

NIGHT GALLERY

2276 E. 16th Street, Los Angeles, California 90021 nightgallery.ca

Kelly Crow, “‘I Don’t Want to Be a Blip’: An Artist on the Rise Adjusts to the Spotlight,” *The Wall Street Journal*, January 30, 2019.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

ARTS | ART & AUCTIONS

‘I Don’t Want to Be a Blip’: An Artist on the Rise Adjusts to the Spotlight

Derek Fordjour has become one of the art world’s most coveted newcomers



‘It just took years of tinkering before everything I wanted to say came together,’ says artist Derek Fordjour, who didn’t start showing his own work publicly until he was 35. PHOTO: BRAD OGBONNA

By *Kelly Crow*

Jan. 30, 2019 9:35 a.m. ET

Dirt. Hay. Pea gravel.

NIGHT GALLERY

2276 E. 16th Street, Los Angeles, California 90021 nightgallery.ca

The New York artist Derek Fordjour often blankets the floors of his shows with materials that can throw audiences off-balance. Vulnerability is central to his work, and the unsteadiness underfoot tends to reinforce the funhouse effect of his portraits and sculptures.

From cheerleaders wobbling in human pyramids to pageant winners and jockeys posing in awkward groups, Mr. Fordjour's paintings appear carnivalesque, yet convey an uneasy feeling of being displayed and exposed—his way, he said, of exploring his fear of both failure and success in today's volatile art market.

"I've seen how good things can also evaporate," the 44-year-old said. "I don't want to be a blip."

Ironically, delving into his own insecurities has transformed Mr. Fordjour into one of the art world's most coveted newcomers, with collectors like Sciamé president Joseph Mizzi, museums like the Dallas Museum of Art and fellow artists like Henry Taylor buying his work. Last fall, the Whitney Museum of American Art commissioned his painting "Half Mast," displaying a reproduction of it on a billboard near New York's High Line. Last month [at Art Basel Miami Beach](#), Mr. Fordjour's works were selling for as much as \$48,000 at London dealer Josh Lilley's booth.



A reproduction of Derek Fordjour's 'Half Mast' displayed in New York. PHOTO: RON AMSTUTZ/NIGHT GALLERY

NIGHT GALLERY

2276 E. 16th Street, Los Angeles, California 90021 nightgallery.ca

“Sometimes the narratives he’s painting are dark, but he seduces you with the textures of his paintings,” said Mr. Taylor. “His surfaces are just beautiful.”

On Saturday, Night Gallery in Los Angeles is scheduled to open “JRRNNYS,” a show of his new work, followed by the city’s California African American Museum, which is including him in a group show, “Plumb Line: Charles White and the Contemporary,” opening March 6.

All this attention seems sudden, Mr. Fordjour said, but he is steeling himself for [the gyrations of the art market](#). Born in Memphis, Tenn., to Ghanaian immigrants, Mr. Fordjour chose early on to make a life in art, earning a master’s in art education from Harvard and working for established artists like Mickalene Thomas.

But he didn’t start showing his own work publicly until he was 35. “It just took years of tinkering before everything I wanted to say came together,” he said.

Mr. Fordjour’s breakthrough began six years ago following a divorce that left him sleeping on an air mattress in his Harlem studio. “I wanted to be confident and gregarious, but I was just broken and overwhelmed,” he said. “I realized I was not comfortable with my own vulnerability as a black man and as an artist.”

He stopped painting portraits of athletes and started painting everyday figures who seemed swept up by social conventions or competitions they might not be winning. The facial expressions of his “players,” as he calls them, grew increasingly blurred and surreal. His jockeys and marching-band drum majors started sporting ornate uniforms, symbols of respectability that double as a kind of armor, he said.

Mr. Fordjour took color cues from candy wrappers in Ghana, but he expanded the scope of his work to explore what American assimilation meant for him and his family. One of his best-known works is 2018’s “Haberdashery,” which depicts a nude black man standing before a mirror as tailors measure him for a suit.

“My parents were really invested in looking the part,” he said. “They gave me and my brothers American names—Derek, Ike and Ricky—and their dream for us was upward mobility.”

Mr. Fordjour added: “They didn’t want our heritage to be a hindrance.”

NIGHT GALLERY

2276 E. 16th Street, Los Angeles, California 90021 nightgallery.ca



'Haberdashery' PHOTO: DEREK FORDJOUR/ JOSH LILLEY GALLERY

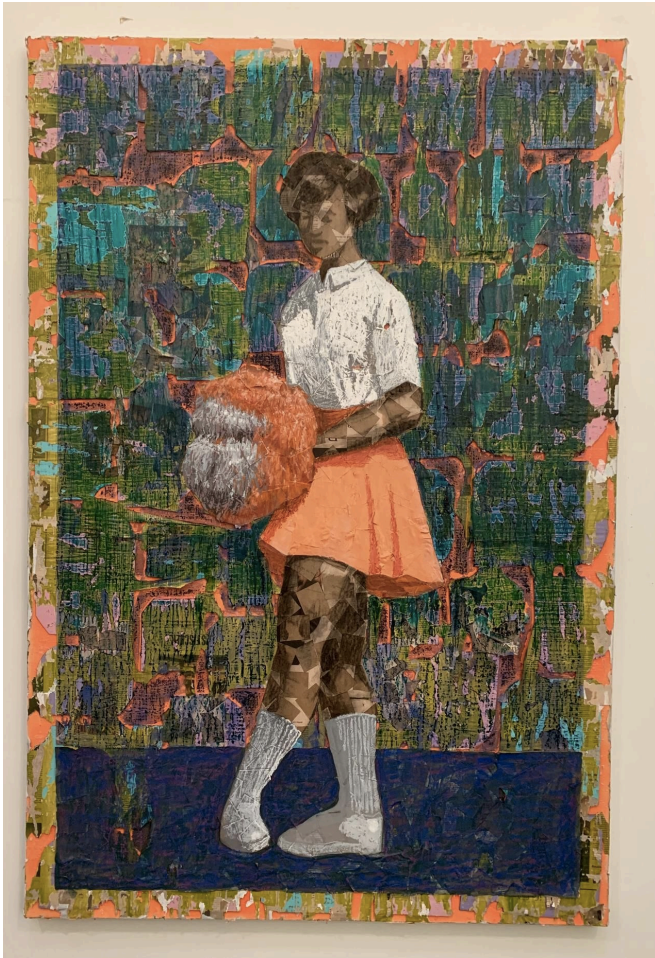
His latest works are often a reappraisal of American ideals. In “JRRNNYS,” he plans to show a pair of portraits of a soldier and a tennis player in a new series called “Worst to Be First.” The series nods to the pressure that black trailblazers often face. (This persists in art history, he said, where prices for pioneering black artists like Jacob Lawrence still lag behind trendier recent arrivals.)

“Stable,” another work in the Night Gallery show, depicts a dozen jockeys on horseback. Mr. Fordjour said he’s enamored of the history of black jockeys who served as superstar athletes long before most minorities were allowed to compete in other major sports. Yet today, he added, black jockeys are scarce, lending eerie double meaning to the work’s title.

NIGHT GALLERY

2276 E. 16th Street, Los Angeles, California 90021

nightgallery.ca



‘Second of September,’ one of the artist’s new works. PHOTO: DEREK FORDJOUR/NIGHT GALLERY

His most ambitious piece for the show is “STOCKROOM Ezekiel,” a 30-square-foot installation featuring cell-like walls whose cutouts are filled with glass balloons, billiard balls and tiny busts carved from coal and dirt. From the outside, it looks like a playful shadow box, but he said it explores the U.S. legacy of prison inmates being “leased” to businesses in need of labor.

“He’s pointing toward traditions that form the backbone of American culture,” said William Hathaway, the gallery’s sales director, “and he’s deeply interrogating the dynamics that drive them.”