

NIGHT GALLERY

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

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Jack Radley, "Derek Fordjour Considers the Precariousness of Shelter," *Hyperallergic*, April 6, 2020.

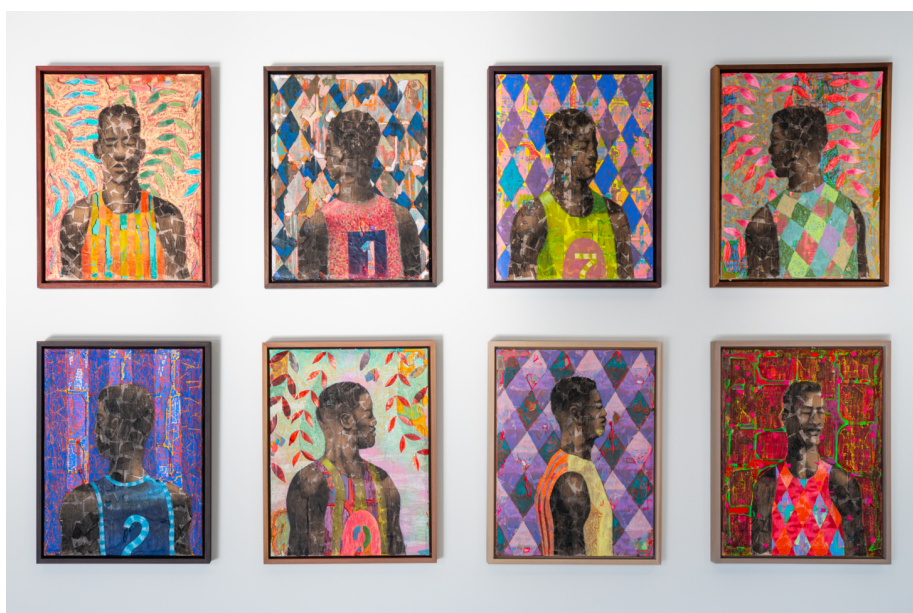
HYPERALLERGIC

ART

Derek Fordjour Considers the Precariousness of Shelter

As many grapple with the tension between confinement and the privilege of security, Fordjour's artworks offer opportunities for relief from, and for contemplation of the uncertainty that lies beyond.

Jack Radley | April 6, 2020



Derek Fordjour: *SHELTER*, installation view, Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, January 17-April 19, 2020 (photo by Dusty Kessler)

ST. LOUIS — In the midst of self-quarantines due to the COVID-19 pandemic, perhaps nothing has become more paramount to personal and community wellbeing than shelter. Many of us who remain at home throughout the day have become increasingly aware of the tension between the confinement we feel within our walls and the privilege of seeking security in them. In his first major solo museum exhibition, *SHELTER*, at Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, Derek Fordjour examines the prevalence and precariousness of this concept, providing an intimate, multisensory experience of his figurative artworks.

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Viewers enter a dark, ramshackle structure composed of corrugated metal walls and a dirt floor, illuminated by work lights dangling from cords and metal clips. The menacing percussion of rain patters overhead. Eight paintings and two sculptures are installed in the structure's various rooms. While audiences navigate uneven footing, the artist does not tread lightly; Fordjour interrogates the histories of his materials. The corrugated metal, used globally, has become ubiquitous since its development in the 19th century, yet its light weight and ease of transport — once assets — have come to signify colonization, impermanence, and poverty, as in shantytowns and temporary shelters. Fordjour examines the political implications of migration and migrants — including his parents, who emigrated to the United States from Ghana — to underscore how his figures represent injustices and unstable situations.



Derek Fordjour: *SHELTER*, installation view, Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, January 17-April 19, 2020 (photo by Dusty Kessler)

While *SHELTER* could come off as ruin-porn in less skilled hands, Fordjour's execution is masterful — as convincing as it is powerful. Minute details, from painted rust on security cameras to dead plants buried in the 22,000-plus pounds of dirt, dispel any sense of disbelief. Fordjour worked with a team of engineers to create a sound that mimics rain; tiny balls hit the roof, triggering nerves that respond to distant impact (like those that make us feel the bristles of a broom as we sweep).

Fordjour excels at multi-figure paintings, and pageantry and sports recur as subjects. His textured canvases have raw substrates of layered cardboard and cut paper under acrylics, charcoal, and spray paint. In "Aquatic Composition" (2019), swimmers advance horizontally through a pool, as diagonal flags cut across them, disrupting their progress. The parameters of the pool are not visible: despite the vigor of their strokes, victory is not in sight for these athletes. Fordjour's focus on the sports-industrial complex has sociopolitical resonance, as Black and brown people are often only celebrated, and under-compensated, for their athletic contributions.

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Derek Fordjour, "Two More Years" (2018), acrylic, charcoal, oil pastel, and foil on newspaper mounted on canvas, 40 x 60 inches (courtesy Night Gallery, Los Angeles)

Another painting, "Grooming Day" (2019), shows men in a barbershop blanketed by clouds of hairspray, while a soccer game plays in the background. Mirrors collaged with aluminum foil shimmer as viewers move about the room, imbuing a familiar scene with a sense of enchantment. The vertical stripes of the wallpaper reflect the corrugated metal wall on which the painting hangs. Near the bottom of "Grooming Day," an orange extension cord connected to hair clippers echoes that of the lights hanging above viewers. Contextualized by its environment, the painting presents the barbershop as a community refuge from the outside world.



Derek Fordjour, "Aquatic Composition" (2019), acrylic, charcoal, oil pastel on newspaper mounted on canvas, 60 x 100 inches (courtesy Josh Lilley Gallery, London)

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SHELTER is not Fordjour's first environment (it follows 2019's *STOCKROOM Ezekiel* at Night Gallery), but it is by far his largest and most immersive to date. While his paintings' vibrant colors seem joyous, their environment accentuates the vulnerability of his subjects' positions. Fordjour's *Worst to Be First* series depicts the isolation and pressures of exceptionalism and achievement for Black and brown Americans. For his subjects, the pressure of performing belies the pulchritude of pageantry. Their environment does not cast a shadow on his exuberance and technical prowess as a painter, but rather accentuates the paintings' psychological undercurrents that might otherwise go overlooked. By situating his paintings in this temporary refuge, Fordjour poses his artworks as opportunities for pause, for relief from, and for contemplation of the uncertainty that lies beyond these makeshift walls.



Derek Fordjour, "Grooming Day" (2019), acrylic, charcoal, oil pastel, and foil on newspaper, mounted on canvas, 68 x 85 1/2 inches (courtesy Night Gallery, Los Angeles)

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Derek Fordjour, "Five Down Wide" (2019), acrylic, charcoal, oil pastel and foil on newspaper mounted on canvas, framed. Artwork dimensions: 40 x 100 inches; framed dimensions: 43 x 103 inches (courtesy Night Gallery, Los Angeles)



Derek Fordjour, "Tandem Blue" (2018), acrylic, charcoal, oil pastel and foil on newspaper mounted on canvas, 40 x 60 inches (courtesy Night Gallery, Los Angeles)

Derek Fordjour: *SHELTER* is scheduled to continue at Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis (3750 Washington Blvd., St. Louis, Missouri) through April 19.

Editor's note: Please note that physical viewing hours for this exhibition have been temporarily suspended in light of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. Discussions around art and culture remain important during this time, so we have opted to publish this review to enable readers to explore the exhibition virtually as many of us continue to self-isolate. Please check the museum website to see when viewing hours will resume.