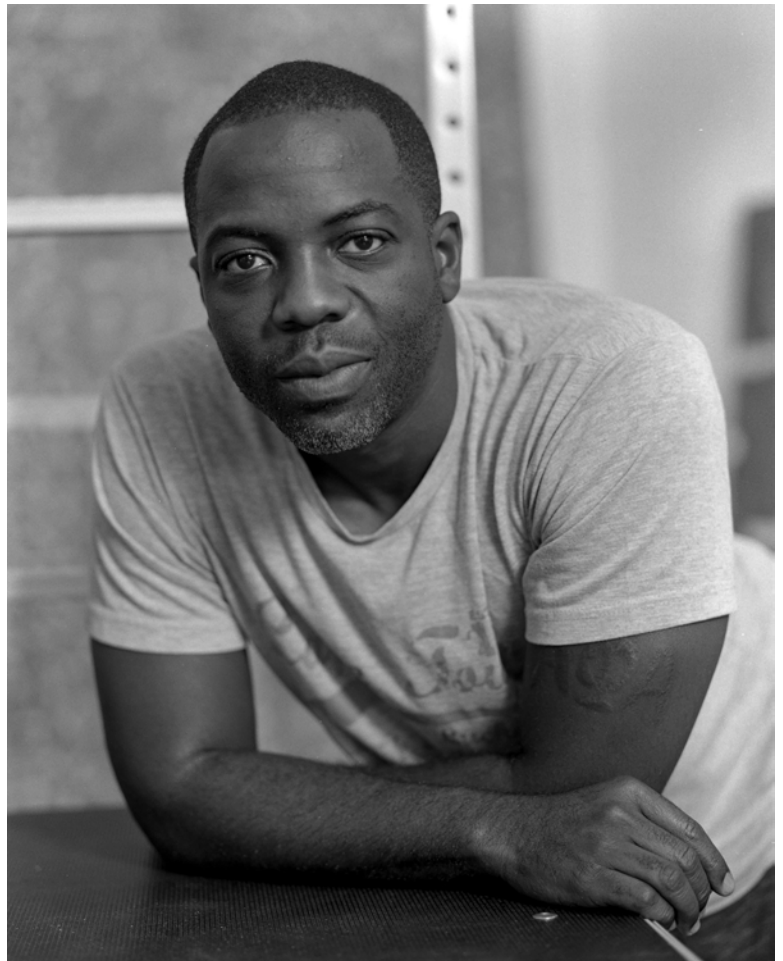
Fordjour expresses himself through painting, sculpture and installation. Employing layers of cardboard, newspaper, and paint, a complex visual materiality is present throughout his work.

Issues of race, identity, and inequality are central to his practice. He invokes the culture of sport and the symbolism of teams, uniforms, marching bands, and formations in his explorations of the power of the collective and the vulnerability, agency, and scrutiny that comes with visibility and achievement. Intense color and repetition are key elements in his work.

Recognition of Fordjour has risen sharply over the past few of years. In 2018, a pair of public art commissions were unveiled in New York—an outdoor installation at the Whitney Museum of American Art and a project with the Metropolitan Transit Authority. “Parade,” a series of mosaic works by Fordjour are permanently installed at the 145th Street subway station in Harlem.

Last year, the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis presented “Derek Fordjour: Shelter,” the artist’s first full-scale solo museum exhibition. An extensive profile in *The New York Times* coincided with his Petzel exhibition. His work has recently been acquired by a number of museums, including the Whitney Museum, Perez Art Museum Miami, Dallas Museum of Art, and Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University.

Born in Memphis, Tenn., Fordjour lives and works in New York. He studied at Pratt Institute and went on to earn an undergraduate degree from Morehouse College. He also holds a master’s degree in education from Harvard University and an MFA from Hunter College.



COURTESY FREDDIE L. RANKIN II / DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY, LOS ANGELES

“Derek Fordjour is one of the most inventive, distinct, and culturally relevant American artists working today. He’s created an immediately recognizable iconography and materiality that grapples with complex and urgent themes of identity, race, vulnerability, and grief,” Mike Homer, partner and senior director at David Kordansky Gallery said in a statement.

“Ambitious projects like *Fly Away*, a live puppet show experience, reveal an artist fearless in his pursuit to evolve and push his practice into new dimensions. We are honored to support his singular vision.”

David Kordansky represents more than 40 artists, including Fred Eversley, Sam Gilliam, Lauren Halsey, Rashid Johnson, Deana Lawson, and Adam Pendleton.

The gallery will present a new painting by Fordjour in a One-on-One online exhibition on its website in April 2021. Fordjour’s first solo exhibition with David Kordansky will open in spring 2022.

# More Than Just *a Moment*

Derek Fordjour is  
Earning His Way  
Into History One  
Show at a Time

Since the age of three, from his very first memories of drawing a fire truck and the ensuing feelings of joy it brought him, Derek Fordjour knew that he wanted to be an artist. No matter how early he set his sights on attaining that goal though, it's probably safe to say that Fordjour, now 46, never dreamt of achieving the level of success he's experiencing in the artworld today. The son of Ghanaian immigrants in Memphis, Tennessee, he has found himself a central player in a cohort of Black and African American artists who have watched interest in their work – and the market surrounding Black figuration in general – positively explode in recent years.

Jay-Z and Beyoncé acquired a suite of his 'Player Portraits' at Frieze New York in 2019. His record price at auction was reset yet again when 'ONE UP TWO DOWN' (2016) sold for \$250,000 at Sotheby's Contemporary Art Day Sale this past June. And 2020 brought his first full-fledged museum show, at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis. However, despite all of the opportunities for distraction that



Derek Fordjour. Photo by Freddie L. Rankin II. Courtesy of Petzel, New York

come with being one of the most in-demand artists on the primary market today, Fordjour's most recent show, 'SELF MUST DIE,' at Petzel Gallery's Chelsea space was still met with widespread critical acclaim. Indeed, for an artist whose work has long tackled issues like the Black experience in America and systems where Black bodies produce profit, 2020 was a particularly poignant backdrop for Fordjour to be working against.

There were specific moments he lived through that directly informed the subject matter of the

show. There was his uncle who passed away from COVID-19, and the experience of attending that surreal, socially-distanced funeral. There was also his overall sense of foreboding and impending death that was reflected in individual paintings like 'Pall Bearers' (2020) which was directly inspired by the funeral of George Floyd in Houston. His father is 76, two years over the average age expectancy of a Black man in America. His 22-year-old son was protesting in the streets of Atlanta over the summer. And of course, Fordjour was keenly aware that he is the same age as George Floyd himself was when he was murdered last year. The work in 'SELF MUST DIE,' as well as in 'Fly Away,' the live puppet show performed twice daily at the gallery that Fordjour collaborated on with award-winning puppeteer Nick Lehane, explored all of this. And in a way, it almost seems like this progression in Fordjour's practice was inevitable. After years of dissecting and investigating the Black experience, of course he would come to grapple head-on with the ideas of mortality and death that were so central to everyday life in 2020.

It's rare for an artist to sit for an interview with *The Canvas*, but nothing was off limits as Fordjour, sans shoes and socks, with colorful bursts of paint visibly splattered on his toes, sat down with us at his studio in the South Bronx on a cold mid-November evening. Taking us step by step through his practice, he explains the symbolism of the 'Black Jockey,' figure throughout his work, and offers his incisive thoughts on the speculation and market mania surrounding Black artists today. He shares the perspective of one of the most sought-after artists around on everything from MFA programs and how they should better prepare their students for the business realities of the artworld; to what it's like with so many large, powerful galleries, institutions, and collectors knocking on his door, to determine the next step in what will undoubtedly be a long and fruitful career. Because make no mistake about it: The art market may focus on fleeting moments in time, but Derek Fordjour is here to stay.

*Interview begins ▼*

● *The Canvas*: Thanks so much for inviting me to your studio, Derek. I so rarely get the opportunity to have long, in-depth interviews with artists, so I really appreciate it. Anyone who's familiar with your work knows that through your art, you grapple with issues like the Black experience in America, systems where Black bodies produce profit, and the complexities surrounding Black exceptionalism. However, in your recent show at Petzel, 'SELF MUST DIE,' it feels like your practice has progressed to the point where you're tackling the idea of mortality and death in a way that you perhaps never before addressed so directly. For instance, works like 'Chorus of Maternal Grief' and 'Pall Bearers' come to mind. So, to start, how much of the subject matter in 'SELF MUST DIE' directly stemmed from the current moment in which the country found itself during w2020 between the Black Lives Matter movement and the pandemic? And how much of it was just the inevitable progression of your practice?

*Derek Fordjour*: One of the great things about life as a contemporary artist is that I'm able to respond to the current moment. I also think there's a kind of documentary function in art-making that I really embrace. We can look back and see certain shows or bodies of works created at previous moments in history and learn more about that time from those works. Certainly, this show – and the notion of death in particular – came to the fore in my thinking as a result of living in New York City in 2020.



'Pall Bearers' (2020). Acrylic, charcoal, cardboard, oil pastel and foil on newspaper mounted on canvas. 102.25 x 74.25 inches. Photo by Daniel Greer. Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York.

There were specific moments I lived through that directly informed the subject matter of the work. There was the Lyft driver who shared the fact that his neighborhood had this tremendous stench that came from a refrigerated trailer full of dead bodies that had lost power. I had an uncle who died during COVID and there was no place available for his body. His was the first Covid-era funeral I attended. It was quite an odd experience. My father's best friend of 60 years passed, and he bid farewell to his friend through a computer screen at his kitchen table thousands of miles away. I was aware of so many other people who died and were not afforded final funeral rights.

And then there was this overall sense of foreboding and impending death that was reflected in the work as well. My father is 76, two years over the average age expectancy of a Black man in America. My son is 22 and was protesting on the streets in Atlanta. I think a 22-year-old black boy is particularly vulnerable to police violence, and those parental fears were very much active throughout the time I was in the studio for this show. And of course, I was keenly aware that I am the same age as George Floyd was when he was murdered. So, all of these disparate thoughts began to congeal around notions of death; and the metaphorical ego death I seek to practice as a human being interested in maintaining a certain degree of humility.

*The Canvas*: I want to talk about that metaphorical idea of death and what it means for an artist to be "reborn" at various stages of his or her career. In 'Fly Away,' the live puppet show that you collaborated on with Nick Lehane – and which was a key part of 'SELF MUST DIE' – the central protagonist was reborn again and again through various life cycles. And of course, the name of the show itself – 'SELF MUST DIE' refers to this idea of one's ego dying. In a way, would you say that the show at Petzel was somewhat about killing your own ego as a successful artist in order to restart your cycle of creativity?

*Derek Fordjour*: I think the practice of surrender is probably what I am more attracted to; surrendering to this sense of release that comes from "death." So, it's not death as a means of rebirth as much as it's death as an act of surrender. I do think that it's important for an artist to have an ego. There's no question about that. I do prefer my ego to live in my work. But in my practice beyond the act of making art, I very much prefer humility as a guiding principle. It's really just a matter of surrendering the desire to become this larger-than-life kind of presence where the role of the artist – that cult of personality – can actually dwarf the work itself.

I think of myself and the people I work with as working in service to this almost spiritual practice of producing objects and experiences that carry meaning. I think of myself as a conduit. I need ego and ambition to move things forward, but too much of either can create blockage and stifle the work.

**The Canvas:** An essential element of your work is exploring systems where Black bodies produce profit. At least for me, I think that's the most straightforward way to view your work. This idea is perhaps most represented through your Player Portraits series. But in 'SELF MUST DIE,' it was transmitted through the Black racehorse jockey, which has also been a recurring motif throughout your career. Can you walk me through how you view this idea of the Black jockey?

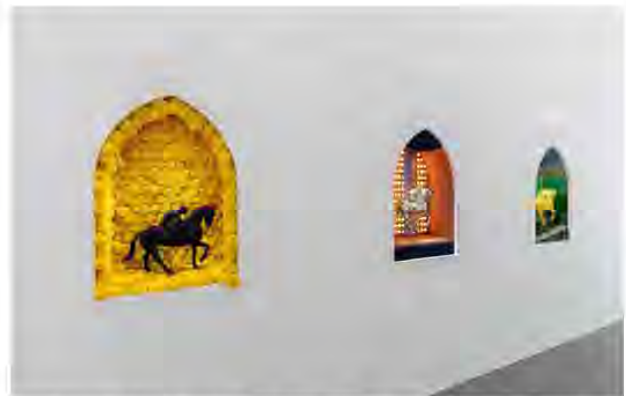
**Derek Fordjour:** I'd say that the jockey, and in particular, the Black jockey in my work is a symbol. And I want to stress that, because it's possible to think of it as a type of memorial to the Black jockeys of the past, and that introduces this notion of nostalgia which is decidedly less interesting to me. I do think invoking their presence has a memorial function. But what drives me to include them in the work really has more to do with their place in a profit-making system.

After the Civil War, Black jockeys were incredibly successful. They attained a status of celebrity similar to that enjoyed by today's NBA players. With the advent of Jim Crow laws, their success, over time, was essentially eradicated to the point that they were relegated to positions of caretaking and maintenance. They were no longer the stars of the show, and for the most part, that's still the case today. Over the summer, pressure was put on Greg Harbut, the sole Black owner of a racehorse set to compete in this year's Kentucky Derby, to withdraw from and boycott the race due to the George Floyd and Breonna Taylor murders.

Greg's predicament is analogous to the discomfort and contortion that you see in the figures in my work. In some cases, there are these extreme contortions that become circus-like spectacle. But they also act as metaphors for the kind of gesturing, positioning, and strategy that is incumbent upon someone who is made hyper-visible as a result of exceptionalism. This performance is as distinctly American as is the legacy of the Black jockey.



'Couplet' (2018). Acrylic, charcoal and oil pastel on newspaper. Two Panels, Each: 30 x 24 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Josh Lilley, London.



Installation view, Derek Fordjour, 'SELF MUST DIE', Petzel, 2020. Photo by Daniel Greer. Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York.

**The Canvas:** Does that idea then extend itself to the position you occupy within the artworld? After all, most collectors – and dealers for that matter – are white. The art market is currently focused on Black figuration; almost to the point where it feels like Black artists are being pitted against each other to see whose career will last the longest, and who will be the most successful. How do you wrestle with that issue?

**Derek Fordjour:** I think the question itself is indicative of certain inescapable biases of a system that has historically been discriminatory. If the artworld had been consistently inclusive, there would be no need for your question.

Markets are informed by a completely different set of motivations and include any number of elements. At the end of the day, artists make art, not markets. I believe that when I make good work, it's going to find its way into the world. I control what happens in here [gestures around his studio] and that's what I control...the work I make, who I show it with, when I show it...those are my decisions. What people pay for it, what they do with what they own, that's not my business.

To return to your original question though, my invocation of the short-lived dominance of the Black jockey, and the subsequent erasure is probably my best response to the speculation surrounding Black artists today. I think there's a certain catharsis for me in making those works. When considering all the factors outside my control, it becomes centering to maintain an awareness of how profit-making in this country and around the world has performed a conspicuous extraction of black labor, in all its many forms, both historically and contemporaneously.

**The Canvas:** You mentioned this idea that you can only control what happens in your studio. Especially considering the issues you deal with in your work, do you ever try to have a say or a voice in terms of who your works are being sold to? Some artists are very vocal about who can buy their work. I'm wondering how much of a voice you try to have in those kind of conversations...

**Derek Fordjour:** I have been fortunate to work with really amazing people. I cannot emphasize how important it is to work with thoughtful dealers. In the case of this show, it's Friedrich Petzel. But I've also been really fortunate to work with some other really good dealers throughout the last few years. In the same way that I don't want a dealer in my studio telling me what to make, I try not to go into the back rooms of the gallery with too much of an agenda. I view the relationship as a partnership. I want them to do their work, and I expect that in the end, I can hold them accountable.

What I am ultimately invested in is this idea of connection between people across cultural and philosophical divides. I'm not naive about the attraction of the gain of profit, but I'm a fierce believer in the power that art has to connect with people. I'm probably less concerned with whom those particular people are. I find it special that there may be people very different than me who are attracted to my work. I've seen and spoken to people who have brought my work into their homes because they wanted their families to engage in important conversations. I hope that in both the private and public domains, the work has the power to affect people in some profound way.

**The Canvas:** Some artists try to appeal to a very broad audience with their work. They look to spark the kind of connection that you speak of on a large scale. Some artists prefer those more intimate kinds of moments they can create with individual collectors. Do you draw a distinction between the two in your own practice? Are you interested in one more than the other?

**Derek Fordjour:** I think a good work of art can operate on multiple levels. I think the first is a personal level, which has to do with an artist's personal motivations and maybe also the unique experience between an artwork and an individual. Secondly, there's a kind of art-historical level, which is a broader conversation between artists and artworks across time. This is also a matter of curatorial context, and where a particular work belongs in the lineage of art history. And finally, there is a universal level, where if I take a specific painting to Israel or to Romania or to Nigeria, the people there can also have an experience with it.

When you think about some of the great, beloved works of art that we return to over and over again, some of the civilizations in which the work was created are gone. But we still find value in the work itself. That's my goal. That is what I'm working towards. I want my work to have resonance beyond the time in which it was created. It's quite a lofty goal but it is a worthy pursuit.

**The Canvas:** I want to talk a bit more about your installation work, in particular, as we haven't talked much about that. In the past, you've said that your installations are central to your

practice as they give you "an opportunity to engage more of the senses . . . the emotional register of the visitor." I'm wondering if you could shed a bit more insight into that. To me, as someone who's focused mostly on the market side of things, I'm always fascinated by the dynamics of large-scale installation works because they're inherently less collectible. In the inverse way that you constructed the *Player Portraits* to resemble trading cards as a way of commenting on their commoditization upon being bought and sold over and over again, are your large-scale installations a way for you to remove the market component from the work itself?

**Derek Fordjour:** You might be giving me a little more credit than I deserve. I don't know that I'm so strategic. I think what matters most is that I'm creating an experience that people want to return to; that is thought-provoking and offers people a greater awareness of self, place, or their own personal history. I genuinely believe that entering an immersive environment offers that potential.

For me, as a child, whether it was the Wizard of Oz, Willy Wonka, an amazing play, or an amusement park ride, the experience was like entering a dream world. I loved the imaginative ride they provided, which created an outlet to disconnect my thoughts from anything else I happened to be considering at the time. So, I'm very attracted to the immersive potential of an installation. Yes, I do like the fact that they're not collectible, much to the chagrin of my dealers. I think about them more as an orientation of sorts. What I mean by that, for example, is that if someone sees the puppet show in '*SELF MUST DIE*,' then they will, hopefully, see the paintings in the show differently. The interplay between two and three and four dimensions hopefully delivers an experience that's closer to the skin.



Installation view, Derek Fordjour, '*SELF MUST DIE*,' Petzel, 2020. Photo by Daniel Greer. Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York.

You asked earlier about whether I responded to the moment of this year, and how. Take Breonna Taylor, for instance. She was awakened out of her sleep and murdered. I honestly can't think of a more vulnerable position for a person to be in than asleep. I really can't. And I think about it often. I sleep with my partner, and I imagine a militaristic kind of barrage breaking down our door as we're sleeping. It's terrifying. But I'm always attracted to that vulnerability, whether it's my own or a broader cultural reality.

In 'VESTIBULE,' I tried to explore that vulnerability in depth. So, when you enter the enclosed space, it's dark, there's gravel, there are lights circularly encompassing the stage. There's a light from above slowly combing the entire room, performing as both searchlight and spotlight. A sculpture of a young girl with a hoop – 'Contrapposto' – is a reference to innocence, 'Domicile' alludes to domestic security. The objects in the center of the room loosely construct a narrative.

**The Canvas:** If it's okay with you, I want to get to some more industry-related questions before we run out of time. You joined Petzel in 2019 shortly after your mural at the Whitney was unveiled. At the time, you said, "After a series of visits and conversations, it was very clear after a while that Petzel was a good fit." I was hoping you could share a little insight into those conversations. I'd love to hear from the perspective of an artist who, for the most part, probably could have had his pick of any gallery he wanted, what factors went into your decision making.

**Derek Fordjour:** I was, in fact, talking to a few different galleries. There are some galleries that are much better at the business of art, and there are others that happen to be really good at managing institutional relationships, for example. Each gallery has its own particular strength. At this point in my career, I think I'm most interested in working with people whose first priority is the human aspects of art.

Very rarely do galleries pass from one generation to the next. So, in that case, they are a bit unique, like artists, in that it's ultimately a cult of personality built around a singular vision. That person whose name is on the door really matters. In the case of Petzel, Friedrich, in particular, is an intellectual. He's interested in ideas; he's interested in history. We didn't really talk about money or numbers. He didn't ask me how much my paintings were going for (though, perhaps he already knew...). In any case, that wasn't the focus of our conversation. He was interested in taking the long view and there was no pressure for me to come in and immediately produce a lot of work right off the bat. It really felt like we were speaking the same language.

**The Canvas:** I imagine you spoke to a number of galleries that perhaps tried to convince you to let them represent you on a global basis. As you're continuing to work with Josh Lilley in London, Petzel in New York, and will soon announce new rep-

resentation in LA, you clearly weren't interested in that kind of arrangement. I'm curious to hear your perspective on these types of global representation agreements.

**Derek Fordjour:** Personally, I don't like them. When I first started working with galleries, I had a kid to support. I really didn't like the possibility that I could wake up one day and suddenly find that my dealer could be going to jail, retiring, or any other number of possibilities. This is a very precarious business. Most galleries are a few tough shows away from shutting down. So, purely as a means of mitigating risk, I liked the idea of working with multiple galleries.

Also – and I still give this advice to young artists – I trust consensus. That's significantly more valuable than one point of view which may or may not prove correct in the end. So, having multiple galleries also gives me the benefit of broad and diverse counsel. That's what you need as an artist in order to make effective decisions because you are not prepared for many of the situations in which you find yourself.



Installation view, Derek Fordjour, 'SELF MUST DIE', Petzel, 2020, Photo by Daniel Greer. Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York

**The Canvas:** That idea of artists not being prepared for many of the situations they find themselves in actually leads directly into my next question. I know that the lawsuit with the Robert Blumenthal Gallery is making its way through the court system and that your lawyer has filed a motion to dismiss the case entirely. I don't want to draw a correlation between the two as every case has its own unique set of circumstances, but do you feel that MFA programs are failing their students by not preparing them better for the business side of the artworld?

**Derek Fordjour:** One of the positive outcomes of the lawsuit is that I have committed to teaching in some capacity or another, in order to be available as a resource for young artists. At this point, in terms of time, teaching is a bit of a distraction, but I enjoy the exchange with students and getting out of my studio. However, I do definitely think the kind of assistance I seek to provide informally should become more standardized.

It is important to remember that MFA programs are still fairly new in the history of the American university. Whether it's with law, medicine, or any other industry, professional practice is always slow to follow pedagogy. Look, back in the '60s and '70s, the art market was small. It was controlled by small group of people in New York City. But today, as the market has grown exponentially, the pressure has unfortunately made it to the doorsteps of art schools and created a need for artists to develop much greater business acumen. Where do museums get the money for acquisitions? How do you decide on a good dealer? How do deals come together and how should your taxes work? All of these things should be actively taught to artists. Students are vulnerable. I will always mentor on a personal level, but professional practice is an inevitable necessity for art schools.

**The Canvas:** Last question, as I've taken up way too much of your time. Do you ever get worried about the art-historical canon leaving you behind? For instance, if so many of your talented contemporaries are showing together in the same program with a massive gallery, does that potentially inhibit your inclusion in some of the conversations you're trying to address in your work?

**Derek Fordjour:** I think that history is a selective practice that mixes fact and fiction. I like to believe that if, in my era, I make the absolute best work I can – and present it in the best possible context – that history might look favorably on that. This is my purest ambition, that depending on what I do in my time, I might earn my way into history.

This reminds me of an experience I had a couple of years ago when I went to the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts Museum to see a show of the late African American artist Norman Lewis. He was a wonderful painter who worked actively through the '40s, '50s, and '60s. In the show, along with his paintings, they included some of his written correspondence to the famed dealer Leo Castelli. Lewis had a studio right around the corner from Castelli and Lewis wrote these beautiful letters inviting him to come look at his work. Castelli never came.

It was a very different time. But it is my hope that what history forgets, art will remember. ■

“ It is my hope that what history forgets, art will remember.”



Installation view, Derek Fordjour, 'SELF MUST DIE', Petzel, 2020. Photo by Daniel Greer. Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York.

# Marching to the Beat of Their Own Drum

Inspired by this year’s protests against racial injustice, this Derek Fordjour painting reimagines the stars and stripes of the American flag.

November 27, 2020



“Boom! Lockstep! March!” (2020) by Derek Fordjour. Courtesy of the artist and Night Gallery, Los Angeles

*In each installment of The Artists, T highlights a recent or little-shown work by a Black artist, along with a few words from that artist putting the work in context. This week, we’re looking at a painting by Derek Fordjour, whose solo show at the Petzel Gallery, “Self Must Die,” is on view through Dec. 19.*

**Name:** Derek Fordjour

**Age:** 45

**Based in:** New York City

**Originally from:** Memphis

**When and where did you make this work?**

I completed this work in June at the height of the B.L.M. protest marches, hence the title, “Boom! Lockstep! March!” I added the birds flying in the opposing direction after biking home from my studio through a protest march in the South Bronx, where police helicopters were hovering above.

**Can you describe what is going on in the work?**

Three marchers move in unison playing drums while birds gather overhead. I thought a lot about patriotic symbols — stars and bars from the flag have been remixed here. I think about these figures as shaking up democracy and quite literally moving to the beat of their own drum.

**What inspired you to make this work?**

Like most people, I am excited and intrigued by the frequency and intensity of the national protests. It’s important to me that there is something at stake with every work that I make, especially now. I really wanted to connect what was happening in my studio with what was happening in the streets.

**What’s the work of art in any medium that changed your life?**

My life continues to be changed by works of art. It is impossible for me to isolate a single moment. I hope this never stops.

# Anguish to Transcendence

By SIDDHARTHA MITTER

In a bare room upstairs from his art studio inside an industrial building in the South Bronx, Derek Fordjour watched as three puppeteers brought a character drawn right out of his paintings to three-dimensional life. The artist was forging yet another branch of his multi-form practice: a live show, inspired by Japanese puppet theater, to complement work in his upcoming gallery exhibition.

Mr. Fordjour often depicts Black athletes and performers — dancers, riders, rowers, drum majors — as strivers who navigate the ambiguities that come with their achievement, and the racial scrutiny that accompanies visibility in the mainstream culture.

The wood puppet was a vessel for these concerns. He had an athletic look, in breeches and a tunic. The top was a striped number in pink, blue and brown, typical of the busy colors and patterns that energize Mr. Fordjour's paintings. The character careened between triumph and slapstick abjection as the puppeteers moved him across a long table with artificial turf.

The puppet bent to pick up a ball; it stuck to his hand. As he tried to shake it off, a laugh track played — a crowd guffawing at his distress. Later he soared for a dunk, Jordan-style. He was mocked and applauded — the story suggested that what elevates Black achievers in our society can also erode their psyches.

"I love learning other ways to have a con-

CONTINUED ON PAGE C8



Derek Fordjour draws lessons from his own journey to art stardom and from a year of Black grief to create a solo show.



Left, Derek Fordjour outside his art studio in the Bronx, where he was preparing for a solo show at Petzel Gallery. Above, puppeteers bringing a character from one of his paintings to life for a performance at Petzel.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE C1

versation," Mr. Fordjour said after the rehearsal, a collaboration with the puppet artist Nick Lehane. "Painting has its utility, but performance is another register."

By art world metrics, Mr. Fordjour, 46, is already registering. He was a market sensation in 2019 with a noteworthy sale at Phillips, where "Agency and Regulation (study)" went for \$137,500, double its estimate. At the Frieze art fair, he sold a suite of 10 paintings to Jay-Z and Beyoncé.

This year brought his first full-fledged museum show, at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, where paintings hung in a tropical environment that included corrugated metal walls and an ingenious method to replicate the sound of rain. "The idea was about creating a multisensory experience," Wassan al-Khudhairi, the show's curator, said of the immersive staging. She added, "He's an extremely ambitious person; risk-taking is part of the journey."

Mr. Fordjour's solo show, "Self Must Die," at Petzel Gallery is typically elaborate, with a walk-in installation, two new painting suites, a series of sculptures and the puppet show, performed twice daily.

His rise has been remarkable considering that his breakout show, in an artist-run space in Bushwick, was in 2014. Two years later, he was still completing his M.F.A. at Hunter College.

The sculptor Nari Ward, his teacher and adviser at Hunter, recalled that Mr. Fordjour, who was older than most other students — was driven with big ideas. "He came in hungry," Mr. Ward said. "I was like, 'Ooh, what's going to happen to this guy?'"

Woven into Mr. Fordjour's work are lessons from his tortuous journey since committing to art back in high school, the son of Ghanaian immigrants in Memphis, Tenn.

But it was the events of 2020, between the pandemic and the police killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, that took his newest work on a bleaker path, one that digs deeper into the ceremony of Black grief and mourning. The focus of his art is shifting from the complexities of performative roles to include how we mark the lives that had been lost.

A new ensemble painting, "Chorus of Maternal Grief," commemorates 14 women, from Mamie Till-Mobley, Emmett Till's mother, to Tamika Palmer, Ms. Taylor's mother, whom bereavement forced into public roles. It is a new move for him: specific portraits rather than archetypes.

"This year, I feel like memorial is important," he said. "Black funerary tradition is on my mind," he added. "Thinking about all the people who were not able to have funerals."

The Petzel show arrives with an epigraph

from "In the Wake: On Blackness and Being," a 2016 book by the scholar Christina Sharpe, who refers to "wake work" — the ensemble of activities, grand and mundane, that acknowledge and address Black death and, in doing so, affirm Black life.

Mr. Fordjour was taken by that concept, he said, and he has also been reading Black liberation theory, by the theologian James H. Cone, and studies of Black mourning.

The artist recalled years ago criticisms of the funeral industry for inflating its prices. "And Black funeral directors really rebuffed it," he said. "They said, this is the opportunity to celebrate. This is our chance to be ornate."

One work in the show, "Pall Bearers," is inspired by the lavish funeral given George Floyd in Houston. Struck by Mr. Floyd's gold-finished coffin, Mr. Fordjour researched recipients of similar ones and found that they included Michael Jackson and Whitney Houston.

The painting presents men in top hats, in a flattened perspective that conveys rhythm and immediacy. "But the casket is probably the subject of the painting," he said. "A man commemorated in a gold casket, contrasting so sharply with the way his life ended."

Mr. Fordjour plays with the ornate; he is not afraid to dazzle.

"He's a superb colorist," said Manon Slome, the curator who developed with Mr. Fordjour a wild, funhouselike installation for kids (but not just) at the Sugar Hill Children's Museum of Art & Storytelling. "There's a theatricality in the work; they're showmen," she added. "The light radiates from within."

When depicting crowds, as in "Parade," Mr. Fordjour's 2018 mosaic series inside the 145th Street subway station of the No. 3 line, the artist shows the inspiration of Jacob Lawrence and Archibald Motley, though his palette is lighter, more variegated.

The process of painting is at once humble and intricate: He covers a canvas or wood board with cardboard tiles, foil and other materials, and wraps it in newspaper (always *The Financial Times*, for its warm, salmon hue). The process repeats several times, with Mr. Fordjour applying washes of paint, then tearing and carving the accumulating surface as he goes.

These days, Mr. Fordjour has assistants handle the preliminaries, which involves seven or eight layers. "This is where I start cooking." He applies hundreds of small pieces of hand-cut paper, and sketches in charcoal. Then he moves to acrylic and oil pastel.

"He found a technique," said Mr. Ward, who remains his friend and sounding board. "It's a kind of seduction of the hand, but once you're in it, you realize you've been



DEREK FORDJOUR, VIA PHILLIPS

### Self Must Die

Through Dec. 19 at Petzel Gallery, 456 West 18th Street, Manhattan; 212-680-9467, petzel.com. A puppet show, "Fly Away," is performed twice daily.

brought to another space — of inquiry and realization of a kind of historical angst."

Mr. Fordjour's first round in art school in New York, back some 20 years earlier, wasn't such a success. Set on his path by Bill Hicks, a local-legend art teacher at Central High School in Memphis, he enrolled at Pratt Institute, but now says, "I went way off track."

He dropped out and hung out — at the Met, at the Art Students League, and had a brush with the justice system in Brooklyn. "The truth is that I ran into some trouble. I got arrested," he said. The charge involved drugs, but the case was dismissed. The incident left him shaken and reminded him of his middle-class privilege.

"The thing that saved me was that my

dad was an oral surgeon, and I had a cousin at Harvard Law School. But I saw what happens when someone like me gets into that system." Long ashamed, he revealed the story when he participated in Project Reset, where artists mentor young people facing misdemeanor convictions.

Mr. Fordjour returned to Memphis and enrolled in community college, then had a baby with a girlfriend (his son is now a college student). "Living some life kind of got me on track," he said. He began teaching art in day care centers. He then finished college at Morehouse University, continuing to Harvard, where he earned a master's in art education.

A different path was germinating, that of the artist. At Morehouse, Akua McDaniel's course in African-American art history awakened him to a lineage from slavery to the Harlem Renaissance to the scholarship of David Driskell and Richard J. Powell. "It opened me up to a whole world of possibility," he said.

And a series of portrait commissions for bankers and others in Memphis's Black pro-



fessional circles showed that there could be money in painting. By the time Mr. Fordjour reappeared in New York and got married, settling into suburban life in Mount Vernon, he was steadily producing portraits and landscapes in his basement.

He hated it. "It was a lot of bad work, failed experiments," he said. Things he cared about did not show up in his work. When his marriage fell apart, he found himself sleeping on an air mattress in a storage building.

But he found it liberating to work with charcoal on newspaper — the only surface he could afford for a time. And he was making friends on the art scene like Hank Willis Thomas. Mickalene Thomas let him help in the studio; her work with fractured surfaces, bright color, and neon, he said, unlocked his own imagination.

By the time Mr. Fordjour enrolled at Hunter, his friends were alerting collectors. The construction executive Joseph Mizzi offered him an exhibition in his office in 2013. He accepted, recalling advice from Mark Bradford: "Show anywhere." The painter Henry Taylor turned up and bought a sculpture.

"It just started happening, man," Mr. Fordjour said. "I haven't even put it together for myself."

In the studio last month, collaboration was in the air. Art by friends hung in the conference room. On Zoom, Mr. Fordjour checked in with Hollywood designers, one a friend from high school, who were crafting his new installation. The puppet artists worked upstairs.

Mr. Fordjour contemplated how this year had elevated the stakes.

Last March, he was sued by a former gallerist, Robert Blumenthal, who claimed that Mr. Fordjour reneged on a deal they agreed to in 2014, to deliver 20 canvases. Mr. Fordjour's lawyers call the pending case "meritless," and have filed for its dismissal.

It was not lost on him that as his prominence grows, his own position resembles more and more the archetypal performers he has painted balancing between anguish and transcendence.

"To some degree maybe these are self-portraits," he said, showing a painting of an argyle-clad man on a unicycle, holding balls in both hands, with another ball on his neck.

"I'm benefiting from a moment," he said. "I hope that my work is good. I recognize that I'm an artist in society, and when society goes and moves in another direction I've still got to be rooted in what I'm doing."

To keep steady, he said, meant living on shifting boundaries: between exposure and vulnerability, close-knit community and the broader social sphere. It was a challenge for his art, and for his life.

Battaglia, Andy, "Best Practices: Derek Fordjour's Art Stares Down Shared Fears and Vulnerabilities," *ARTnews.com*, November 10, 2020

**ARTnews**

# Best Practices: Derek Fordjour's Art Stares Down Shared Fears and Vulnerabilities

By Andy Battaglia | November 10, 2020



Derek Fordjour sits among paintings in various stages of creation in September. IKE EDEANI FOR ARTNEWS

When Derek Fordjour conjured the title of his new gallery show, "SELF MUST DIE," it took him some time to understand all that it might evoke. He was thinking about his 22-year-old son in school at Morehouse College in Atlanta. "When everything started with the protests, I remember seeing these kids being tasered and dragged out of their car," Fordjour said. "I remember the fear of knowing he's out there and that that can happen." Then he thought of his father, who is 76—"four years above the average life expectancy for an African-American man in America."

Then Fordjour thought of himself, at 46—the same age as George Floyd and right "in the middle of these polarities where the danger is." As he considered his fate and the susceptibility of his family and friends, he came to recognize the many ways that mortality and "vulnerabilities only heightened by Covid really centered death as a starting point of the show."

Fordjour was in his New York studio in early fall, masked up and hard at work on an exhibition for Petzel gallery—opening this week and running through late December—that counts as his first major show in the city he calls home. The two floors of studio space he occupies are in the Bronx, in a large loft and warehouse building occupied by lots of other artists (Firelei Báez, Renee Cox, and Fab 5 Freddy among them) as well as batting cages and training equipment for an indoor baseball academy.

The mood surrounding preparations for a death-centered exhibition was anything but somber as Fordjour and his team of assistants fine-tuned works of sculpture, installation art, and even a puppet show that would accompany the kind of paintings for which the artist is best known. A tour of the studio began at a station reserved for those paintings, born of a process of building up and digging down.



To make his paintings, Fordjour builds up layers of newspaper and cardboard that he paints over.

"It starts with a blank canvas, and we have a system," Fordjour said as he pointed to colored cardboard cutouts and sheets of newspaper that get applied and reapplied in layers to summon subtle variations in surface that take on aspects of topography and depth. To those surfaces Fordjour adds portraits and patterns that celebrate the vibrancy of life while acknowledging the darkness underneath.

The cardboard between the paint and the canvas offers dimensions to cut into, with X-Acto knives wielded like archaeological tools, and the newspaper—in an unusual hue—adds color and context to the mix. "It's always the *Financial Times*," Fordjour said of the salmon-colored publication he has depended on for years. The process dates back to the beginning of his career, when newspapers were among the few materials he could afford. And after an experiment with the similarly shaded *New York Observer* caught the eye of a banker who mistook it for the *FT*, the medium took on greater meaning. "The idea of value and conspicuous branding resonated with me," Fordjour said. "I stuck with it, and it continues to work—it gives me more ground than dirty gray." (While he used to go on runs to buy out daily holdings at Hudson News, he now has a subscription that feeds the piles of papers stacked up around the studio.)

Canvases typically receive 10 or so layers before they move on to the next steps, which include tearing, peeling, and puncturing. One painting in progress, titled *Showtime* (2020), featured sketches of figures inspired by the marching band at Howard University, an institution founded shortly after the Civil War with government support.

"Howard is coming into focus with Kamala Harris as a graduate, and it's exciting for historically Black colleges and universities," Fordjour said. "I'm a Morehouse graduate and I'm excited. But beyond that, the story of Howard as it relates to land-grant colleges and the period of Reconstruction is interesting to consider now. A lot of Reconstruction-era conversations are emerging as we question equity and inclusion and systems of oppression. Howard is at the epicenter of the nation's first attempts at restitution."

After the figures of dancers and musicians were painted in full, *Showtime* would have its surface reworked, with incisions made to expose the different-colored layers beneath. "There's an excavation that happens," Fordjour said. "It creates fragility in the work—it's coming apart while holding together. Precarity is something I'm interested in as an amplification of self."

The process of excavating owes to a desire to go deeper than mere representation. "When I first started making this work, I would make Black figures, and people would be on the outside of the experience," he said. "I wanted to create something that connected. To me, feeling vulnerable is something that everybody understands. Maybe I don't know what it's like to be you, or you don't know what it's like to be me—but we certainly know what it feels like to be vulnerable. It was a discovery for me to realize that this is what I'm talking about: being a human being and not feeling safe."

The swell of the Black Lives Matter protests over the summer also intensified certain aspects of his practice. "My work is concerned with pattern," he said, commenting on formal designs that also double as stand-ins for behavioral modes. "I'm curious about the ways in which patterns can be changed or the ways that they



Once Fordjour has built up multiple painted-over layers, he then subjects his works to acts of "excavation." IKE EDEANI FOR ARTNEWS



Fordjour applying paint to canvas. IKE EDEANI FOR ARTNEWS

remain fixed. How do we gauge social progress? Is it happening now? Is it not happening? Are we pushing against something that is fixed?"

A spirit of experimentation also figures in a first for Fordjour: a puppet show to be performed live throughout the run of his Petzel exhibition, under the direction of the celebrated puppeteer Nick Lehane. "I saw a show he did last year and was blown away," Fordjour said of *Chimpanzee*, a theatrical work inspired by what Lehane described as "stranger-than-fiction stories of chimpanzees raised as children in human homes."

The presence of a central character made of papier-mâché gave Fordjour ideas for how to bring his work to life. "With how much paper is in my work, I felt a sculptural kinship," Fordjour said. It also got him thinking about "questions of control and autonomy and the relationship between puppeteer and puppet. It felt right in the wheelhouse of my questions about vulnerability and autonomy."

At the studio in September, the puppet show was in an early workshop stage, with a team figuring out ways to move a puppet in a jockey's uniform in a strange sort of dance around a ball that suggested elements of soccer, basketball, and bits of a circus act. A musician performed live on an oboe, with a pandemic-era black cloth covering the end of his horn so as to prevent the spread of aerosols. At one point, Lehane piped in with instructions to make a certain puppet passage "more decisive" and another, more "hands-on-the-hips, like posing for a photograph."

In developing the puppet show, titled *Fly Away*, Fordjour said, "I was interested in taking the themes I think about in my paintings, sculpture, and installation work and adapting them to performance. The first big issue is that of control and questioning the interdependence of an artist and a dealer, and how much independence is achievable when you operate within an ecosystem of interdependency."

Another integral theme is death and loss, "in particular Black death and collective loss," Fordjour said. "In every act the central character experiences loss and returns to how he negotiates that through us being connected with him."

A different kind of loss that figures in *Fly Away* and his exhibition as a whole is aspirational, Fordjour said—suggesting that the title "SELF MUST DIE" has more than morbidity going for it. "It's also about ego death," he said. "As things expand and you have greater capacity, it becomes important to have a kind of spiritual practice of surrendering your ego."

"You need an ego," he conceded. "But you also need to release it."



## Derek Fordjour on painting the African-American experience

From abstract painting to mulching the FT, the rising artist reveals how contemporary reality informs his work

By Jackie Wullschläger | October 20, 2020



In a decade or five, which painting will recall how 2020 felt? It must convey grief, fragility, claustrophobia, also resolve, unity, sensuous joy in small things, during a year paralysed by the pandemic but galvanised towards social reform by George Floyd's killing.

One such is the contemporary history painting "Pall Bearers": the standout in Derek Fordjour: *SELF MUST DIE*, opening next month at New York's Petzel Gallery. When George Floyd was killed, another Floyd, boxer Floyd Mayweather, paid for his burial in a gold casket. Fordjour has painted a man killed like a dog, leaving earth like a king.

Descending a staircase in a compressed, vertiginous space, six black men with pink gloves carry the coffin, tilting it towards us: an accusatory, hard, gleaming cylinder adorned with a soft mauve wreath. Extravagantly dressed in mulberry suits, orange waistcoats, glamorous

as singers in a band, dignified, a cohesive sextet, they are also vulnerable, uneasy, broken.

Fordjour, 46, is a rising name. His billboard mural "Half Mast" showed at the Whitney last year; his inaugural museum show, presciently called *SHELTER*, launched pre-lockdown, in January, at Contemporary Art Museum St Louis. But since impoverished student days Fordjour has painted on mulched newspaper (the Financial Times, in fact), building sumptuous layers in acrylic, oil pastel, charcoal, cardboard and foil strips. The effect is raw, homespun, alluring: from a distance the collages cohere into decisive, memorable images, close up the devil is in the detail. The pallbearers' features are fragmented: jagged assemblages of cardboard squares, newspaper piercing through. They reject our gaze, seek protection in invisibility: they close their eyes, lower hats to block their faces.

These top hats are luscious, Manet-like. An umbrella, so many purple curves and crescents, recalls Renoir's "Les Parapluies" (The Umbrellas). Big candyfloss clouds summon Courbet's final landscapes. Trembling blue/rose horizontals depicting marble steps simultaneously form a modernist grid. "Undoubtedly, my relationship to painting is born out of a keen interest in late 19th and early 20th-century painting, both formally and politically," Fordjour acknowledges. But he is also a 21st-century multimedia artist presenting painting as immersive spectacle. Petzel opens with "Vestibule", a theatrical stage and curtain "morphed into a circular enclosure populated with sculptures and illuminated by a slowly roving spotlight. I'm thinking of it as a sort of invocation," he explains. "My installation work is central to my practice, an opportunity to engage more of the senses . . . the emotional register of the visitor."

I initially encountered Fordjour at his first UK show, at Josh Lilley during Frieze 2019. His rhythmic, exuberant depictions of black athletes and entertainers — repeated figures, choreographed rituals — struck me as among this century's most exciting paintings.

He was born in Memphis to Ghanaian immigrants who gave their sons American names and fed them hamburgers and popcorn. His father became Tennessee's second black oral surgeon, his brother is a dentist.

"In the era in which I was raised, achieving racial markers as the first to accomplish integration in any field was a goal." But in paint, in his striving, achieving characters, Fordjour says he "is questioning that push toward exceptionalism as societal progress . . . I'm aware of the tension between public adulation and hidden scorn."



*Pall Bearers'* (2020) © Courtesy the artist, Petzel, New York and Josh Lilley, London

Fordjour, softly spoken, patiently considered in his responses, is warmly cordial, even when, too often, a white Londoner fails properly to comprehend how an African-American artist fuses the personal, political and painterly.

"I once heard optimism described as a survival instinct," Fordjour replies when asked if he is optimistic for social change. "I am probably more concerned with survival, especially as an artist. The hope is that your life's work survives...the oeuvre itself is decidedly more dubious and questioning."

The more so now, I assume, in reaction to the pandemic and to Floyd's death. Another new work, "Chorus of Maternal Grief", suggests the history of atrocity as an epic: the faces of a group of women are painted with stills of black mothers who lost their sons.

"As much as I am riveted by the horrors of George Floyd's murder, I would not say his death inspired my work," Fordjour answers. "I have been deeply engaged with the social conditions, patterns, histories that made it possible for his death to occur. I have known of this reality since I was 15 and lived through many years of targeted police aggression personally. Hopefully George Floyd's death inspires the art-consuming audience to be more attuned."

His new paintings at Petzel, ever more ambitiously scaled, constructed, textured, include the five-metre "Regatta" and three-metre "Cadence": rowers and swimmers in uniform poses, identikit costumes, their reflections bleeding in deep gorgeous colour into swirling, curling calligraphic water. Immediate impressions

are of black bodies vigorous, bright, powerful — an upbeat rendering. But sport produces losers as well as winners; are performers, replicated, lacking individuality, as here, commodities? And slave trade allusions — black flesh on water — are hard to banish.

Yet Fordjour's exquisite abstract patterning is pure optical joy — though also, he explains, "actually more conceptual than decorative. It is through the investigation of social patterns that I am able to ascertain some sense of progression, regression, replication, fixity or disruption." He quotes influences from sociologist Thorstein Veblen in the same breath as West African appliqué fabrics, Mexican muralists, "black artists who were largely excluded from the canon" — Aaron Douglas, Archibald Motley, Hale Woodruff.

"Worst to be First IV", displayed at Josh Lilley for this month's Frieze, is a disconcerting hallucinatory nocturne portrait of a black army officer, erect, stoical, in a tropical setting. It references a retired serviceman who told Fordjour "how proud he was to be the first black communications officer in his platoon during Vietnam. He was the radio man. He later learned that blacks were often given that position because enemy soldiers sought to eliminate the radio first. I wanted to evoke a sense of looming uncertainty, danger, discord, isolation."

"STRWMN" features a flamboyant, dynamic dancer — attached to strings. Entertainment has long been a route to black success; Fordjour notes how "subcultures like hip hop in America and more Skhothane culture in South Africa become direct responses to racism and systemic oppression, then become co-opted as vehicles for widely accessible entertainment."

Fordjour is the most original of the generation currently taking wing from pioneering Chicago artist Kerry James Marshall's liberating conviction that "the most instrumental, insurgent painting for this moment must be of figures, and those figures must be black, unapologetically so".

I wonder, naively, if expectations of black artists today remain different, more constraining, from those of, say, Jeff Koons or Ed Ruscha. Fordjour's answer darts back arrow-sharp: "When Jeff Koons or Ed Ruscha are asked to speak for other white artists and the decisions they make on account of race, then this question itself will become irrelevant. I cannot speak for other black artists. My primary artistic goal is freedom."



*'Chorus of Maternal Grief'* (2020) © Courtesy the artist, Petzel, New York and Josh Lilley, London

ELEPHANT

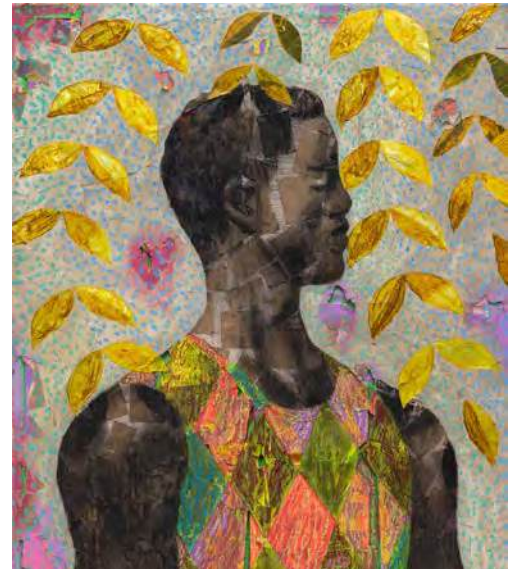
# Derek Fordjour Uses Sport as the Perfect Allegory for Organised Society

The American artist's subjects are both expressive and contained, dressed in vibrant tones, yet often moving in total alignment with those around them. Sport, rule setting, competition and wealth disparity all converge in his elaborate images.

By Emily Steer | October 16, 2020



*Three Bend Deep*, 2019. All images courtesy the artist and Petzel, New York



*No 46*, 2019

Derek Fordjour's works are full of energy and movement, often featuring sports players and figures in motion, beating drums, folding nimbly into backbends, and posing in symmetrical tableaux with teammates. "Surely there are parallels between art and sport in society," says the American artist. "They both have significant social, cultural and economic value, but no utility. They are also fundamental elements of organised societies around the world throughout history. Beyond these facts, my relationship to sport and gaming is somewhat allegorical, and my interests converge around the necessary appearance of fairness, rule setting, governance and competition."

The multiple figures in Fordjour's wall-based works are often similar, decked out in matching costumes, and presented with almost identical frames and poses. There is something about this repetition which is pleasing on the eye, but it also calls to mind the regimented nature of group dynamics, and the play between the mass and the individual. "I have a conceptual interest in patterns: how they persist, how they are disrupted, what is fixed and what is shifting," says the artist. "Formally this interest is best explained in the five general categories of Gestalt theory: proximity, similarity, continuity, closure and connectedness."

Fordjour often uses low-cost materials. He has previously associated his "worn" finishes with the cycle of clothing passed through his own family in the US, and eventually to Ghana, where his parents emigrated from. "I purposely work with newspaper, cardboard scraps and low cost, supermarket grade aluminium foil along with other pedestrian materials," he says. "What began as a matter of necessity ultimately became a conspicuous act of association, connecting under-resourced communities with the privileged space of museums and galleries, which are inextricably linked to wealth."

You can see more of Fordjour's work in the new autumn issue of *Elephant* magazine. Derek Fordjour's exhibition *Self Must Die* opens at Petzel on November 12, 2020.

Goodman, Wendy, "My Studio in the Bronx Thirteen artists and makers who have found space and community in a former paper-clip factory in Port Morris," *NewYorkMagazine.com*, October 9, 2020

NEW YORK

## My Studio in the Bronx: Thirteen artists and makers who have found space and community in a former paper-clip factory in Port Morris

By Wendy Goodman | October 9, 2020

You can see the telephone number plastered across the side of the handsome old brick building at 728 East 136th Street as you walk from the Cypress Avenue 6-train stop. It might as well be a blinking neon sign heralding the changes taking place in Port Morris, the Bronx, which is becoming the latest postindustrial refuge for people who need studio space. When the Altmark Group purchased the building in 1994, it housed light manufacturing, and in part, it still does. (Its M1-2 zoning doesn't permit residential use.) But two decades later, more and more artists began looking to the neighborhood.

When a moving-and-storage company occupying the entire fifth floor left for New Jersey, "we had this big block of space available. It was like 15,000 square feet," says Barry Altmark, who handles leasing for his family concern. "And we weren't really sure what to do with it." That was three years ago, when artist and School of Visual Arts faculty member Judy Mannarino was looking for new studio space. She found the building while walking through the neighborhood and rented 4,000 square feet, which turned out to be more than she needed, so she brought in fellow artist and SVA colleague Steve DeFrank. Together, they broke it up into four separate studios, sharing one and subletting the other three. Gradually, word spread about the building.

Today, there are about 50 artists, furniture-makers, ceramicists, and architects — along with NY Sluggers Baseball Academy — in the building. We visited 13 of them, most of whom had come from more cramped spaces in other parts of town. "I wasn't sure what to expect. The Bronx was an X factor in my mind," says artist Derek Fordjour. "When I arrived, I quickly understood why so many artists had moved before me. It feels like Bushwick or Williamsburg in the '90s."

### Derek Fordjour

*Painter and interdisciplinary artist*

Rents: 2,000 sq. ft.

Moved in: February 2019.

Previously: Had a space through Sharpe-Walentas Studio Program in Brooklyn, then downtown L.A.

How you got here: "I was looking for a space close to home and consulted with Eric N. Mack and Hugh Hayden, artists who had studios in the Bronx."

What you like: "I'm able to work uninterrupted."



Photo: Jason Schmidt



# Derek Fordjour Honors Disenfranchised Communities in His Vibrant, Layered Work

By Jacqui Germain | June 3, 2020



Derek Fordjour, *Tandem Orange*, 2019. Courtesy of the artist.



Portrait of Derek Fordjour by Winnie Au. Courtesy of the artist.

Derek Fordjour is acutely aware of his audience—and in recognizing that awareness, he likes to toy with them. Recently, he's been doing this by presenting his richly layered figurative paintings in elaborate, immersive installations that have become integral to his practice. "SHELTER," Fordjour's first major solo museum exhibition—which opened earlier this year at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis (CAM)—is the most sensory-dense experience he's designed to date.

The show takes place within a fully enclosed, 800-square-foot shed-like steel structure. It involves a carefully engineered mechanical system of levers and ball bearings and 22,000 pounds of dirt covering the floor. The majority of Fordjour's works are displayed in this insular space, hanging on the corrugated metal walls; discarded everyday objects litter the floor, while a disarmingly believable rain-storm simulation pelts the roof overhead. Viewers enter the dimly lit, uneven terrain through a hallway and are immediately transported upon entering the striking environment.

Elsewhere in the museum, 24 works from Fordjour's "Players Portrait" series are displayed on CAM's 60-foot-long Project Wall. The vibrant portraits create a strong contrast against the stark whiteness of the museum's Project Wall, making "SHELTER" seem that much more otherworldly.

"Conceptually, I never really loved the extraction of work from the artist's life and environment and reality—that sanitizing that happens where you pluck it from its roots and present it in a cube," Fordjour said recently, making sense of the installation's immersive qualities. "I'm always working against that because for me, there's something in that sterilization that's commercial or presenting to an audience [in a way] that's necessarily disconnected from the artist's reality, but is also problematic to me."

Germain, Jacqui, "Derek Fordjour Honors Disenfranchised Communities in His Vibrant, Layered Work," *artsy.net*, June 3, 2020

The structure of "SHELTER" intentionally shrouds the displayed collection in a world of Fordjour's own making. The exhibition's sound element, installed above the metal enclosure, serves a similar purpose. "One of the things I associate with diasporic experiences is the notion of sound, the music of culture," Fordjour explained. "Whether that's the decibel levels at which people talk and laugh, whether it's actual music, whether it's rain associated with equatorial life or the tropics—I do find that idea to be another disruption to sterility."

Fordjour limited himself to creating work from materials often associated with the makeshift homes of migrant populations, refugee camps, and economically disenfranchised rural communities. He uses these perceived markers of poverty to make a claim about the inherent dignity of homemaking, arguing that the deliberate re-manipulation of resources—regardless of limitations or quality—is a dignifying act. Through employing everyday materials like wood, newspaper, and aluminum foil, Fordjour creates a content-rich border between his works and the depersonalized, institutional gaze.



Derek Fordjour, installation view of "SHELTER" at Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, 2020. Photo by Dusty Kessler. Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis.

Crossing the boundary between the outside world and a constructed interior space is an experience that Fordjour grew up with. Born in Memphis, Tennessee, to Ghanaian parents, the duality of Fordjour's upbringing mirrored that of many first-generation Americans of color. And like many immigrant families, the resources Fordjour's parents were able to secure also doubled as opportunities to provide support for other people.

"My mother and my father were always providing housing for students and their immediate and extended family networks," Fordjour recalled. "I was very aware at an early age that people moved from places where they had less opportunity to places where there was more, and that they needed temporary shelter in order to do that."

Fordjour grew up navigating the distinct experience of Southern Black American life in Memphis while Ghanaian foods and traditions continued to thrive at home. He translated these experiences of sustaining and "slipping" between dual contexts into three-dimensional environments, the first of which appeared at Art Basel in Miami Beach in 2018, a presentation that established Fordjour as an emerging talent.



Derek Fordjour, installation view of "SHELTER" at Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, 2020. Photo by Dusty Kessler. Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis.

Since piquing the interest of the contemporary art world, esteem for the 46-year-old artist's work grew rapidly, garnering recognition from the Whitney Museum and the Dallas Museum of Art to the Metropolitan Transit Authority of New York City and the Studio Museum in Harlem. The press surrounding his success never fails to mention celebrity collectors like Beyoncé, Jay-Z, and Drake, nor his six-figure sale during the 2019 fall auction season. Recent press has focused on the controversial \$1.45 million lawsuit levied against him by New York art dealer Robert Blumenthal. When asked about the ongoing legal battle, Fordjour declined to comment.

The recent whirlwind of energy and institutional interest has only heightened the artist's own sense of the market's unpredictability. Even as the art world christens him a rising star, Fordjour's work remains preoccupied with the sense of vulnerability and precarity that comes with being a Black artist in an industry that still believes it has "discovered" the newest "trends." That presumed novelty plays out in a fickle multi-billion-dollar market landscape in a way that artists themselves have very little control over.

Germain, Jacqui, “Derek Fordjour Honors Disenfranchised Communities in His Vibrant, Layered Work,” *artsy.net*, June 3, 2020

Fordjour’s own anxiety about that realization congealed into a nagging concern about proving his credibility as an artist—a preoccupation that he explores through his art practice. The investigation developed into a broader commentary about the particular ways that Black people often live under the burden of a similar kind of anxiety. For Black artists specifically, the hope might be that a certain fellowship or award will validate them as artists. For Black people more generally, the hope might be that an academic degree or a stable job, our status as tax-paying American citizens, or some other spectacle of success will validate our credibility as human beings.

That reliance on spectacle—and its paralyzing burden—led Fordjour to create a haunting contrast that has become a signature in his paintings. The color and figures of Black pageantry and parade merge with Fordjour’s practice of tearing and peeling away previously applied layers of newspaper and cardboard, gradually dulling and marring the surface to reveal deep vulnerabilities.

“I’m accumulating those layers through additive processes, the meticulous gluing of all the bits and portions of paper that create sub-layers and sub-sub-layers,” Fordjour explained. “But that’s so that I can beat the surface up and literally chip away and enter a technique of repair and disrepair. The surface is what really gives indication of use and reuse.”

The worn and tattered quality of each artwork connects Fordjour’s practice to the generations of disenfranchised Black communities who’ve had to make a habit of repair and resourcefulness, who’ve been tasked with “creating something dignified or newly personal” out of disparate, discarded items.

“It’s [an] aspiration that’s kind of a strained one that I think is the patina of urban life or the lives of African American people especially,” Fordjour said. “You know, taking that used beamer and putting a new paint job on it and buffing it and putting new tires on it,” he added with a laugh.

Still, from far away, the figures in these works appear deceptively whole, carnival-like, and brightly colored at first glance. It isn’t until closer inspection that the viewer discovers the clear damage, layers of nicks and injury that mirror both the effects of the persistent burden and stress of spectacle. Gently exposing the wear and tear of this injury is a central part of Fordjour’s work. In place of spectacle, the viewer is invited to instead consider that the paintings—despite the damage and dullness; despite being made of pedestrian, everyday materials—might claim their dignity and value regardless.



Derek Fordjour, *Lotto*, 2018. Courtesy of the artist.



Derek Fordjour, *Red Stripe Pivot*, 2018. Courtesy of the artist.

# ARTFORUM

## St. Louis

**DEREK FORDJOUR**  
CONTEMPORARY ART MUSEUM  
ST. LOUIS  
3750 Washington Blvd.  
January 17–April 19, 2020



Derek Fordjour, *Five Down Wide*, 2019, acrylic, charcoal, oil pastel, and foil on newspaper mounted on canvas, 40 × 100".

Dislocation and danger animate Derek Fordjour's ramshackle architecture. For his first major solo museum exhibition, the New York-based artist presents SHELTER, a jury-rigged installation that will fill the entirety of one of CAM's eight-hundred-square-foot galleries. With dirt floors and corrugated-metal walls, the makeshift structure presents a selection of the artist's sculptures and mixed-media paintings alongside detritus scavenged from nearby city streets. The canvases, several of which also hang on the institution's newly revived Project Wall, address the black American experience—especially as it pertains to the spectacle of sports—and the artist's Ghanaian heritage. Yet SHELTER is the show's thematic focus: Providing scant protection, the ad hoc home underscores the precarity and vulnerability of migrant life.

— Jennifer Piejko

Rees, Lucy, "Derek Fordjour: The rising-star artist uses imagery of carnivals, sporting contests, casinos, and games to grapple with complex issues," *GalerieMagazine.com*, March 5, 2019

Galerie

# Derek Fordjour

The rising-star artist uses imagery of carnivals, sporting contests, casinos, and games to grapple with complex issues

By Lucy Rees | March 5, 2019

At last winter's Art Basel in Miami Beach, artist Derek Fordjour transformed London dealer Josh Lilley's booth with five tons of gravel, corrugated steel, and barbed wire—all for an immersive faux-backlot installation that included several of his beautiful textured paintings. "The idea was borne out of frustration with the sterility of art fairs," says the Brooklyn-based talent, who is preparing for a solo exhibition with Lilley in May. (His first gallery show opened at L.A.'s Night Gallery in February.)

Fordjour uses imagery of carnivals, sporting contests, casinos, and games to grapple with complex issues like race and societal inequality in a "visually rich and accessible way."

Born in Memphis, Tennessee, the rising star first caused a stir in late 2017 with a playful installation at the Sugar Hill Children's Museum in Harlem; last fall, he installed a massive 17-by-29-foot wall work across the street from the Whitney Museum that subtly reflects on gun violence. Uptown, at the 145th Street subway station in Harlem, a suite of mosaics from his "Parade" series dazzle passersby on their daily commute as part of the MTA Arts & Design project.

Currently, Fordjour is adding Instagram to his list of influences, with the aim to learn about the work of an entirely new artist every day. "I'm infinitely inspired."



Derek Fordjour in his studio. PHOTO: BRAD OGBONNA



Derek Fordjour, *Picture Day*, 2018. PHOTO: COURTESY OF JOSH LILLEY GALLERY



Derek Fordjour, *Second of September*, 2019. PHOTO: COURTESY OF JOSH LILLEY GALLERY



Derek Fordjour, *Pageant*, 2018. PHOTO: COURTESY OF JOSH LILLEY GALLERY

## CULTURED

# Artist Derek Fordjour Revels in the Game Toppling Expectations as He Goes

By Jennifer Piejko | February 2, 2019

"I use a knife as much as I use a brush, and I use charcoal as much as I use paint," artist Derek Fordjour explains, gently shuffling through the fragile, heavily textured canvases that line the floor of his temporary Boyle Heights studio. His signature palimpsestic composite portraits reveal layers of shredded newspaper pages and skinned corrugated cardboard between washes of blazing neons and smudges of charcoal. "I never feel that all the labor it takes to get to these surfaces is a waste. You never know how it's going to work out. There's some chance in it." Fordjour's elevation of these humble, mundane materials is a reference to the hand-me-downs he grew up passing along to relatives in Ghana—clothes that would eventually resurface in family photos—as much as it is to the Global South, a notion that people of color occupy a certain physical and psychological position regardless of geography. "People there tend to use a collage, or gumbo, aesthetic of working with scraps. Putting these torn or broken pieces next to a pristine work or space like a museum feels really honest and democratic."

Fordjour often expands his undulating surfaces into multidimensional spaces, such as with *PARADE*, a carnival fantasyland he created within New York's Sugar Hill Children's Museum of Art & Storytelling in 2017, complete with popcorn and fresh hay. Alluding to Harlem's rich history, his installation of eight large-scale mosaics, also titled *PARADE*, was commissioned by New York City's MTA for the nearby 145th Street station. Starring a line of majorettes and drummers, the mosaics depict the area's legacy of African-American parades, beginning with the 1919 celebration of the Harlem Hellfighters—New York's all-Black World War I regiment—and continuing with the African-American Day Parade, which began during the Civil Rights era and is still active today. Further down Manhattan's West Side, the Whitney Museum commissioned the mural *Half Mast* across the street from its main entrance. Installed last fall, the mural shows a vibrantly-hued dense crowd scene and deals with gun violence: police officers, students, targets and civilians all share the same small space, which is occasionally dotted with the buoyant balloons and beloved teddy bears of victims' makeshift sidewalk memorials.

"JRRNNYS"—Fordjour's first major solo show in Los Angeles, on view at Night Gallery through March 2—presents *STOCKROOM Ezekiel*, a site-specific three-sided room that is his most intricate, and perhaps most revealing, work to date. After creating *BACKROOM*, a shanty-style stockroom inside Josh Lilley Gallery's booth for Art Basel Miami Beach late last year, and *UPPER ROOM* at Robert Blumenthal Gallery in 2015, which was based on a prayer room his Ghanaian mother maintained in his childhood home in Memphis, *STOCKROOM Ezekiel* offers more insight into his conceptual process. "I'm thinking a lot about incarceration and my own experiences with the criminal justice system, and growing up in the '90s and seeing the crack era, and where we are now with sentencing." The installation's name honors the life of Ezekiel Archey, a convict laborer who worked under Alabama's brutal convict leasing program in the late 19th century.



Photo: Philip Cheung

Piejko, Jennifer, "Artist Derek Fordjour Revels in the Game Toppling Expectations as He Goes," *CulturedMag.com*, February 2, 2019

The installation closes in on you: the 12-foot-high wooden walls hold up grids of a thousand small cubbyholes inside the room, accessed by sweeping through meat-locker-like plastic sheeting curtains. Some of these "cells" are populated with small objects, and some are upholstered with designer fabrics recognizable from the early aughts' logo-mania days: Gucci Gs and Louis Vuitton's unmistakable monogram in browns, grays and reds, representing what the artist refers to as "modern material ambition"; others are left in their raw state. Still other articles are made from the unmistakable stiff orange cotton of prison uniforms. Some cells host gleaming Mercedes-Benz hood ornaments; there are a few blue-and-white discs plucked off of BMWs. One cell holds an elegant vintage alarm clock, while others still contain a single—or a few—scuffed-up, precariously stacked billiard balls. Or a dart. Or a baseball.

"There are a few things that are recurring for me, one of which is my interest in games. There's something of a gaming logic to most of my inquiry." For *STOCKROOM*, Fordjour fabricated several hundred hand-sized busts from the same mold in a variety of materials—including resin, copper, dirt and plaster. The small, traditional statue is familiar, if uncanny: "This one references a historical bust and the Tuskegee Airmen," he explains, a nod to the African-American Air Force pilot group that fought in World War II, the first to do so in the U.S. Armed Forces. "But then again, their leather helmets make them look like sportsmen, or game pieces, too," he adds. "I'm interested in how our bodies are larger in relation to this figure, and so we feel that they're expendable. We have lots of autonomy or dominion over them." They light up intermittently in differing configurations, programmed on an Arduino board. "The whole thing functions as a gaming board, too," Fordjour explains.

So, is this a system in place here, or is this design given over to chance? "Right..." he laughs.



Photo: Philip Cheung



Photo: Philip Cheung

## THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

### ‘I Don’t Want to Be a Blip’: An Artist on the Rise Adjusts to the Spotlight

Derek Fordjour has become one of the art world’s most coveted newcomers

By Kelly Crow | January 30, 2019



‘It just took years of tinkering before everything I wanted to say came together,’ says artist Derek Fordjour, who didn’t start showing his own work publicly until he was 35. PHOTO: BRAD OGBONNA

seums like the Dallas Museum of Art and fellow artists like Henry Taylor buying his work. Last fall, the Whitney Museum of American Art commissioned his painting “Half Mast,” displaying a reproduction of it on a billboard near New York’s High Line. Last month at Art Basel Miami Beach, Mr. Fordjour’s works were selling for as much as \$48,000 at London dealer Josh Lilley’s booth.

“Sometimes the narratives he’s painting are dark, but he seduces you with the textures of his paintings,” said Mr. Taylor. “His surfaces are just beautiful.”

On Saturday, Night Gallery in Los Angeles is scheduled to open “JRRNNYS,” a show of his new work, followed by the city’s California African American Museum, which is including him in a group show, “Plumb Line: Charles White and the Contemporary,” opening March 6.

All this attention seems sudden, Mr. Fordjour said, but he is steeling himself for the gyrations of the art market. Born in Memphis, Tenn., to Ghanaian immigrants, Mr. Fordjour chose early on to make a life in art, earning a master’s in art education from Harvard and working for established artists like Mickalene Thomas.

But he didn’t start showing his own work publicly until he was 35. “It just took years of tinkering before everything I wanted to say came together,” he said.

Mr. Fordjour’s breakthrough began six years ago following a divorce that left him sleeping on an air mattress in his Harlem studio. “I wanted to be confident and gregarious, but I was just broken and overwhelmed,” he said. “I realized I was not comfortable with my own vulnerability as a black man and as an artist.”

Dirt. Hay. Pea gravel.

The New York artist Derek Fordjour often blankets the floors of his shows with materials that can throw audiences off-balance. Vulnerability is central to his work, and the unsteadiness underfoot tends to reinforce the funhouse effect of his portraits and sculptures.

From cheerleaders wobbling in human pyramids to pageant winners and jockeys posing in awkward groups, Mr. Fordjour’s paintings appear carnivalesque, yet convey an uneasy feeling of being displayed and exposed—his way, he said, of exploring his fear of both failure and success in today’s volatile art market.

“I’ve seen how good things can also evaporate,” the 44-year-old said. “I don’t want to be a blip.”

Ironically, delving into his own insecurities has transformed Mr. Fordjour into one of the art world’s most coveted newcomers, with collectors like Sciame president Joseph Mizzi, mu-

He stopped painting portraits of athletes and started painting everyday figures who seemed swept up by social conventions or competitions they might not be winning. The facial expressions of his “players,” as he calls them, grew increasingly blurred and surreal. His jockeys and marching-band drum majors started sporting ornate uniforms, symbols of respectability that double as a kind of armor, he said.

Mr. Fordjour took color cues from candy wrappers in Ghana, but he expanded the scope of his work to explore what American assimilation meant for him and his family. One of his best-known works is 2018’s “Haberdashery,” which depicts a nude black man standing before a mirror as tailors measure him for a suit.

“My parents were really invested in looking the part,” he said. “They gave me and my brothers American names—Derek, Ike and Ricky—and their dream for us was upward mobility.”

Mr. Fordjour added: “They didn’t want our heritage to be a hindrance.”

His latest works are often a reappraisal of American ideals. In “JRRNNYS,” he plans to show a pair of portraits of a soldier and a tennis player in a new series called “Worst to Be First.” The series nods to the pressure that black trailblazers often face. (This persists in art history, he said, where prices for pioneering black artists like Jacob Lawrence still lag behind trendier recent arrivals.)

“Stable,” another work in the Night Gallery show, depicts a dozen jockeys on horseback. Mr. Fordjour said he’s enamored of the history of black jockeys who served as superstar athletes long before most minorities were allowed to compete in other major sports. Yet today, he added, black jockeys are scarce, lending eerie double meaning to the work’s title.

His most ambitious piece for the show is “STOCKROOM Ezekiel,” a 30-square-foot installation featuring cell-like walls whose cutouts are filled with glass balloons, billiard balls and tiny busts carved from coal and dirt. From the outside, it looks like a playful shadow box, but he said it explores the U.S. legacy of prison inmates being “leased” to businesses in need of labor.

“He’s pointing toward traditions that form the backbone of American culture,” said William Hathaway, the gallery’s sales director, “and he’s deeply interrogating the dynamics that drive them.”



A reproduction of Derek Fordjour's 'Half Mast' displayed in New York. PHOTO: RON AMSTUTZ/NIGHT GALLERY



# How Artist Derek Fordjour Turned Cardboard and Newspaper Into a Carnival Funhouse

The artist takes us behind the scenes of his show at the Sugar Hill Children's Museum of Art & Storytelling.

By Sarah Cascone | December 18, 2017

Ahead of his latest exhibition, artist Derek Fordjour spent a year in residence at the Harlem museum. He crafted a carnival-inspired dreamworld populated by marvels that blend the everyday with the fantastic: a Ferris wheel, tribal art figurines, a popcorn machine, and a velvet-flocked tricycle topped with a birthday cake done in tribute to Wayne Thiebaud. Those elements became the building blocks for "PARADE," Fordjour's show at Sugar Hill Children's Museum of Art & Storytelling.

"Everything in the show was made here and onsite and just for the show," Fordjour told artnet News during a studio visit.

Visitors weave their way through the narrow hallways of the funhouse-like installation: A glittering yellow brick road leads the way into a sculpture-filled corridor of childhood delights that culminates in a Narnia-inspired wardrobe, stocked with used shoes and clothing. One climbs through not to another world but to discover a haunting player piano and the sounds of Scott Joplin's "The Entertainer."



Derek Fordjour at the Sugar Hill Children's Museum in Harlem. Photo courtesy of Derek Fordjour.

For this edition of "Origin Story," in which we examine the backstory of an individual work of art, Fordjour walked us through the creation of *The Drum Major*, a painting of a triumphant figure in red which greets visitors at the entrance of the show.



Derek Fordjour's *The Drum Major* (2017). Photo courtesy of Derek Fordjour.

How did you develop your painting technique?

It started because I had no money. I couldn't afford paint, only newspaper and charcoal. The first works were just that. Eventually, I became much more elaborate and started working with corrugated cardboard.

I start with tiles of corrugated cardboard squares and rectangles, glued to canvas and covered in spray paint. We just lay out the pieces and then determine the spaces in between the pieces. We do a layer of papering on top, applying glue in a netting pattern, which is what allows for good removal. If you just smear on all the glue it will just be stuck. These little air bubbles between the layers create a way for me to get a knife in there and have things sort of pop off, which is how we end up with a beautiful surface.

Then I draw an image right on the paper, and color it with acrylic and spray paint. I cover it in newspaper again, and then with hundreds of very small pieces of archival masking paper. Using registration marks and a custom acetate stencil, the figure is graphed onto the new surface and the entire underpainting is reconstructed as a drawing in charcoal.

Through a series of cuts and tears, painted and drawn marks with spray paint, charcoal, acrylic, and oil pastel, the final surface alternately conceals and re-

Cascone, Sarah, "How Artist Derek Fordjour Turned Cardboard and Newspaper Into a Carnival Funhouse," *news.artnet.com*, December 18, 2017

veals underlying layers to create a rich, textured surface. There's a relationship between the under-image and the top image.

I would have never thought of a process like this, but I think I really just love the payoff with the final surface that it has all that memory.

How much of the final product do you plan ahead of time, and how much evolves during the creation process?

It's really just a process that grows out of making. I can't say I've stepped back and thought about it because the more you make it, it just kind of happens. So it's a relationship between the layers that makes it work.

There's some kind of logic to it, I think that's intuitive. The coloring and the spacing, it might be beyond language, honestly. It's just very intuitive, the way I balance color.

When I'm on the top surface and I start ripping and tearing, I don't always know what's under there, exactly. And that's like fun, and I respond to that—trying to build in some surprises and some improvisation.

Your paintings have a kind of worn, distressed look to them. What inspired that?

The reason I work this way or why I'm drawn to this kind of surface is a lot about my experiences with used things or worn things. So my parents are Ghanaian and when we were kids they would send our used clothes to Africa. We would get pictures back of our cousins wearing clothes we had 10 years ago, but they would be fresh, restyled as if they got the newest. Seeing an old thing become new again, the dignity of that, that's one layer.

Also, I grew up in Memphis, Tennessee, where there was a lot of white flight. There would be these white neighborhoods, and then black families would move in, and then the white families would move out.

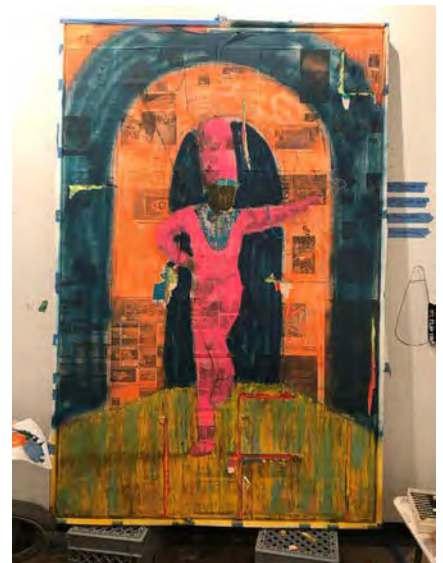
I'm really attracted to that notion of our institutions and our homes having that kind of used, worn, quality but still trying to have dignity about it, and make it something new. That kind of wear and tear, that's kind of what it's about.



Derek Fordjour's *The Drum Major* (2017), process shot. Photo courtesy of Derek Fordjour.



Derek Fordjour's *The Drum Major* (2017), process shot. Photo courtesy of Derek Fordjour.



Derek Fordjour's *The Drum Major* (2017), process shot. Photo courtesy of Derek Fordjour.

## HYPERALLERGIC

### A Dreamy Carnival at the Children's Museum in Harlem

Derek Fordjour's impish and touching installation is so chock-a-block with the minute details of Fordjour's making that I feel I'm inhabiting his dreamscape

By Seph Rodney | November 22, 2017

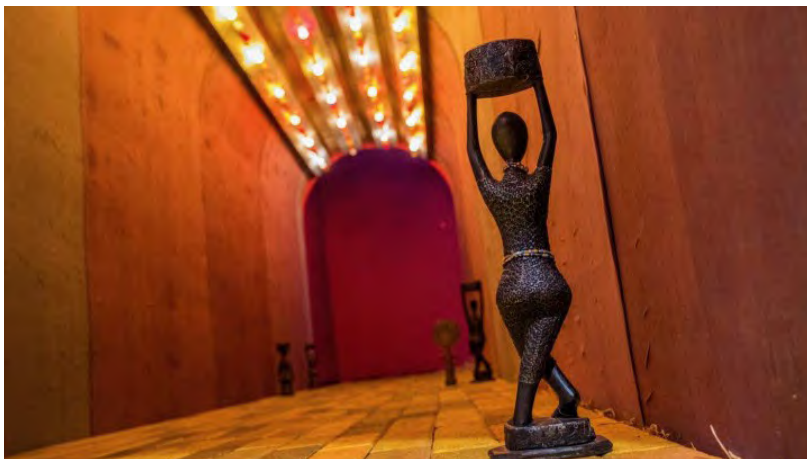
I had a dream a few weeks ago. In it I had returned to the house I grew up in — my father's house — and I was again occupying the room I had as a boy. There was music playing, music I didn't want to hear, so I tried to close the door to my room, but the upper left corner of the door was warped in such a way it wouldn't, couldn't close. I felt something like frustration, but also recognition that I didn't belong in that house, in that room anymore. The small, quotidian details of that dream (and perhaps it's this way with all dreams) made it emotionally charged for me and that charge made the memory endure. Derek Fordjour's impish and touching installation, *Parade*, now at the Sugar Hill Children's Museum of Art & Storytelling, is so chock-a-block with the minute details of Fordjour's making that walking through the work I do feel like I'm inhabiting his dreamscape — one I wanted to linger in.



(all photos by Michael Palma Mir, courtesy of the artist and Sugar Hill Children's Museum of Art and Storytelling)

It starts out crazy fun: a tunnel lit overhead by those warm incandescent bulbs that remind of a carnival or fair, with a floor of yellow bricks of varying shades dusted with glitter. There are also tribal art figurines on the yellow brick road that ends in a colorful painting of a drum major high stepping on a similar harlequin floor. The tunnel then leads right and I follow it into a hall with hay all over the floor, and newspaper covering the walls. The hall is full of odd objects that could only belong to Fordjour's memory: a blue tricycle perched on brightly colored milk cartoons, with a birthday cake on the seat and stuck in the middle of the cake, a long pole ending in a balloon, "Primordial Ambition" (2017).

There are food carts advertising hot dogs, popcorn and varied goodies "Hot Dog/Fufu" (2017); more figurines; big, lighted plywood carnival wheels "Post-colonial Cyclorama" (2017), old wooden window shutters and a black and white Rubik's cube in a little alcove. I notice that one painting I had seen the week before in Rachel Uffner gallery's *All that Glitters* exhibition: "Couplet" (2017), which here has migrated to the floor. Afterward, I find out that the works that are for sale have been mixed in with other objects (some of which visitors are allowed to touch and manipulate) in such a way that it all feels like one encompassing reverie. Having Scott Joplin's "The Entertainer" playing throughout the piece also gives it that nudge towards nostalgia. But it's not treacly; it's like a day at the fair: full of visual delights.



Installation view of the entrance to Derek Fordjour's *Parade*

The ending, which I won't give away, is so radiant, and how you have to get there, so apt that I would only spoil it by revealing it. In this season of daily disappointments in the operation of our government this exhibition is a lovely reprieve.

## The New York Times

# From Derek Fordjour, a Sense of Abandoned Ritual

By Holland Cotter | November 20, 2015

Entering Derek Fordjour's "Upper Room" from Madison Avenue is like changing planets. The small reception area in Robert Blumenthal's third-floor gallery is carpeted with loose crushed stone, destabilizing underfoot; fragments of neon advertising signs hang from and lean against the walls. To the right, up two steps, a small door leads to a darkened larger space swathed, tent-style, in semisheer fabrics and burlap; the floor here is covered with packed earth. As your eyes adjust to the dimness you can make out tree trunks standing upright like tent poles. Wreaths of dried flowers are suspended from them.

This installation is partly autobiographical. Mr. Fordjour grew up in Memphis, a child of Ghanaian immigrants. "Upper Room" refers to places of worship: a prayer room in his family home and church revival meetings in forest clearings. Worship was intended to strengthen personal identity and safety-in-numbers solidarity, though powerful forces were set against this. A soundtrack of hymns plays in the gallery, but so does live audio from a police scanner in New York City, where the artist now lives. The installation's atmosphere is one of menace rather than safety. It feels less like a place of communion than one of abandoned ritual. The dried flowers could easily be funeral wreaths.

Mr. Fordjour takes risks here: If he had overstated his basic image, or editorialized on it, the piece would have landed with a thud. He has trusted in the truth of materials to tell a story, and they do. "Upper Room" balances information and mystery. It comes out of personal history, but refers to larger ones, including the history of refugees who still live, destitute and unprotected, in the campgrounds that are streets of this rich city.



A view of Derek Fordjour's tentlike "Upper Room" at the Robert Blumenthal Gallery. Credit...Courtesy of the artist and Matt Grubb/Robert Blumenthal Gallery



# DEREK FORDJOUR *The Big Game*

By Jonathan Goodman | October 5, 2014

Still in grad school at Hunter College's fine arts program, the artist Derek Fordjour has nonetheless pulled off a terrific, completely professional show of paintings and sculptures. He works with the grand metaphor of sports as a way of reading the black experience in America (Fordjour is the son of Ghanaian immigrants, who established their home and career in the South). The metaphor has to do with the still problematic position of African-Americans both in and outside the world of professional sports, which promises talented athletes celebrity and wealth but all too often fails to deliver the goods—or takes pleasure in their fall.

At the same time, Fordjour cleverly develops his metaphor to include upward aspiration in a way that transforms competitive athletic experience into something larger, and deeper, than the court or playing field. The tension between the work's evident meaning and the larger aim of his portraits and sculptures of football heroes and basketball stars is key to the exhibition's success. His point is serious and germane to contemporary life; Fordjour articulately demonstrates the dangers inherent with the identification of sports with black people in America—that such allusions inevitably lead to a misreading of their ambition and forms a constraint to higher goals.

The analogy of sport succeeds because as an idea, it holds true in real life—identification between the privileged athlete and the marginal youth is quite clear. (Professional athletes are currently charged with child abuse, domestic violence, and even murder.) Fordjour works representationally, with great stylistic imagination. Technically, his process for the athlete portraits

is rather involved. He begins with eight layers of the *Financial Times* newspaper, the periodical being deliberately chosen for its emphasis on economy. A layer of spray paint follows, whose colors are mostly hidden by bits and pieces of painted, textured paper, which is then painted over again with the final image. In this sense, each athlete's portrait is both a painting and a collage, an intricate process that affords us the study of a young black man's image, even if we cannot identify him as a star.

There is also embedded the idea of the *artist* as player, which in today's art market, is a highly accurate description. Overall, however, the portraits deny any specific identity; Fordjour wants to turn the young sportsman he describes into a kind of "everyman." "No. 85" (2014) presents the indistinct features of a black athlete wearing an orange-striped jersey against a background pattern of black diamonds. The surface of the picture attains the depth of a low relief, muffling the image's particularity in favor of a nostalgic haze of reference. There is heroism in the image, but that too is modified by the indistinctness of the details. The success of the portrait lies in its being applicable to anyone who has sought fame in America. It isn't difficult to work out the implications of "No. 85," who tellingly has a number but not a name: the black athlete is at once celebrated and made anonymous, needed by society but also a servant of his very fortune.

In the remarkable sculpture, "Single Coverage" (2014), a gaily-patterned canopy sticks out of the helmet and head of a black football player; according to Fordjour, the umbrella gives the nod to street commerce both here and in Africa. A small banner hangs from the pole supporting the canopy's fabric top. It is in some ways a surreal image, but its old-fashioned aura—it looks like the player is wearing a leather helmet—renders it nostalgic and in a strange way, highly postmodern. It seems to project innocence or emotional neutrality, but not the implications of the sculpture's signs. Being disingenuous is part of the game.

Another painting of two cheerleaders supporting a third, who stands on their legs, is memorable too as an image that runs deeper than its description. Two of the young women are black; the third is white. They celebrate, again with supposed innocence, a way of life in America: the big play in which athletes become heroes only to fade into the background as soon as the game is over. Here again, the reference to the artist's career is implied, and we remember Warhol's maxim: in a mercantile democracy, everyone will enjoy 15 minutes of fame.

In addition to the connection between sports and the artist, Fordjour also has a piece driven by the broad influence of modern art—"Topdog/Underdog" (2014)—which offers a Brancusian endless column consisting of eight athletes rising, head stacked on head, from a distinctly Duchampian wheel. The title inevitably refers to the position of the star athlete's wheel of fortune, whose unknown turn also points to the unknown destiny of an artist like Fordjour. It is a witty piece whose effect is greater than the sum of its parts. One recognizes that the work's upward movement is both subtle and necessary—two adjectives that describe this show's compelling effect on its audience.



Derek Fordjour, "No. 85" (2014). Acrylic, oil pastel, charcoal on newsprint, mounted on canvas, 30 x 24". Courtesy of Storefront Ten Eyck Gallery.

## Derek Fordjour

b. 1974, Memphis, TN

lives and works in New York, NY

### Education

- |      |                                                                                               |
|------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2016 | MFA, Hunter College, New York, NY                                                             |
| 2002 | Ed.M., Harvard University, Cambridge, MA                                                      |
| 2001 | BA, Morehouse College, Atlanta, GA<br>Pratt Institute College of Art and Design, New York, NY |

### Selected Solo / Two-Person Exhibitions

(\* indicates a publication)

- |      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2025 | <i>Nightsong</i> , David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA                                                                                                                                                            |
| 2024 | <i>Visiting Masterworks</i> , Montana Museum of Art and Culture, University of Montana, MT                                                                                                                             |
| 2023 | <i>SCORE</i> , Petzel Gallery, New York, NY                                                                                                                                                                            |
| 2022 | * <i>Magic, Mystery &amp; Legerdemain</i> , David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA                                                                                                                                   |
| 2021 | <i>Derek Fordjour: Gestalt</i> , Pond Society, Shanghai, China                                                                                                                                                         |
| 2020 | <i>SELF MUST DIE</i> , Petzel Gallery, New York, NY<br><i>SHELTER</i> , Contemporary Art Museum of St. Louis, St. Louis, MO                                                                                            |
| 2019 | <i>The House Always Wins</i> , Josh Lilley, London, England<br><i>JRRNNYS</i> , Night Gallery, Los Angeles, CA                                                                                                         |
| 2018 | <i>Half Mast</i> , Whitney Museum of American Art Billboard Project, New York, NY<br><i>Derek Fordjour: Camelot Study</i> , Brooklyn Academy of Music, Brooklyn, NY<br><i>Ritual</i> , Nina Johnson Gallery, Miami, FL |
| 2017 | <i>PARADE</i> , Sugar Hill Museum, New York, NY                                                                                                                                                                        |
| 2016 | <i>Agency &amp; Regulation</i> , Luce Gallery, Turin, Italy<br><i>Derek Fordjour: Eight Paintings</i> , Papillion Art, Los Angeles, CA                                                                                 |

- 2015 *UPPER ROOM*, Robert Blumenthal Gallery, New York, NY  
*Meritocracy*, Jack Bell Gallery, London, England
- 2014 *The Big Game*, Storefront Ten Eyck, Brooklyn, NY
- 2013 *Sciame Artist's Salon Series Exhibition*, Sciame Corporate Gallery, New York, NY  
*Built Environments: Inaugurations*, with Felandus Thames, Russ Barrie Medical Science Pavilion, Columbia University, New York, NY

### **Selected Group Exhibitions**

(\* indicates a publication)

- 2025 *\*Get in the Game: Sports, Art, Culture*, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, AR  
*Telepathic Jungle*, Schick Art Gallery, Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, NY  
*Intrigue*, Tilton Gallery, New York, NY  
*Recent Editions*, Pace Prints, New York, NY
- 2024 *Toy Story*, Center of International Contemporary Art Vancouver, Vancouver, Canada  
*Invisible Luggage*, Historic Hampton House, Miami, FL  
*Making Strange: Sacred Imagery and the Self*, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, PA  
*\*Get in the Game: Sports, Art, Culture*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA  
*\*Flight into Egypt: Black Artists and Ancient Egypt, 1876-Now*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY  
*\*Strike Fast, Dance Lightly: Artists on Boxing*, Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, FL  
*\*Fifteen Years*, Luce Gallery, Turin, Italy  
*Reverberations*, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA  
*Stop & Stare*, UTA Artist Space, Atlanta, GA  
*Day for Night: New American Realism*, organized by the Aishti Foundation, Palazzo Barberini, Rome, Italy  
*Abstraction after Modernism: Recent Acquisitions*, The Menil Collection, Houston, TX  
*an arena*, Barbati Gallery, Venice, Italy  
*Soliloquies*, Petzel Gallery, New York, NY  
*Recent Editions*, Pace Prints, New York, NY  
*\*Multiplicity: Collage in Contemporary America*, The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.
- 2023 *Accra! The Rise of a Global Art Community*, Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus, OH  
*\*Black American Portraits*, Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, Memphis, TN  
*Shared Visions*, Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, Eugene, OR  
*\*20*, David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA  
*Windrush: Portraits Of A Pioneering Generation*, Palace of Holyroodhouse in Edinburgh, Scotland; Buckingham Palace in London, England  
*\*NGV Triennial 2023*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia  
*Together in Time: Selections from the Hammer Contemporary Collection*, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA  
*\*Multiplicity: Collage in Contemporary America*, Frist Art Museum, Nashville, TN  
*Brand New Ancients*, Misk Art Institute, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia
- 2022 *Dark Light: Realism in the Age of Post-Truths*, curated by Massimiliano Gioni, Aishti Foundation, Jal El Dib, Lebanon  
*Unmasking Masculinity for the Twenty-First Century*, Kalamazoo Institute of Arts, Kalamazoo, MI  
*51 @ 51: Collected Works*, Rennie Museum, Vancouver, Canada  
*In Our Time: Selections from the Singer Collection*, Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, Scottsdale, AZ  
*Through Our Eyes - Resonance and Illusion in Contemporary Portraits*, Center of International Contemporary Art, Vancouver, Canada

*In These Truths*, curated by Edreys Wajed, Aitina Fareed-Cooke, and Aaron Ott, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY

- 2021 *SPOTLIGHT*, Vanhaerents Art Collection, Brussels, Belgium  
*Dark Waters*, benefiting the Better Watts Initiative, curated by Lauren Halsey, AJ Girard, and Tea Vickers, Watts Labor Community Action Committee, Los Angeles, CA  
*But No Elephants!*, Sugar Hill Children's Museum of Art and Storytelling, New York, NY  
*The Slipstream: Reflection, Resilience, and Resistance in the Art of Our Time*, curated by Eugenie Tsai, John and Barbara Vogelstein, with Joseph Shaikewitz, Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY  
*Present Generations: Creating the Scantland Collection of the Columbus Museum of Art*, Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus, OH  
*Puppets of New York: Downtown at The Clemente*, Abrazo Interno Gallery, The Clemente Soto Velez Cultural and Educational Center, New York, NY; Museum of the City of New York, New York, NY
- 2020 *100 Drawings from Now*, The Drawing Center, New York, NY  
*Private View: Selections from ABHK*, Petzel Gallery, New York, NY  
*Open Air*, Luce Gallery, Turin, Italy  
*Majeure Force*, Night Gallery, Los Angeles, LA  
*Uptown 2020*, Wallach Art Gallery at Columbia University, New York, NY
- 2019 *Transmissions*, Zidoun-Bossuyt Gallery, Luxembourg, Luxembourg  
*Plumb Line*, California African American Museum, Los Angeles, LA  
*Politically Private*, Guggenheim Gallery at Chapman University, Orange, CA
- 2018 *Everyday Muse*, Itd Gallery, Los Angeles, LA  
*Invincible Summer*, Galerie Mikael Andersen, Copenhagen, Denmark  
*Cliché*, Almine Rech Gallery, New York, NY  
*Fun House*, Josh Lilley, London, England  
*Reclamation!*, Taubman Museum of Art, Roanoke, VA  
*Sidelined*, Galerie Lelong, New York, NY
- 2017 *Reinventing the Figure*, Galleria Monica de Cardenas, Zuoz, Switzerland  
*Diamonds, Rings and Courts*, Geoffrey Yeh Art Gallery, St. John's University, New York, NY  
*All That Glitters*, Rachel Uffner Gallery, New York, NY  
*Selections*, Elizabeth Dee Gallery, New York, NY
- 2016 *Human Condition*, curated by John Wolf, L.A. Metropolitan Medical Center (formerly), Los Angeles, CA  
*The Barn Show*, Johannes Vogt Gallery East, East Hampton, NY  
*First We Take Manhattan*, Ethan Cohen Gallery, New York, NY  
*Island States*, Tops Gallery, Memphis, TN  
*March Madness*, Fort Gansevoort, New York, NY
- 2015 *I Like it Like This*, Sotheby's S2 Gallery, New York, NY  
*And There is an End*, Roberts & Tilton Gallery, Los Angeles, CA  
*Mixed Doubles*, Sometimes Gallery, New York, NY  
*No Such Place*, Edward Tyler Nahem Gallery, New York, NY
- 2014 *OPEN*, Papillion Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
- 2013 *Corpus Americus*, Driscoll Babcock Gallery, New York, NY  
*Tiknahova and Winter*, New York, NY  
*Atlanta University Center Alumni Exhibition*, Atlanta University Center, Atlanta, GA

## Residencies And Awards

- 2025      Art Fellowship, Gordon Parks Foundation, Pleasantville, NY
- 2024      Humanitarian Honoree, I AM C.U.L.T.U.R.E.D. Gala, Brooklyn, NY
- 2023      Artist x Artist Honoree, Hirshhorn Gala, New York, NY  
Spirit of the Dream Award, St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, Memphis, TN
- 2022      Alumni Achievement Award, Alliance for Young Artists & Writers/Scholastic Art & Writing Awards, New York, NY
- 2020      Alex Katz Chair in Painting, The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, New York, NY
- 2018      Artist-in-Residence, Whitney Museum of American Art, Youth Insights, New York, NY  
NYSCA/NYFA Artist Fellow, New York, NY  
Deutsche Bank NYFA Fellow, New York, NY  
Artis Artist in Residence, Tel Aviv, Israel
- 2017      Sharpe-Walentas Studio Program, Brooklyn, NY  
C-12 Emerging Artist Award, Hunter College, New York, NY
- 2016      Artist-in-Residence, Sugar Hill Museum, New York, NY

## Visiting Artist And Lectures

- 2025      Aspen Institute, Artist Endowed Foundation Initiative, Featured Speaker, New York, NY  
Arizona State University Art Museum, Public Lecture, Tempe, AZ  
Museum of the City of New York/MTA Art & Design, Panelist, New York, NY  
Scholastic Young Artist and Writers Gold Key Exhibition, Keynote Speaker, New York, NY
- 2024      SFMOMA, Event Speaker, Intermedia: Dialogue Across Disciplines – Sports Edition, San Francisco, CA  
Anderson Ranch, Summer Series Speaker, Snowmass Village, CO  
AUC Art Collective, Distinguished Guest Lecturer, Atlanta, GA  
Art Law Association Event Speaker, Brooklyn Law School, Brooklyn, NY
- 2023      Frist Art Museum, Artist Talk, Nashville, TN  
Tennessee Arts Academy, Keynote Speaker, Nashville, TN  
Stable Arts Studio, Open Forum Guest Facilitator, Washington, D.C.
- 2022      Cranbrook Academy of Art, Visiting Artist and Critic, Bloomfield Hills, MI
- 2021      Phoenix Museum of Art, Lenhardt Lecture Series, Phoenix, AZ  
Columbus Museum of Art, Artist Talk, Columbus, OH  
SFMOMA, Collector's Forum, Artist Talk, San Francisco, CA  
Columbia University School of the Arts, Visiting Critic, New York, NY  
The New School – Parsons, Visiting Critic, New York, NY  
Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Visiting Critic, St. Louis, MO

New York Studio School, Evening Lecture Series, New York, NY

- 2020 Contemporary Art Museum of St. Louis, Artist Talk, St. Louis, MO  
Yale University School of Art, Core Critic, New York, NY  
Whitney Museum, Vida Americana: A Symposium, Panelist, New York, NY  
Tennessee Art Education Association Conference, Keynote Speaker, Memphis, TN
- 2019 New York University, Visiting Artist Lecture, New York, NY  
Purchase College, Visiting Artist Lecture, Purchase, NY  
UCLA, Visiting Artist Lecture, Los Angeles, CA  
Brooks Museum, Visiting Artist Lecture, Memphis, TN  
Fisk University, Visiting Artist, Nashville, TN  
Yale University School of Art Lecture, New Haven, CT
- 2018 Artist-in-Residence, Whitney Museum of American Art, Youth Insights, New York, NY  
NYSCA/NYFA Artist Fellow, New York, NY  
Deutsche Bank NYFA Fellow, New York, NY  
Artis Artist in Residence, Tel Aviv, Israel
- 2017 Yale University MFA, Visiting Critic, New Haven, NY  
Rhode Island School of Design BFA, Visiting Critic, Providence, RI  
SUNY Purchase College, Visiting Critic, White Plains, NY  
Hunter College, Hunter Mellon Arts Fellowship Workshop Panel, New York, NY  
FIT, ARTSpeak Panel Discussion, New York, NY
- 2016 School of Visual Arts MFA, Visiting Critic, New York, NY

### Commissions And Public Projects

- 2026 National Civil Rights Museum, Memphis, TN
- 2025 *Portals of Remembrance*, New York City AIDS Memorial Park, New York, NY  
High Line Art, Mural Commission, New York, NY
- 2024 *Where Do We Go From Here?*, For Freedoms Billboard Commission, Memphis, TN  
12on12, Timbaland x Derek Fordjour Collaboration, Miami, FL  
Set Seen, Art Production Fund x Frieze Projects, Banner Commission, Los Angeles, CA
- 2023 *Windrush: Portraits of a Pioneering Generation*, Royal Collection Trust, London, England  
Tennessee State University (TSU), Outdoor Installation, Nashville, TN
- 2022 *Sonic Boom*, Building Art Outdoor Art Series, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles
- 2018 Whitney Museum of American Art Billboard Project, New York, NY  
MTA Arts & Design Permanent Installation – 145th Street 3 Train Line, New York, NY

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