



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.

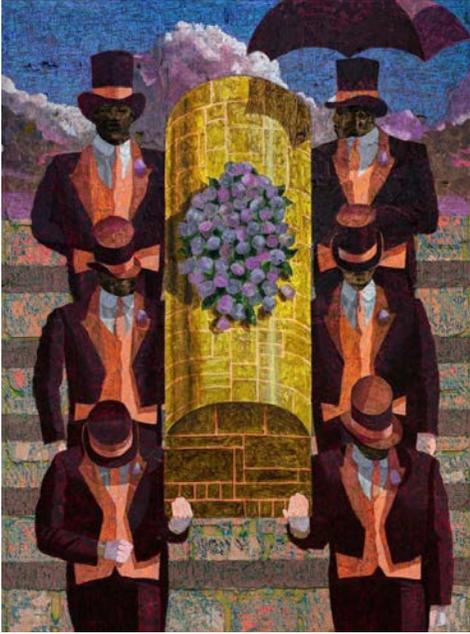
Fordjour, 46, is a rising name. His billboard mural "Half Mast" showed at the Whitney last year; his inaugural museum show, presciently called *SHELTER*, launched pre-lockdown, in January, at Contemporary Art Museum St Louis. But since impoverished student days Fordjour has painted on mulched newspaper (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.

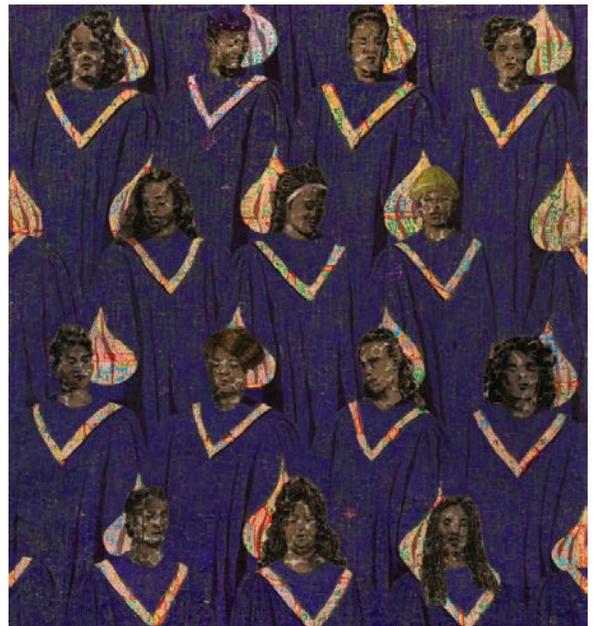
Yet Fordjour's exquisite abstract patterning is pure optical joy — though also, he explains, "actually more conceptual than decorative. It is through the investigation of social patterns that I am able to ascertain some sense of progression, regression, replication, fixity or disruption." He quotes influences 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 wide-ly 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, un-apolitically 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