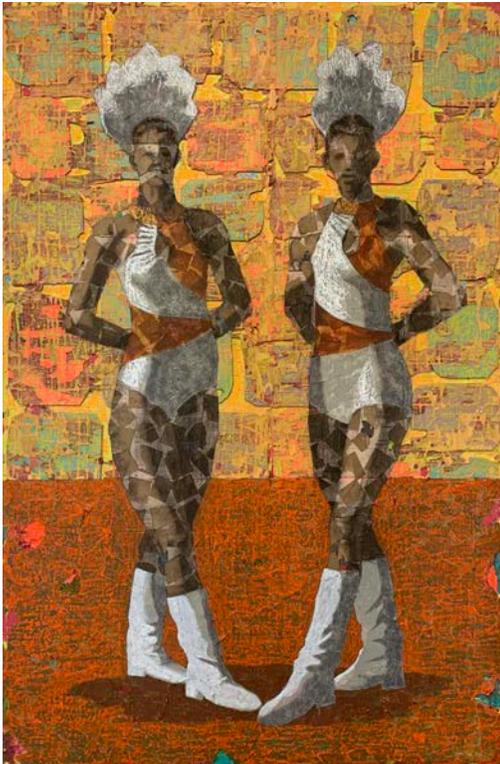




Derek Fordjour Honors Disenfranchised Communities in His Vibrant, Layered Work

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."

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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.

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.



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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.

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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.”

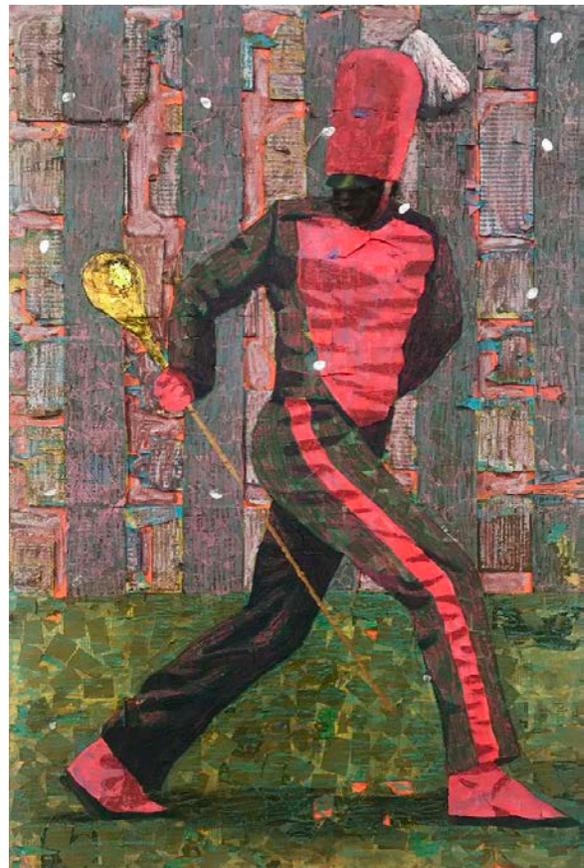
The worn and tattered quality of each artwork connects Fordjour’s practice to the generations of disenfranchised Black communities who’ve had to make a habit of repair and resourcefulness, who’ve been tasked with “creating something dignified or newly personal” out of disparate, discarded items.

“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.