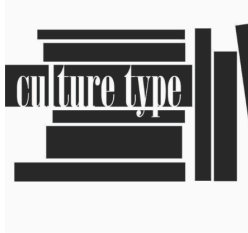




Victoria L. Valentine, "After Debuting Two Major Public Art Works in New York, Derek Fordjour is Headed to Miami for a Solo Presentation at Art Basel," *Culture Type*, December 3, 2018



After Debuting Two Major Public Art Works in New York, Derek Fordjour is Headed to Miami for a Solo Presentation at Art Basel

by VICTORIA L. VALENTINE on Dec 3, 2018 • 4:58 pm



"Derek Fordjour: Half Mast" (2018), outdoor installation at the Whitney Museum of American Art

WITH IMAGES OF MOURNING and celebration, **Derek Fordjour** is commanding the attention of New Yorkers. The artist's work is the subject of two prominent public art installations in the city. Downtown, near the Whitney Museum of American Art and the High Line, Fordjour is addressing America's perilous culture of gun violence. Uptown, his tribute to Harlem street parades was recently unveiled at the 145th Street and Lenox Avenue subway station.

In the Meatpacking District, Fordjour's festively colored image of a tightly composed crowd initially reads as a mass of people on a congested city street. In actuality, the artist has brought together a diverse group of people in a shared space to make a bold statement about mass shootings and violence against black and brown bodies at the hands of police.



"Derek Fordjour: Half Mast" was unveiled in September. The title of the installation references the tradition of flying flags at half mast in honor of the dead. Symbols of mourning, death, safety, peril, and resistance are embedded in the work. Life-sized teddy bears and balloons commonly found at makeshift, roadside memorials are interspersed among students wearing backpacks, ordinary civilians, and uniformed law enforcement officers.

Several people have a militaristic look and wear berets bearing a single star, calling to mind Che Guevara, the Black Panthers, the Guardian Angles, school crossing guards, and African revolutionaries. Two figures wear black helmets and vests with a single row of stars across the back. Others in the crowd have targets on their backs or appear as silhouettes, as though their lives have already been snuffed out. According to the museum's description of the work, Fordjour "holds no one person or group responsible for the violence, even as it speaks to loss and abuse of power. Painted brightly in his signature graphic style, the work points to possibilities of a future civic movement or celebration."

Fordjour's public art work "holds no one person or group responsible for the violence, even as it speaks to loss and abuse of power."



Installation view of DEREK FORDJOUR, "Half Mast," 2018. On view at the intersection of Gansevoort and Washington streets, New York, N.Y., the installation is considered his first solo museum exhibition. | via Whitney Museum

BORN IN MEMPHIS, Tenn., Fordjour lives and works in Harlem. He is the latest artist to participate in the Whitney Museum's series of public art installations. His predecessors include Christine Sun Kim (2018), Do Ho Suh (2017–2018), and Njideka Akunyili Crosby (2015–2016).



In Harlem, Fordjour won a commission from the Metropolitan Transit Authority for suite of permanent installations at the 145th Street Station. After undergoing improvements, the subway station just re-opened and now riders pass his work on their daily commute.

"Parade" gives a nod to historic processions that activated the streets of Harlem beginning in the early 20th century. In 1919, the Harlem Hellfighters 369th Regiment, the nearly all-black New York Army National Guardsmen, marched after World War II. Harlem's African-American Day Parade was inaugurated during the Civil Rights Movement. The storied neighborhood parade is the subject of Lorraine O'Grady's 1983 performance work "Art Is..." and continues annually to this day.

Fordjour has a penchant for marching bands, cheer squads, and sports teams and all the celebration, pageantry, rigor, and spectacle they invoke is on display in his glass and ceramic tile mosaic installations. The public art works capture the arc of his practice, which primarily explores issues of race, identity, community, and inequality. The artist's figurative paintings include individual portraits, images of multiple bodies in unified formation, and vibrant populous scenes. Through these images he considers individual vulnerability and strategies for navigating the broader public.

In his artist statement, Fordjour explains the confluence of ideas. He states that he "uses the economic, political and psychosocial implications of games to discuss the power structure that exists around rewards and sanctions, merit and punishment, for both the player within the game and as an allegory for the broader human experience. Team dynamics that evoke the tension of an individual situated within a collective effort, convey the seductive sense of the risks and rewards that are inherent in the drama of both games and life."



Detail of DEREK FORDJOUR, "Parade" (2018), 145th Street subway station. | MTA Arts & Design



Installation view of DEREK FORDJOUR, "Parade" (2018), 145th Street subway station. | MTA Arts & Design

LAST MONTH, Fordjour achieved a new artist record at auction when one of his mixed-media paintings reached more than five times the high estimate. A 30 x 24-inch portrait of a male, "No. 36" (2014) sold for \$37,500 (including fees) against an estimate of \$5,000-\$7,000 at Phillips New York on Nov. 14. The artist's previous record was \$8,125 achieved in 2017.

He's making moves in television, too. A diptych by Fordjour will be featured on the OWN network on Dec. 8. Oprah Winfrey is interviewing Gabrielle Union and Dwayne Wade about their new baby daughter. Throughout the conversation, a pair of his portraits ("No. 74," 2017) is on view in the background above the fireplace.

Meanwhile, Fordjour is taking a solo turn at Art Basel Miami Beach (Dec. 6-9). Josh Lilley Gallery of London is presenting the his work in the Nova section of the art fair, which is designed to showcase "never-before-seen pieces fresh from the artist's studio."

Titled "Backroom," Fordjour describes the presentation as "a site-specific installation that departs from the clinical austere feel of a convention-center booth in favor of a transformed backlot environment that evokes both a shanty-styled stockroom and a backside to a traveling show."

Lilley is participating in the marquee fair for the first time after showing at NADA Miami Beach for five years. The Nova sector "puts a focus on individual artists that NADA simply cannot match in terms of exposure and context," Lilley told Artsy.

"It's also just as crucial for my existing collectors to see my work in this larger context—and to be able to appreciate the growing reach of the gallery, and the strength of Derek's work in particular." **CT**



TOP IMAGE: DEREK FORDJOUR, "Half Mast," 2018 (acrylic, charcoal, oil pastel, and foil on newspaper mounted on canvas, 60 x 100 inches. / 152.4 x 254 cm), reproduced as vinyl print on billboard. | Collection of the artist; courtesy Night Gallery, Los Angeles



"Haberdashery" is among the new works Derek Fordjour is showing with Josh Lilley Gallery in the Nova section at Art Basel Miami Beach (Dec. 6-9, 2018). The artist says the work "references my own relationship the increasingly antiquated notion of respectability politics, the futile notion that somehow dressing sharply can offer protections against systemic racism and prejudice." On [Instagram](#), Fordjour explains the concept behind his works and the environment he has created to present them at the art fair. | via Instagram



Installation view of DEREK FORDJOUR, "Parade" (2018), 145th Street subway station. | MTA Arts & Design



Detail of DEREK FORDJOUR, "Parade" (2018), 145th Street subway station. | MTA Arts & Design



Installation view of DEREK FORDJOUR, "Parade" (2018), 145th Street subway station. | MTA Arts & Design



Installation view of DEREK FORDJOUR, "Parade" (2018), 145th Street subway station. | MTA Arts & Design