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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.

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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."