

**Derek Fordjour**

Nightsong

September 13 – October 11, 2025

Los Angeles

Press Release

David Kordansky Gallery is pleased to present *Nightsong*, its second solo exhibition by Derek Fordjour, on view from September 13 to October 11, 2025. In the most radical transformation of David Kordansky's Los Angeles gallery to date, Fordjour, in collaboration with Kulapat Yantrasast and the design studio WHY, will create an immersive, multifaceted experience combining painting, sculpture, live performance, and video. Additional collaborators include a music team led by Omar Edwards, including composer Jason White and Josiah Bell, and a video installation co-directed and edited by Kya Lou. Opening hours will be limited to 6 – 10 PM in reflection of *Nightsong's* themes. The exhibition will open to the public on Saturday, September 13 from 6 – 10 PM.

Variously described by Fordjour as a “giant music box in the dark,” an “acoustic wilderness,” and “a conjuring,” *Nightsong* immerses viewers in an atmospheric sensorium whose aesthetic and thematic depictions trace Black musical history as it manifests, evolves, and travels through time and genre. While Fordjour has long drawn on music and theatricality in his two and three-dimensional artworks, *Nightsong* brings these subjects to exuberant life, as numerous vocalists perform an original, four-hour songcycle, composed exclusively for the exhibition, across a spatial, multi-room nightscape. The interactive, durational experience of the exhibition ensures that no two viewings will be exactly alike.

Upon entering *Nightsong*, viewers cross into a gradual emulation of nighttime, a temporal state made spatial, in which music takes on material shape and live singers seem to have stepped, wholly animated, from Fordjour's painted tableaux. As galleries are populated with stages and mezzanines, and rooms give way to forests, architectural elements situated in minimal light, fold in and outdoors into a dream-like state. A wooded thicket harkens back to sites known as “hush harbors,” secret refuges in the woods where enslaved Africans would retreat to gather, sing, and plan escape. In this sense, as in the origin stories of work songs and spirituals, the beginnings of Black vocal music in America are inextricable from life-or-death strategies for survival, a legacy that persists, Fordjour reminds us, even behind the sequined glamour of a stage costume or the exultant joy of a Motown harmony.

Intertwined histories of oppression, labor, expression, and innovation reverberate throughout *Nightsong* as direct representations—and as visual motifs, including the repetition of rotating discs, patchwork fabrics, colorful globes, and reflective surfaces. A performer pushing a soundcart traverses the gallery in a sonic declaration of personal presence, evoking the slippage between public and private spheres familiar from street processions and block parties. Throughout the space, the accumulative process of collage Fordjour employs in his densely layered paintings expands across a field of visual, sonic, and symbolic accretion. Collage's foundational ethos of repurposing, or the idea of conjuring something from nothing, takes on an added dimension in the exhibition's emphasis on performance, in which the act of singing becomes a paradigm of radical resourcefulness. When one has been given nothing else materially to work with, the voice itself emerges, in all its expressive

potential, as Fordjour's vocalists demonstrate. At the same time, the voice, the moment it's celebrated, lends itself to quick commodification—along with the body from which it issues. When considering the history of music in America, the commodification of Black voices and musicianship—and the potential for exploitation and appropriation that's never far behind—is as foundational to any national sound as guitars and brass, the blue note and a doo-wop chorus.

In all the ways *Nightsong* is a paean for Black artistry, so, too, is it an elegy for what's been lost, stolen, or suppressed by a perpetual night. Near the exhibition's end, a primordial room with mud-caked walls, rock floor, and photographic portraits invites viewers into a vigil in memory of those who have passed on—relations of the artist alongside celebrated figures—while evoking eternal cycles of life, death, and rebirth. As a corollary to the exhibition's title, the notion of vesper songs, and their religious function as thresholds between day and night, light and darkness emphasize music's near-magical capacity to mark time while transcending it, bridging past, present, and future in an act of exchange between singer and listener, artist and viewer, that extends indefinitely.

Derek Fordjour (b. 1974, Memphis, Tennessee) has been the subject of solo exhibitions at the Pond Society, Shanghai, China (2021) and the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, MO (2020). He has received public commissions for the High Line, New York; the NYC AIDS Memorial; MOCA Grand Avenue, Los Angeles; and the New York City MTA's Arts & Design program. Recent group exhibitions include *Flight into Egypt: Black Artists and Ancient Egypt, 1876–Now*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY (2024–2025); *Get in the Game: Sports, Art, Culture*, SFMOMA, San Francisco, CA (2024); *Reverberations*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA (2024); *Day for Night: New American Realism*, Palazzo Barberini, organized by the Aishti Foundation, Rome, Italy (2024); *Abstraction after Modernism: Recent Acquisitions*, Menil Collection, Houston, TX (2024); *Windrush: Portraits of a Pioneering Generation*, Palace of Holyroodhouse, Edinburgh, Scotland (2023); NGV Triennial, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia (2023–2024); *The Slipstream: Reflection, Resilience, and Resistance in the Art of Our Time*, Brooklyn Museum, NY (2021); *Present Generations: Creating the Scantland Collection of the Columbus Museum of Art*, Columbus Museum of Art, OH (2021); *100 Drawings from Now*, The Drawing Center, New York, NY (2020); and *Plumb Line*, California African American Museum, Los Angeles, CA (2019). His work is in the permanent collections of institutions including The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY; Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY; Dallas Museum of Art, TX; the Royal Collection, London; Pérez Art Museum Miami, FL; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, CA; Brooklyn Museum, NY; Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, IL; and The Studio Museum in Harlem, NY. Fordjour is the recipient of the 2025 Gordon Parks Foundation Artist Fellowship and the 2023 St. Jude Children's Research Hospital Spirit of the Dream Award. He served as the 2020 Alex Katz Chair of Painting at The Cooper Union, New York, and serves on the faculty at the Yale University School of Art, New Haven, CT as a core critic. Fordjour is the founder of Contemporary Arts Memphis, and lives and works in New York.