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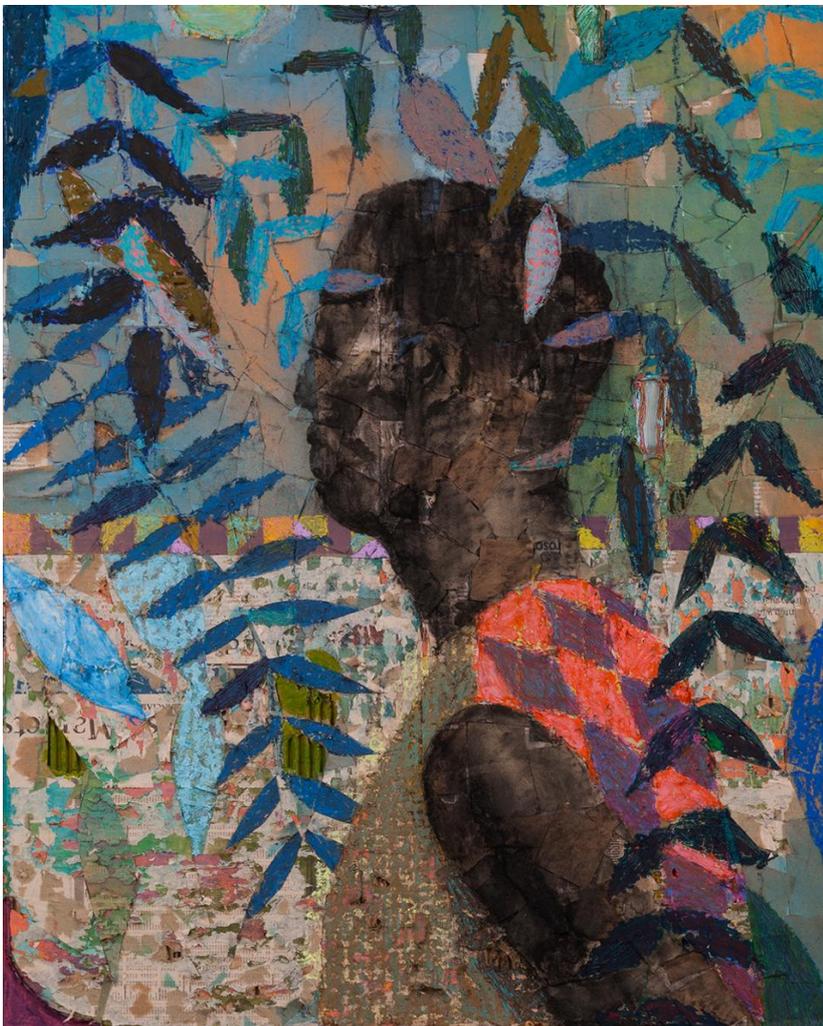
Arts & Entertainment

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# The Jay-Z Of The Art World Discusses His Upcoming Show In Harlem

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Courtesy the artist

*Acrylic, charcoal and oil pastel on newspaper mounted on canvas 30 x 24 inches*

The conversational chemistry was good with the artist Derek Fordjour from the moment he greeted me, barefoot, in the hallway outside of his studio at the Sugar Hill Children's Museum of Art and Storytelling in Harlem. It got even better when I brought up JAY-Z's new album *4:44*, which I had been listening to on my way to our interview, and almost nonstop since it was released on June 30.

"I could have bought a place in Dumbo before it was Dumbo for like two million," I responded when Fordjour said he was participating in the Sharpe-Walentas Studio Program in Dumbo after his residency ended at the Sugar Hill Children's Museum. It was a lyric from "The Story of OJ," a single off *4:44*.

Rather than look at me like, "girl, bye," Fordjour responded with similar enthusiasm.

"It's the best album he's ever done," Fordjour said. "JAY-Z's gonna be the Mick Jagger of rap. He's going to be 70 years old rocking out a stadium."

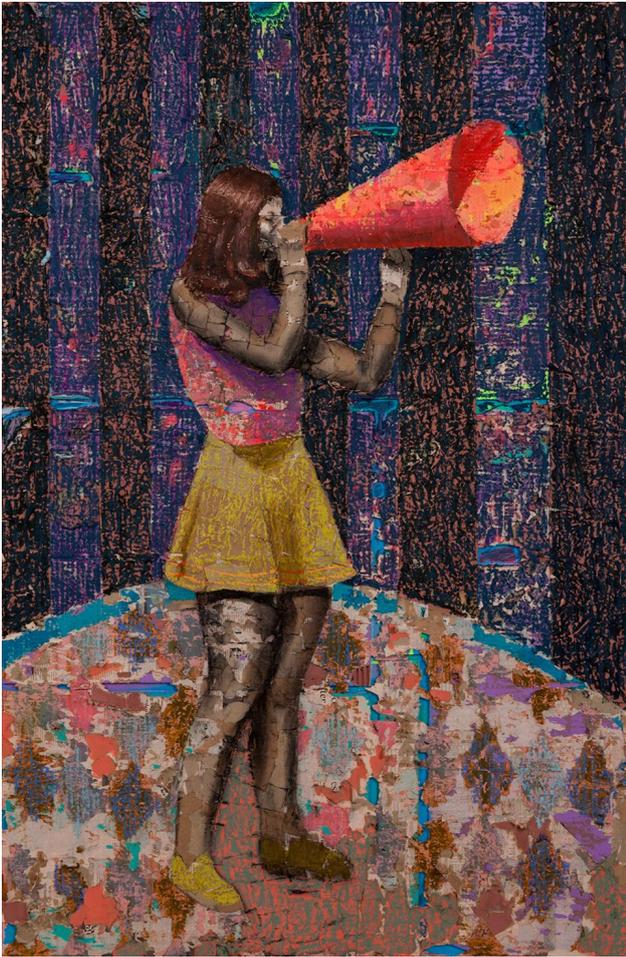
Throughout our conversation, JAY-Z served as a metaphor for the artistic process.

"When you listen to *4:44*, you know there weren't a lot of people around when Jay was making it, you know he was being very honest, and you feel the intimacy, and that's all we want from him," Fordjour said. We were talking about how the ideas for many of the objects in *PARADE*—an exhibition of Fordjour's work that will open on July 27 at the museum—appear out of nowhere, like apparitions. For example, a sculpture consisting of a birthday cake mounted on a tricycle that will be covered in fuzzy turquoise fabric.

"Very rarely do I say: 'I'm going to go into the room and think now,'" he said. "I will walk, or nap, or read something, and I just wait. And this tricycle came, and it was silly, and it made me a little uncomfortable because it didn't make sense. But I drew it, and I liked it, so I stuck to it. It just comes very spontaneously."

How, I wanted to know, does Fordjour determine if one of his visions is worthy of being put in front of an audience?

“The audience wants to watch us do our thing unchecked,” he told me. “I have a friend who critiques my work. He says, ‘Dawg, they want to see you doing you. If you’re not having fun, we can’t have fun. You gotta do you. Don’t worry about what’s happening.’”



Courtesy the artist  
*Acrylic, charcoal and oil pastel on newspaper mounted on canvas 60 x 40 inches*

Naturally affable and charismatic, Fordjour told me that from a very young age, his parents expected him to be the entertainer of the family. The middle of three sons, much of his existence was a performance. His parents were immigrants from Ghana. His father came to the United States to go to medical school, and went on to practice oral surgery in Memphis, Tennessee.

“My father was a post segregation black doctor,” Fordjour said. “He had to perform to a greater extent than anyone else.”

As the child of immigrants, Fordjour had to play at being both American, and at being African. As an artist, the performance has continued. He has to entertain an audience with his work. He has to entertain me, a journalist, who after only forty-five minutes of conversation, will go write something that will exist on the Internet as truth about his work.

“There is always some layer of performance if you’re trying to win,” he told me. “Unless you want to have no mobility. All of these ideas tie together. My parents moving here, them wanting us to go further, what the fuck does that mean, towards what?”

He continued: "I'm questioning Americana – work hard and go, but go where? What’s your strategy, how are you getting there, how do you determine what markers there are?"

And then, to bring it back to JAY-Z, he added, “I don’t think JAY-Z is going into meetings with Sprint and saying, n\*\*ga this, n\*\*ga that. He’s affable, he’s attractive, he’s seductive.”

I knew without Fordjour using a JAY-Z metaphor that I was being charmed, and I didn’t mind it, even, or perhaps especially, with my husband waiting for me just outside the studio. I liked Fordjour a lot. And liking him made me look at his work much closer than I would have walking into his exhibition, which will encompass a single room in a children’s museum.

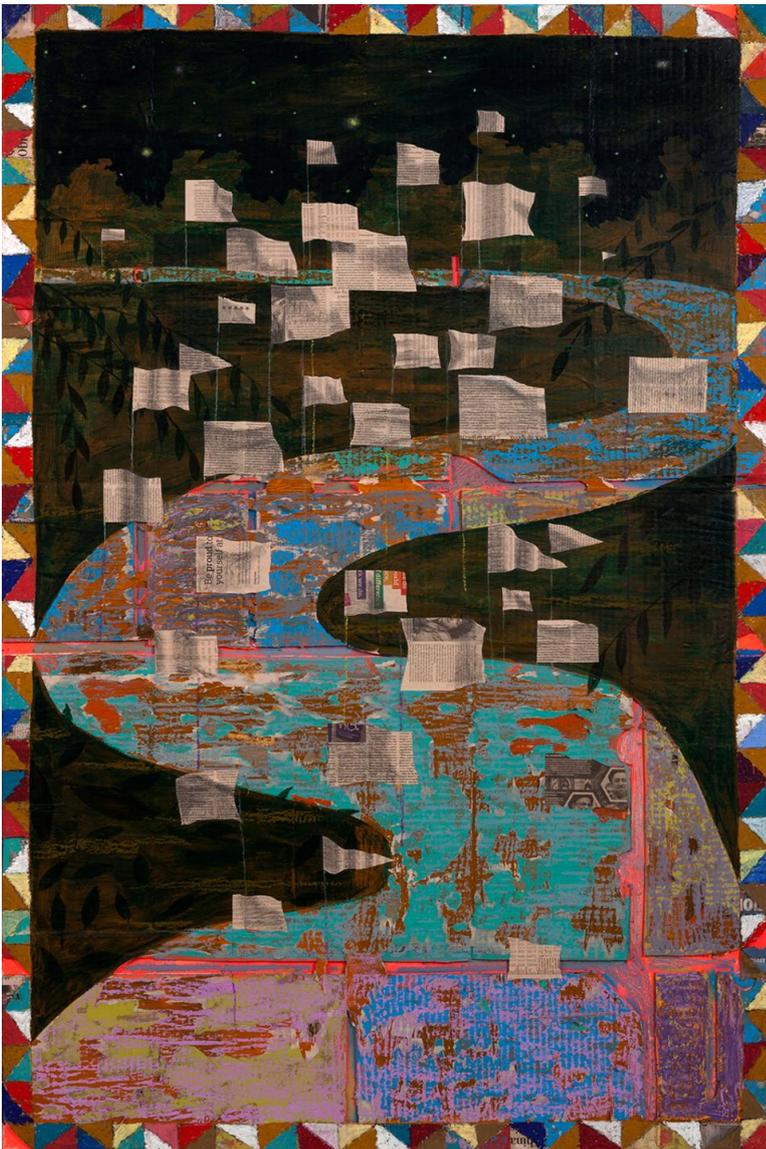


Courtesy the artist  
*Terra cotta, vinyl paint, wooden wagon wheel 90 x 15 x 37 inches*

Fordjour walked me around the room, which was then empty. On the floor were pieces of tape that delineated where his sculptures will be placed. The room will be divided into a series of narrow corridors by a network of walls. The walls will be papered with old copies of *The Financial Times*, which Fordjour uses because he likes the warmth of the publication's colors, and also because using paper reminds him of a time when he couldn't afford paint. At intervals will hang Fordjour's paintings. On the ceiling will be a scrim upon which is projected an image of clouds. On the floor, a road of red bricks covered in glitter.

Throughout, sculptures measured to the size of Fordjour's body that depict, among other things, a ferris wheel, a tower of wheels, and a pushcart. At the end, viewers will crawl through a closet in which hangs the discarded clothing of a museum staff member's ex-boyfriend, whom she kicked out of her apartment, into a tiny room containing a piano upon which plays "The Entertainer." An apt tune for a man called to perform.

The title, "Parade," harkens back to Fordjour's childhood habit of organizing dolls into formations he wished could be animated; but it also refers to the way that he's laying out the creative apparitions that haunt him in real space so the he can make some sense of them as an objective observer.



Courtesy the artist  
*Acrylic, charcoal, glitter and oil pastel on newspaper mounted on canvas 60 x 40 inches*

Through the work, Fordjour told me, he is trying to discover the moment when he became an artist.

“It’s unanswerable,” he admits, but in asking himself the question, he unleashed a funhouse of objects that are both seductive and terrifying; seemingly simple, but complex in meaning; familiar, but impossible to pin down in a cohesive narrative about who Fordjour is, and why he wants to please rather than telling everyone to go f\*\*k off.

I like it. I’ll go see the show for sure, and take my daughter; Fordjour promises that children are allowed to touch the art, and by children, he means adults like me. My daughter can’t even walk.