

Derek Fordjour

SHELTER



Derek Fordjour, *Backbend Double*, 2018. Acrylic, charcoal, oil pastel, and foil on newspaper mounted on canvas, 48 x 72 inches. Courtesy the artist and Night Gallery, Los Angeles.

Derek Fordjour: SHELTER presents multiple bodies of work that explore issues of race, identity, aspiration, and inequality. Fordjour's *Player Portraits* line the Project Wall, forming a procession toward the exhibition's entryway. Each portrait, from a series of 100, is made through the artist's signature process of layering and tearing, painting and repainting. Fordjour employs and recycles humble materials—cardboard, newspaper, charcoal—making reference to the hand-me-downs that were passed along to relatives in Ghana, and the wear and tear of buildings he inhabited as a child in Memphis, Tennessee. The notion of making something out of nothing, and the dignity found in making something old new again, are themes evident in Fordjour's material process.

SHELTER is a site-specific installation that resembles a ramshackle structure composed of corrugated metal walls, dirt floor, and a sound piece that mimics the

effect of rain striking a tin roof. We are placed at the heart of a storm. With detritus culled from the urban environment, the installation creates a place of safety amidst crisis and impending harm. *SHELTER* reminds us of the unstable conditions in which art is often made and of human migrations across the earth, the millions seeking shelter from a multiplicity of storms. Vulnerability is central to Fordjour's work, and the unsteadiness of dirt underfoot reinforces the fun-house effect of his portraits and sculptures. Hanging in this makeshift environment are Fordjour's



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Derek Fordjour, *Worst to Be First II*, 2019. Acrylic, charcoal, bituminous coal, oil pastel, and foil on newspaper mounted on canvas. 82 1/2 x 42 1/2 inches. Courtesy the artist and Night Gallery, Los Angeles.

scenes. Fordjour uses the metaphor and pageantry of sport as a way of considering questions of marginalization and inequity in America. The artist's paintings explore both the vulnerability and strategy required of individuals as they navigate legacies of injustice and socio-political bias. Cheerleaders in splits, drum majors in backbends, athletes posing in awkward groups—these paintings convey an uneasy feeling of display and exposure. The artist sheds light on the pressures of exceptionalism and performance, while questioning the extent to which trailblazing figures are truly able to disrupt patterns of long-standing systemic inequality in the US.

Process

The surface of Fordjour's paintings defy the labor of their making. Over many years of experimentation, the artist developed his unique painting process using humble materials, chosen for their affordability: charcoal, newspaper, and cardboard. To make his paintings, the artist begins by creating a base layer made up of tiled colored paper on canvas. Fordjour then wraps the canvas in newspaper and tears away at the surface to create an interaction between the layers. This process is repeated several times before Fordjour adds small pieces of paper to the surface, on top of which he paints the subject. Using spray paint, charcoal, oil pastel, and acrylic to create the figures, the final painting alternately conceals and reveals underlying layers to create a rich, textured surface. The repair and disrepair of the canvas reflects the conditions of abandonment and scarcity present in the artist's upbringing in the South. There is also a sense of beauty inherent in the act of breathing new life into the old. Fordjour's vibrant color palette takes cues from his experience growing up in the South, his exposure to Americana and Pop, and from such specific items as candy wrappers, African fabrics, and athletic team colors.

Worst to Be First

Fordjour's series *Worst to Be First* refers to the notion of "firsts" as markers of societal achievement. As desirable as it is to be the first African American to achieve recognition in a chosen field, the experiences of isolation, heightened pressure, and performance are daunting. Fordjour highlights the competitive nature ingrained in our societal structures, which invariably validates notions of injustice. This series is rooted in the artist's lived experience, personal history, and shared narrative of family members, colleagues, and friends. In *Worst to Be First II* (2019) Fordjour pictures a military figure holding an object of significance in a nighttime landscape. By suppressing individual features of any specific person, Fordjour invokes multiple narratives referencing a legacy of military achievement among men of color. The everyman quality of his portraits is a strategic effort to connect many historical narratives.

Rally Finale

Rally Finale (2017) is part of the artist's crowd painting series, in which figures are rendered in iconographic terms—tightly arranged in a composition free of background or foreground. Fordjour's crowd paintings have two functions, both formal and conceptual. Formally, he finds inspiration from particular moments when multiple figures form a dense crowd in paintings. He consciously looks to works like Jacob Lawrence's

The Migration Series, Panel no.1, Renoir's *Bal du moulin de la Galette*, and Archibald J. Motley Jr.'s *Blues* for compositional inspiration. He then sketches a loosely constructed tessellation, a form of tiling within a picture plane made popular by M.C. Escher.

Conceptually, the interlocking patterns evoke intimate social patterns and systems that reveal the interconnectedness of communities and cultures. In crowd series paintings like *Rally Finale*, the figures are squeezed into a chock-a-block formation. The closeness of the figures reveals a tension between difference and sameness. The connectedness and relation of people to one another is undeniable. Each figure overlaps another regardless of race, social class, bias, or political preference.

This particular work was created in early 2017 as a response to the transition from the Obama to the Trump administration, a time of political upheaval and unrest, and during the peak moments of a changing of the guard.



Derek Fordjour, *Rally Finale*, 2017. Oil, acrylic, graphite, newspaper, and foil on wood panel, 60 x 40 inches. Courtesy the artist.



Derek Fordjour, *DoubleDouble*, 2016. Terracotta clay, bituminous coal, steel, and found object, 64 x 11 x 11 inches. Courtesy the artist.

Immersive Installations

More recently Fordjour has been working collaboratively by constructing large-scale, immersive installations that combine the distinct arms of his practice: painting, sculpture, and sound. The artist often situates visitors in precarious environments where the very elements of construction—a dirt floor, for example—throw audiences off-balance. In 2015 Fordjour presented *UPPER ROOM*, replete with a loose crushed stone floor, based on a prayer room his mother maintained at home, where Christian hymns resonated on the interior of the sculpture while sounds from an NYC police scanner played on the exterior. The resulting tension between the two sounds reveal the desperation of a mother seeking refuge and safety for her three black sons through faith.

The artist's installations are rooted in personal history that also refer to larger narratives—in this case, by exposing his mother's ritual seeking of solace from the threat of police violence for her sons, he also engages larger questions of personal safety in public spaces and the uncertainty of finding refuge.

Fordjour's 2019 installation *STOCKROOM Ezekiel* honors the life of Ezekiel Archey, a convict laborer who worked under Alabama's brutal convict leasing program. In the late 19th century, condemned criminals were sentenced to work without compensation in coal mines, steel plants, and molasses distilleries. About this installation Fordjour explains, "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." With its dirt floors and barbed-wire fencing, *STOCKROOM Ezekiel* points to the tragic persistence of injustice that defines American life for black and brown people.

Derek Fordjour (b. 1974, Memphis, Tennessee) has exhibited at Night Gallery, Los Angeles; the Brooklyn Academy of Music; and Josh Lilley Gallery, London, among other venues. He has received commissions for public projects from the Whitney Museum Billboard Project and from the Metropolitan Transit Authority of New York City for a permanent installation at the 145th Street Subway Station in Manhattan. He was the 2016 Sugarhill Museum Artist-in-Residence, a resident of the 2017 Sharpe Walentas Studio Program in New York City, and was awarded the 2018 Deutsche Bank NYFA Fellowship. He frequently serves as a lecturer at institutions and as a Core Critic at Yale University School of Art. His work is held in collections throughout the United States and Europe, including the Studio Museum in Harlem; Perez Art Museum, Miami; Brooklyn Museum of Art; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; and the Whitney Museum of American Art. Fordjour is a graduate of Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia, and earned a Master's Degree in Art Education from Harvard University and an MFA in painting from Hunter College.

Derek Fordjour: SHELTER is organized for the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis by Wassan Al-Khudhairi, Chief Curator, with Misa Jeffereis, Assistant Curator.

The exhibition is generously supported by Ann R. Ruwitch and John Fox Arnold. The Artist Talk is generously supported by Heartland Coca-Cola Bottling Company and the Robert Lehman Foundation.

Related Program

Artist Talk: Derek Fordjour

Thursday, February 20, 6:30 pm

Artist's Suggested Reading List

Derek Fordjour provided the following list of essays and books to share insights into his art and ideas.

Anderson, Claud. *Black Labor, White Wealth: The Search for Power and Economic Justice*. Bethesda, MD: Poweronomics Corporation of America, 1994.

Brown, Ronald, Richard J. Reddick, and Charles V. Willie. *The Black College Mystique*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005.

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*. New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015.

Dubner, Stephen J. and Steven D. Levitt. *Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything*. New York: William Morrow and Company, 2005.

hooks, bell. *Where We Stand: Class Matters*. Abingdon, Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2000.

Hruby, Patrick. "Four Years A Student-Athlete: The Racial Injustice of Big-Time College Sports," April 4, 2016. www.vice.com/en_us/article/ezexjp/four-years-a-student-athlete-the-racial-injustice-of-big-time-college-sports.

Mooney, Katherine C. *Race Horse Men: How Slavery and Freedom Were Made at the Racetrack*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014.

Pessah, Jon. *The Game: Inside the Secret World of Major League Baseball's Power Brokers*. Boston: Back Bay Books, 2016.

Steele, Claude. *Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect Us and What We Can Do*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2011.



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