

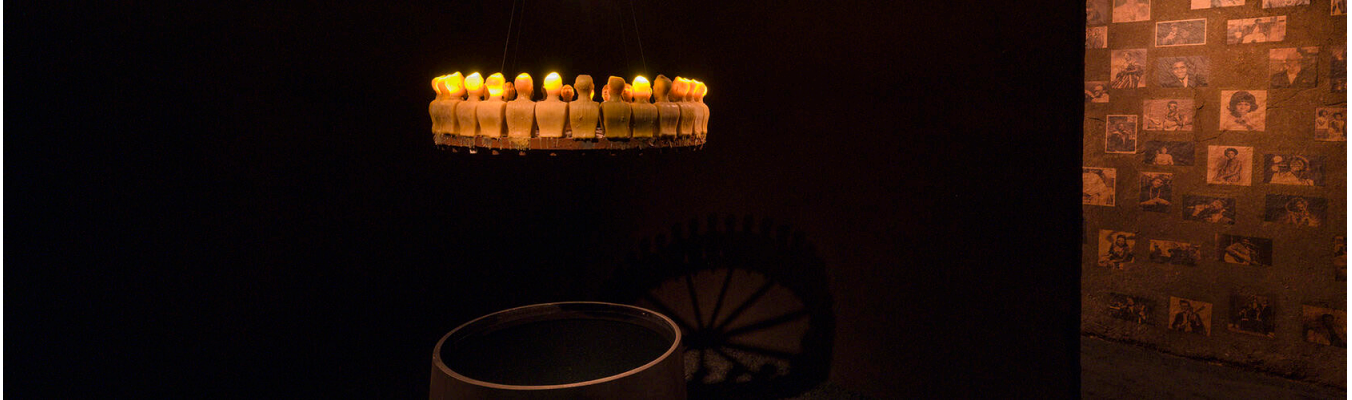
Pulido, Armando, "Derek Fordjour Pays Homage to Black Artistry," *Frieze.com*, October 9, 2025

# FRIEZE

BY ARMANDO PULIDO IN EXHIBITION REVIEWS | 09 OCT 25

## Derek Fordjour Pays Homage to Black Artistry

At David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, a nighttime exhibition with live musical performance celebrates the creative legacies of Black Americans



When the sun sets, Derek Fordjour's 'Nightsong' springs to life. On view at David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles from 6pm to 10pm each evening, the show presents a multisensory exploration of Black cultural production. A narrative musical structure created with producer Omar Edwards unfolds in four acts through each hour of the night cycle, enveloping viewers in years of Black musical tradition. Designed with architect Kulapat Yantrasast, the gallery's dim lighting, theatrical curtains and spotlight artworks underpin this celebration of Black artistry as a critical mode of resistance to the erasure of Black histories.



Derek Fordjour, 'Nightsong', 2025. Courtesy: David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles; photograph: Jeff McLane

The exhibition opens with a tribute, in the form of 'master copies', to 19th- and 20th-century Black visual artists who paved the way for Fordjour, including Henry Ossawa Tanner, whose *The Banjo Lesson* (1893) nods to banjo's Black roots and its influence on generations of African Americans. After this historical orientation, visitors cross a velvet curtain into a darkened room. Large-scale paintings meticulously made with pieces of corrugated cardboard and newspaper command the attention of an empty stage at the room's centre. Gaps where the cardboard is missing leave space for the eye to excavate the histories beneath the surface of these depictions of Black love and musical creation.

*Harlem Basement: The Birth of Black Swan* (all works 2025) portrays musicians on brass instruments in a room decorated with print ephemera. Featured on a drum kit at the heart of the scene is the logo for Black Swan Records; the first major Black-owned record label in the US, it was launched in 1921 by entrepreneur Harry Pace. Fordjour's artwork celebrates Black Swan's breakthrough, which helped Black musicians create art by and for their own – as opposed to the novelty songs and minstrelsy produced by their white counterparts.



Derek Fordjour, *Field Song*, 2025, wood, polymer, acrylic, nylon, cotton, burlap, paper, coffee, Plexiglas, steel, and LEDs, 95 × 65 × 14 cm. Courtesy: David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles

Tucked away among the branches of a prop tree in the gallery space, *Field Song* renders an overseer and his labourers on a cotton field at dawn, a scene crafted with evocative materials like cotton and burlap. The installation references 'hush harbours', spaces where enslaved African Americans would practise and pass down their cultural traditions in secret. Instruments like the Black voice carved a space into political and cultural spheres, and they have remained enduring modes of defiance against oppression.

Out of the forest, installed in a separate room, Fordjour's *Hymn* quietly memorializes Black musical and visual artists who have joined their ancestors. Here, darkness becomes a tangible material. Suspended above a basin of water and flower petals, a ring of beeswax figurines embedded with LEDs glows like a candelabra. Viewers walk over loose gravel, its shifting sounds colliding with hymns sung at intervals nearby – a performance organized with Jason White, Jonathan Coleman and Numa Perrier. With the performers at times hidden behind walls or in plain sight, the presentation brings to the fore issues of obscured musical authorship and proper attribution given – or not – to Black performers of decades past.



Derek Fordjour, 'Nightsong', 2025. Courtesy: David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles; photograph: Jeff McLane

For the exhibition's film component, *Nightsong Exhibition Film*, Fordjour brought in artist and filmmaker Kya Lou to 'image the motion of the music', as Fordjour told me. Lou was responsible for piecing together over 6,000 clips from archival sources to chart a chronological, and necessarily incomplete, history of Black cultural production. The resultant 248-minute, single-channel video installation, in conjunction with the static paintings and dynamic performances, speaks to the breadth and depth of Black artistry across time. Through an intimately layered, collaborative exhibition, Fordjour offers up a guiding light: in the dark of night, the voice, singing in community, can still spark incandescent joy.

*Derek Fordjour's 'Nightsong' is on view at David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles until 11 October*

*Main image: Derek Fordjour, 'Nightsong', 2025. Courtesy: David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles; photograph: Jeff McLane*

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