



Kelley D. Evans, “The Portrait of an Artist: Derek Fordjour Dissects Race, Sports, and Culture,” October 6, 2017.



The Portrait of an Artist: Derek Fordjour Dissects Race, Sports, and Culture

A Morehouse and Harvard grad is telling the world how he feels about life and athletics — via art

BY KELLEY D. EVANS @KELLEYSTHRNGIRL

October 6, 2017



Mid-September in Harlem, New York. The wind, sotto voce. Rain is in the forecast but as yet, no tears from the clouds that hover above the neighborhood commonly known as the birthplace of the Harlem Renaissance. On the corner of West 155th Street and St. Nicholas Avenue stands a 13-story charcoal-colored building designed in 2015 by Sir David Frank Adjaye, the Ghanaian-British architect of the National Museum of African American History and Culture.



The building not only offers affordable housing, and early education programs, it's also home to the Sugar Hill Children's Museum of Art & Storytelling. Just one floor down, though is like entering a previous century. The shift in the atmosphere is due to *PARADE*, an exhibition of the work of visual artist Derek Fordjour. Fordjour, a Morehouse, Hunter College and Harvard graduate born and raised in Memphis, Tennessee, creates installments at the intersection of race, sports, and the "economic, political and psychosocial implications of games."

Fordjour always knew he was an artist. "I don't think it was realization," he said. "I think I was just an artist ... all kids are artists. I just started ... and I just never stopped. Art is the first language for kids, but [most] of us kind of adapt, or move away from it. I just kind of kept going."

At Fordjour's Brooklyn studio, one piece stands out: acrylic, oil pastel, charcoal on newspaper, mounted on a 30-inch by 24-inch canvas. The piece is prideful. It presents the head and shoulders of a black athlete in a striped jersey. The colors peek from behind shadows and strong, textured diamond shapes. The work reeks of the often unsettled place of black athletes in pro sports, a space complicated by fame, money and sometimes false narratives. Fordjour is recipient of the C12 Emerging Artist Award 2017 has had his work featured in exhibitions at Roberts & Tilton Gallery in Los Angeles, New York City's Sotheby's S2 Gallery, and Luce Gallery in Turin, Italy.

His interest in dissecting race in sports takes over a large space in his studio, which is in the DUMBO area of Brooklyn. He says he is a Los Angeles Lakers fan, from as far back as the Showtime Lakers/Magic Johnson era. "In sports ... there's a lot of preparation and skill, but there's also luck," said Fordjour. "Playing the game in the right place matters. If I were [making art] in some far out, distant city, it wouldn't have the same resonance as it does in New York. I see those parallels, I see [sports] as ... entertainment as well, and these works really are about that."

He says that art and sports occupy similar positions in society — because there's no utility to either of them. "The outcome of a game," he said, "or when I complete a piece, it doesn't really fundamentally change the lives of many people ... materially anyway ... but it has social value."

He said that some of what happens when he works is he takes "the story" and then tries to internalize



a lot of it. “One of the reasons why ... surfaces are really worn the way they are is because coming from Memphis, I grew up getting things that were worn a lot — freshly used. I had a big brother, my parents were immigrants ... [so also] seeing our [used] clothes go to Ghana. Those cycles, the things we have worn ... is a lot about what [my] surfaces are about.”

Many times, he starts by laying down a base of cardboard. “Then I do a second layer,” he said, “where I actually paint the image, and then I use registration, which is like transparencies, these clear things, to mark where it is. I have these marks that will help me position the image on the top layer, and then I kind of tear through. I will do another image. I can almost tear it and then just pull that middle layer if I wanted, or go all the way back to the bottom layer. They’re really three paintings on top of each other, and then I just kind of tear in between. I don’t even know how I thought of it, I think it just happens. You’re making things ... you just keep making them.”



Fordjour's *PARADE* installation at the Sugar Hill Children's Museum. Image courtesy of the artist.

Fordjour's *PARADE* opened on July 27 and runs through Jan. 14, 2018, is a bold indicator that art still thrives in Sugar Hill. The installation is backed by carnival music — a nostalgic journey that places visitors back to their own childhoods while giving them a glimpse into Fordjour's own youthful



obsessions. There's a brick-paved tunnel complete with flashing lights and shiny floors. Lighted archways lead to a kind of fun house, with each step visitors move into a new creative space. Unlike regular parades, where the crowd gathers to view the fun passing by, in *PARADE* visitors walk through the exhibit and enjoy the pieces.

The walls are lined with newspaper, with masks and statues, serving as the backdrop of pieces representing Fordjour's Ghanaian heritage. Throughout are what the artist refers to as "works on paper" and the museum describes as " ... his signature and highly textured collages ... vignettes, small sculptures, found objects, and interventions." There is even a small mounted Ferris wheel, a food cart, and a ceiling of blue skies. Sneakers hang from a utility line.

"A touch of urbanity," Fordjour said. "Certain kind of symbols, monikers, they locate an experience, and I wanted that kind of specificity. There are certain neighborhoods you *don't* see that in."

Near the end of *PARADE* visitors enter a closet that houses coats, hats, shirts and shoes. It turns out he got them from a museum staffer. They were items she'd had stored after a breakup with an ex. Fordjour is curious: "But did you go through it?" He believes it's a becomes kind of a litmus test, particularly for adults, about risk-taking. "Some people turn around," he said of the people who don't push through and back, and see what's there, "and go all the way back out."

Fordjour uses material that methodically disseminates layers of texture, which intensifies as the pieces hit the surface. The end result? Astonishing, thought-provoking art. "We want fairness," he said. "Societal fairness. Growing up, I heard in a speech once — 'If I have to run 10 yards for a first down and you have to run three, it don't matter how hard I play.' Some of my work is about that inequality. That's what it comes down to. If you look at health care, if you look at the history of housing, if you look at the history of banking, if you look at education, the disparities across all ... are a lot greater than we realize. I'm interested in those ideas of fairness."

Kelley Evans is a general editor at The Undeclared. She is a food passionista, helicopter mom and an unapologetic southerner who spends every night with the cast of The Young and the Restless by way of her couch.