

Derek Fordjour

The Sporting Life

Interview by Charles Moore Portrait by Jason Schmidt





Long after his childhood peers abandoned their artistic pursuits, Derek Fordjour remained committed to artmaking. The Morehouse and Harvard graduate eventually earned his MFA at Hunter College.

His creative process is rooted in a multimedia approach. The artist transcends his medium, for there's great value, he explains, in allowing the viewer to establish their own relationships to his work. The possibilities are far-reaching across media as diverse as painting, sculpture, and most recently, a puppet show all featured within a single exhibition.

With his layered paintings and textured grounds, found objects, vibrant colors, and newspaper mounted on canvases, Fordjour seeks to build worlds, much to the delight of his audience. He cites Kerry James Marshall, William Kentridge, and Louis Bourgeois as a few of his sources of artistic inspiration, emphasizing his appreciation for artists who grapple with difficult questions in their own artistic practice. Fordjour, too, seeks to imbue his paintings with a sense of urgency; setting out to create works that he believes should exist.

Gamesmanship and the politics of access and representation are integral to his practice, which particularly manifest in works like *Regatta Study* (2020) and *Half Mast* (2018). *Regatta* explores rowing, a sport with abysmally low levels of Black participation, largely due to lack of access—a cultural legacy, while *Half Mast* is reminiscent of Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) and Faith Ringgold's *American People Series #20: Die* (1967).

Half Mast offers a vivid snapshot of New York City, a panorama of urban chaos, the visual noise and multitudes of people swarming city streets, captured in the confines of a single composition. The canvas adroitly alternates between the serenity of a painted crowd, a well-worn trope in western painting, and the inherent threat faced by each individual citizen involuntarily exposed to the precarity of public safety. Law enforcement, civilians, students, the teddy bears and balloons of makeshift streetside memorials appear choc-a-bloc in a densely packed picture plane. Despite the illusion of painted space, the reality of the message is clear: in Fordjour's world, no one is safe. Everyone contends with vulnerability, individually and collectively.

Charles Moore: I see you attended Morehouse, and later Harvard, prior to doing your MFA at Hunter. How did your earlier educational path affect your MFA experience?

Derek Fordjour: I suspect that having had prior experience with research and writing is a compliment to the kind of criticism and analysis that is routine at a place like Hunter. It also provided a methodology for intellectual inquiry within my studio practice. Morehouse indelibly shaped my sense of self, cultural awareness and clarity of purpose.

At Hunter, Nari Ward was your thesis advisor, what was it like to work with him?

Nari Ward is an invaluable resource to me. I cherish him as a friend and mentor. When I first began to dabble in sculpture at Hunter, it was Nari who really helped me understand how to think constructively about objecthood, the power of material and conceptual rigor in the life of an object. His advice ranged from the metaphorical to the practical. We also had several discussions on the woes of storage.

Say more about your relationship to storage.

When I was in school, I had a habit of throwing things away because space was limited. I really



think I came to artmaking as more of a process artist. I was more invested in the time I spent inside of an artwork actually making it. In fact, there's a cognitive theory that explains this perfectly, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's concept of "Flow"—which basically says that everything else in life falls away and all that matters is the present experience of creating in real time. The process was something I prioritized over the end product. Very often, after an installation, I would want to throw things away.

Nari would say to me, "No, man, you can't toss that stuff." As a student, I could not bear the thought of paying extensive storage bills—can you imagine how traumatic that was to hear when I was barely covering rent? Nari explained the importance of keeping things in perpetuity, and if you look at his career, he has artworks that are exhibited 25 years, 30 years after they were made or originally shown. I had to change my relationship to the things I produced and mature to accept proper stewardship as part of my work. I credit Nari for that shift.

What does it mean to you to be a steward of your work and respect it?

Most of my experience with art came from making it. I am a bit obsessed with everything about that process and I have been for most of my life. What I knew less about was what happened to my work when it left my studio. In fact, for years, when my work mostly went unsold, I would leave pieces on the street. I found it encouraging that someone found it meaningful enough to take home. It wasn't until I started buying small works that I could afford that I developed an appreciation for the experience of collecting and living with art. It was quite an enlightening experience that showed me the other side of the coin.

And, as an artist who collects the works of your peers, tell me about the types of works and artists that draw your interest.

I should say that I collect modestly and the motivations are fairly personal. I like to collect artists at a critical stage of development, both recent MFA graduates without representation that I might have come into contact with, or artists later in their careers that might have been overlooked for years. The work is great and still affordable.

I also like to have work around that teaches me or inspires me. I often admire artists who work in ways very different from me. My first love is painting, but I also really appreciate assemblage, photography and sculpture. I have some works in my studio by artists who were early mentors and friends. It's a way of having their loving and supportive energy with me daily.

Let's talk about your own work. You've often referenced your choice of material, such as newspaper and cardboard, because of limited resources at the time you started working with those materials. Your work is rooted in the process of layering, which seems to be more conceptual. Now that you are no longer in a time of austerity, why have you chosen to continue working with the same materials?

I realized that my temporary condition was a permanent situation for many people. Ingenuity borne out of an under-resourced circumstance was a signature feature in Black and Brown communities all over the world. So, to a great extent, choosing to work with limited means was a way to try and connect what I was doing in the studio to the diaspora.

Furthermore, there is this belief that it is possible to achieve the universal through the specific that interests me. A few years ago, I was giving a talk at Bezalel Academy in Israel, and I was explaining this way of working with limited means. The entire crowd started saying the same word in Hebrew to me from the audience. They had a specific word for this and I learned about a group of Jewish artists who had also worked with newspapers nearly a century earlier. This moment was so instructive



for me because a process that felt so personal was connecting across cultures and brought into focus more global movements like Arte Povera. So, by initially working to connect to my local community, I was also creating linkages that then connected my community to other communities and to historical movements as well.

Tell me more about layering.

Sometimes I enter the studio with a set of predetermined ideas. There are other times that the idea emerges from the making itself. Layering happened this way for me. Initially, it served a practical need. As I continued to work, the surface proved to be quite generous and introduced a broader range of mark making, including incisions, tearing and scraping. Layering fundamentally changed my relationship to surface texture and greatly expanded my vocabulary.

Are you still primarily using the *Financial Times* as your newspaper of choice?

Yes.

To me, the *Financial Times* carries a duplicity of association. On the one hand, it is widely available and inexpensive as a material, but the intended audience and content is associated with wealth and whiteness. How do you reconcile these two?

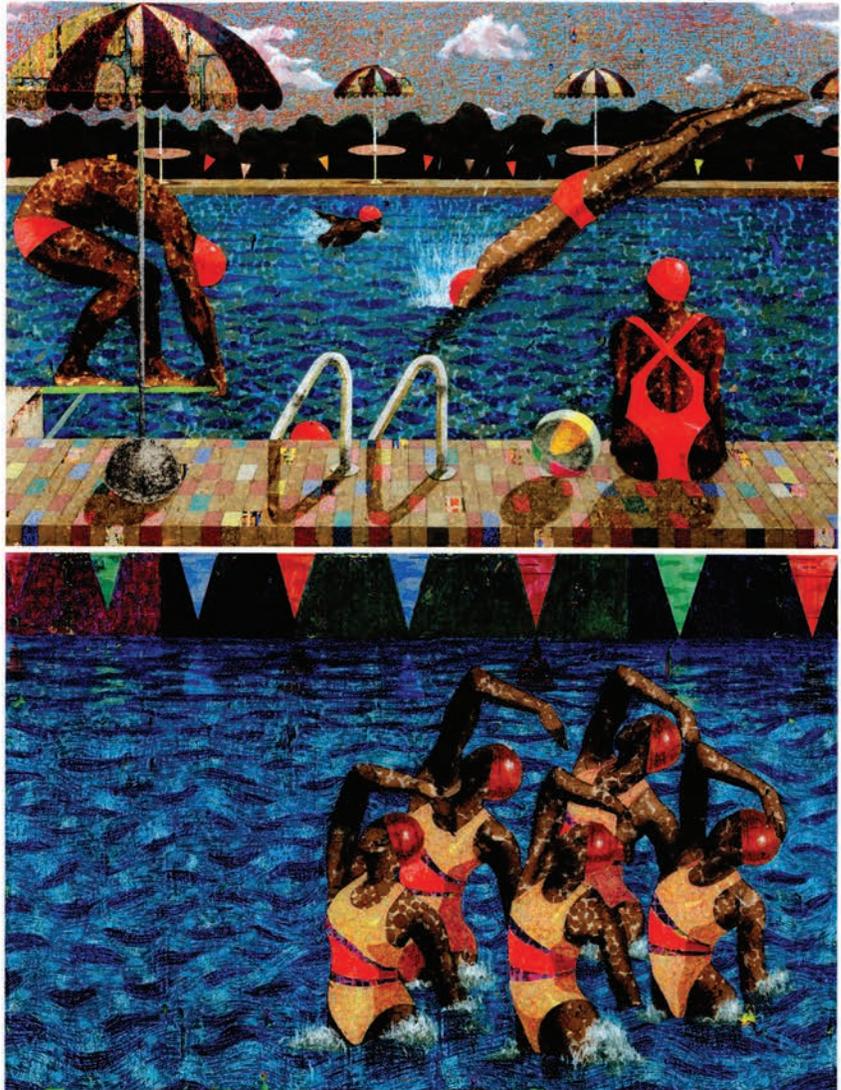
I am attracted to both of those ideas. The universality of newsprint is appealing. And its decreasing popularity creates an archival aspect as well. The conspicuous branding of the salmon pink tint of the paper also creates a warm color ground that functions like an underpainting in traditional canvas painting. The economic status of the readership is secondary, but indeed still relevant.

Fascinating! Tell me more.

I think about the work that I make in the studio with the same importance a chef might place on choosing ingredients. I visited Japan a couple of years ago and found that some of the best restaurants are in the countryside. You discover that the chef is maybe a second or third generation chef that has been serving the same dish that his father and grandfather did, and that, in fact, they've been harvesting the same fish from the same pond, also owned by a second-generation farmer. The meal started with the pond. And so, not to be lofty, I believe that the ingredients that go into each work are important and if they carry significance for me, that becomes a crucial starting point before I build anything pictorial.

Can you talk about your process from idea to finished work?

I begin works from many disparate entry points. I am impacted by every single experience I have, from reading an article to something as benign as a walk down the street. There are other times my work might begin with something as ethereal as a dream, but there is a kind of subconscious



organization or synthesis that happens in a lucid state that is effortless. I also like to imagine that I'm part of a larger canonical conversation that's been happening for centuries in painting. There are times when I'm interested in what needs to join this larger discourse, what paintings don't exist that should. I tend to be very intentional about what I want to accomplish when I set out to make a work, but I also learn a great deal from the end result.

Speaking of paintings that don't exist that should—sportsmanship is often a theme in your work. I'm especially interested in niche sports like rowing. Turning to one of my two favorite works of yours, *Regatta Study*: Why do you think it was important to depict that

particular sport which has such low numbers of Black participation?

I'll tell you, since you also spent some time in Cambridge: In graduate school, I wanted to join the row team because I thought this would be an interesting challenge for me. I walked down to the boat house one morning and expressed interest in joining the row team. The captain politely says, "Okay, meet me back here tomorrow morning at 7:00 am. You'll need to swim two miles." And with that, I was out. I simply wasn't that good of a swimmer at that time.

I figured that was it. You can't even take lessons on sculling or even sailing if you can't pass the swim test.

Yes. You must pass the test. And this is true in



so many areas of society that shut out entire communities of people because of historic legacies of inequity and exclusion. Ironically, my attraction to rowing was intertwined with my love of painting. I always loved Thomas Eakins's late nineteenth-century row paintings. There was a romance to those works that was outside of my world, and that morning at the boathouse I learned a bit more about why.

So that got you thinking about access.

Exactly. It wasn't that he told me I couldn't join the team or that he was at all inhospitable. He just told me what I needed to do in order to qualify. And it was not a seemingly unreasonable ask, either. I think of the myriad of standardized tests required to enter colleges, various professions and even working-class vocations like the postal test or firefighter's exams. Much of why I was unable to perform was a matter of cultural inheritance, zip code, wealth inequality and legacies of racism. My boathouse experience prompted me to examine more closely the economics around collegiate sports. Unsurprisingly, I found predictable patterns of disparity that were troubling. So that image of *Regatta Study* poses questions. I wanted to consider patterns of under and overrepresentation within society.

In your artist's talk at CAM St. Louis during your 2020 show *Shelter*, you referenced the "commodification of bodies" in auction systems. What are your thoughts on auctions?

I'm interested in how bodies like mine participate in capitalist systems of profit. Across industries: music, sports, prison, education—black representation is most often grouped on the labor side of the equation and this fact is rooted in slavery and every successive system of oppression that existed in its wake. Modern day marketplaces replicate these same patterns. It's no surprise to me that the robber barons of the turn of the twentieth century are of the same demographic group as the tech pioneers of our time. Whether it's software or steel, one hundred years ago, or this year, who has access to capital and who can pass the test is largely the same.

You could easily continue to work on canvas and be successful, for sure. What draws you to other mediums like sculpture and even performance, like the puppet show you did at your Petzel Gallery exhibition?

Consider an analogy. Painting is the heartbeat of my creative body. My interest in other media: sculpture, performance, film, are limbs that share a lifeline directly to painting. In addition, I have also consumed lots of theater and literature. I enjoy travel a great deal also, and all these things feed into one another. Building an exhibition affords me the opportunity to engineer an experience that percolates with the same dynamic vitality that inspires me. It's how my mind and creative body work together and when you're in my show, hopefully you can feel my process as well.



Impressive! Lastly, can you tell me a bit about your show in Los Angeles at David Kordansky Gallery that opens in the Spring?

The title is *Magic, Mystery & Legerdemain*. I'm very excited about this show! I am working on an entire body of new paintings drawing linkages to magic. I am thinking about magic in all its many forms: voodoo, white magic, black magic, black girl magic, magical negroes, Magic Johnson, and orishas. I am interested in who has the power to deceive in plain sight, for whom we are willing to suspend disbelief.

How does magic become an allegory?

One of the many tools of a skillful magician is the art of clever distraction. I think about race this way. It is a construct—not actually real. Nevertheless, we are all socialized to participate in this grand illusion to suspend disbelief in order to be willfully deceived.

One of the magicians I've been researching says that everyone is walking around with a collection of stories they tell themselves—that's how we make sense of the world. He says what a magician does is to shoot the dart first and then paint the target. They rearrange the order of our stories and we believe them. I find this almost poetic as it pertains to the ways in which we construct belief and derive meaning. On another level, painting itself is an illusion. Needless to say, I'm having lots of fun making this show. ■

Derek's solo show with David Kordansky Gallery opens this spring in Los Angeles.

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