

Elisa Carollo, "How Derek Fordjour Is Transforming Memphis' Arts Landscape," *Observer*,
November 25, 2024.

OBSERVER

ARTS • ARTS INTERVIEWS

How Derek Fordjour Is Transforming Memphis' Arts Landscape

The artist's bold new cultural project, Contemporary Arts Memphis, is leveling the playing field for young creatives—one fellowship cohort at a time.

By [Elisa Carollo](#) • 11/25/24 4:49pm



CAM Fellows with CAM founder Derek Fordjour, executive director Derek Patterson and chief strategy officer Christy Gilmour.
Contemporary Arts Memphis (CAM)

Petzel

Elisa Carollo, “How Derek Fordjour Is Transforming Memphis’ Arts Landscape,” *Observer*,
November 25, 2024.

In recent years, contemporary artists have increasingly embraced the idea of giving back to their roots, creating spaces to inspire and cultivate new generations of artists and creatives. This global trend is particularly vibrant in Africa, where renowned names like Ibrahim Mahama, Elias Sime, Kehinde Wiley, Yinka Shonibare, Serge Attukwei Clottey and most recently, Amoako Boafo have spearheaded artist-led initiatives. From Mahama’s Red Clay and Savannah Centre for Contemporary Art to other ambitious projects scattered across the continent, these spaces are becoming incubators for talent and cultural exchange. Meanwhile, Julie Mehretu made headlines last month with her \$2.25 million donation to the Whitney Museum, ensuring free admission for visitors aged 25 and under—a move as bold as her work.

Now, record-smashing auction darling Derek Fordjour joins the ranks of artists giving back, unveiling a 4,466-square-foot art space in his hometown of Memphis. Dubbed Contemporary Arts Memphis (CAM), the new facility is designed to nurture young visual artists from under-resourced communities while amplifying Memphis’s dynamic arts scene. Fordjour, whose works grace the collections of the Brooklyn Museum, the Guggenheim, LACMA and the Whitney (among others), is fresh off a blockbuster show at Petzel Gallery. Speaking to *Observer*, Fordjour credits his own journey—from Memphis, by way of Skowhegan rejection, to becoming a celebrated artist—as the driving force behind CAM. “I had the idea for several years, honestly,” he says. “Back then, I had to apply to Skowhegan to study art, and I didn’t get in. For a long time, I’ve been thinking, how great would it be if this program existed in a place like Memphis or somewhere closer?”

Petzel

Elisa Carollo, “How Derek Fordjour Is Transforming Memphis’ Arts Landscape,” *Observer*, November 25, 2024.



Derek Fordjour with Memphis mayor Paul Young, Steve Cohen (U.S. Representative from Tennessee’s 9th district), CAM executive director Derek Patterson and 2022 CAM Fellow Deja Bowen. Contemporary Arts Memphis (CAM)

Before launching his ambitious initiative, Fordjour took thoughtful steps to ensure the project would genuinely address the needs of the Memphis community. “I engaged first with local consultant Adrian Johnson Williams, who helped me recruit another advisor named Christy Gilmour,” he explains. “The three of us worked together to bring together local high school art teachers to ask all the questions and understand whether they thought a project like this was something students could benefit from.” This collaborative approach laid the foundation for CAM, a program deeply rooted in the local context but with aspirations to transform lives on a larger scale.

Founded in 2021 out of Fordjour’s personal investment, CAM launched with its flagship Summer Fellowship: a no-cost, four-week program specifically designed for rising juniors and seniors. Selected by a jury that includes two internationally renowned artists, the program aims to help students prepare for college applications and scholarships.

Petzel

Elisa Carollo, “How Derek Fordjour Is Transforming Memphis’ Arts Landscape,” *Observer*, November 25, 2024.

“We are focusing on kids who might not always have access to the best resources, and we want to provide them that,” Fordjour says. “In addition to those resources, we want to give them guidance and mentorship.” He highlights the critical need for this kind of support, noting how visual arts students often fall through the cracks; compare that to the robust help often available to athletes, dancers and performers. “At that essential but also so delicate stage of one’s life journey and trajectory, there is very little support,” Fordjour observes.

The Fellowship selection process is rigorous—designed to identify students who demonstrate true commitment to art. “They have two rounds of interviews, and we build a cohort based on that applicant pool,” Fordjour explains. “We’re looking for art students who are passionate about art and are trying to figure out how to make a life as an artist.” Once selected, fellows receive a university-level art education led by local artists as well as guest artists from outside the region. They visit local galleries and museums, and the program offers six transferable college credit hours through the University of Memphis.

The fellowship’s culmination is a transformative week-long trip to New York City that exposes students to the art world’s inner workings. During this trip, fellows visit top art schools, world-class museums and the studios of leading contemporary artists, including luminaries like Lorna Simpson and Aliza Nisenbaum. “We want to provide them an accurate and sober view of what life for an artist is,” Fordjour says. “They also speak to dealers and even visit collectors’ homes, so they really get a well-rounded 360 view of the art system.”

Elisa Carollo, “How Derek Fordjour Is Transforming Memphis’ Arts Landscape,” *Observer*, November 25, 2024.



2022 CAM Fellow Deja Bowen with Derek Fordjour's *Front Turn Double*. Contemporary Arts Memphis (CAM)

Now housed in a permanent, purpose-built space designed by architect Lester Ferdinand with interiors by Avni Pathak and artistic contributions from Desmond Lewis, Contemporary Arts Memphis is poised to nurture a new generation of regional artists through a robust year-long program. “With the opening of our new space, we can serve more young artists more consistently,” says Fordjour. “Our goal has always been to be widely accessible to young people in Memphis committed to the visual arts.”

The new center, Fordjour tells *Observer*, is outfitted with state-of-the-art facilities to support a wide variety of practices, with painting and sculpture studios to a computer lab, ceramics kilns, exhibition spaces and dedicated art storage. Additionally, the Teen Lab offers open access for local students who may not be part of the formal program. “They can access our instruction, free supplies and all of our Open Studios,” Fordjour says, emphasizing the initiative’s commitment to accessibility and inclusivity.

Petzel

Elisa Carollo, “How Derek Fordjour Is Transforming Memphis’ Arts Landscape,” *Observer*, November 25, 2024.

As Memphis’s first art-focused organization of this scale, CAM is now also collaborating with key institutions like the University of Memphis Department of Art and Design, Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, Dixon Gallery & Gardens and Metal Museum. “Because of the rising costs of education, the barriers of entry to study art are becoming more prohibitive,” Fordjour says. “CAM seeks to level the uneven field of access to quality art education. Our new space radically expands our capacity to achieve that goal.” And with this ambitious expansion, CAM is staking its claim as a transformative force in Memphis’s creative and cultural landscape.



Shelby County commissioner Shante Avant, U.S. Representative Steve Cohen, CAM founder Derek Fordjour, CAM Fellow Deja Bowen, Memphis City Councilwoman Michaelyn Easter-Thomas, Shelby County commissioner Miska Clay-Bibbs, Memphis City Councilwoman Jerri Green, State Senator Raumesh Akbari, Shelby County commissioner Mickell Lowery and State Senator London Lamar. Contemporary Arts Memphis (CAM)

<https://observer.com/2024/11/interview-derek-fordjour-transforming-memphis-arts-landscape/>