

Seph Rodney, "Derek Fordjour Conjures a Heavenly World," *Hyperallergic*, December 16, 2020.

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Art

Derek Fordjour Conjures a Heavenly World

In "SELF MUST DIE," Fordjour's penchant for lush colors and surfaces dovetails with the theme of churchified rituals of remembrance.



by Seph Rodney
December 16, 2020



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Derek Fordjour, "STRWMN" (2020) Acrylic, charcoal, cardboard, oil pastel and foil on newspaper mounted on canvas, framed: 87.25 x 67.25 inches
Credit: All images courtesy the artist and Petzel, New York, all photos by Daniel Greer

Petzel

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If you grew up in the Black church as I did, upon walking into Petzel Gallery to see Derek Fordjour's *SELF MUST DIE* exhibition, you will recognize in the first gallery the hallmarks of the church. Fordjour has given us the variable shading, cut pile carpeting, a rigidly unforgiving wooden pew with a pocket in the back for hymnals and prayer books, and, displayed around the periphery, paintings depicting pallbearers shouldering a coffin, identically robed members of the choir, a more lavishly robed minister looming over a pulpit, and a pedestrian procession of Black folks waiting in line to pay their respects to the deceased.



Installation view of *SELF MUST DIE* exhibition at Petzel gallery

In keeping with the way Fordjour has long been working, the painter's love of pomp and pageantry is evident in "Pall Bearers" (all works 2020) where the top hats, tailed coats, brightly orange waistcoats and lilac boutonnieres of the figures along with the gold foil of the coffin contrast with the dour, funereal sky in the

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background. Fordjour's penchant for lush colors and surfaces dovetails with the theme of churchified rituals of remembrance. The rites of joyful commemoration aren't ever *really* for the dead; they are for us, the living, especially for Black people. The ceremony tell us that — at least in the funeral ritual — we will be treated by our community with care, respect, and perhaps even love. The expression we used in my church is "going home to glory," and in the painting "Procession (After Ellis Wilson)" Fordjour alludes to this by painting the people in the queue in muted blacks, grays, and in silhouettes, while the stained-glass windows of the chapel consist of heavenly pastel colors.

Even if you aren't familiar with the Black church, the sumptuousness of Fordjour's painting will keep you rooted in the gallery. Years ago I had an experience of a Rembrandt painting when I suddenly



Derek Fordjour, "Pall Bearers" (2020) Acrylic, charcoal, cardboard, oil pastel and foil on newspaper mounted on canvas, framed dimensions: 102.25 x 74.25 inches

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understood why people go on and on about him. Across the room I could see the figure emerge from the chiaroscuro as if carved out of it, and then up close the brushwork was daintily exacting. I felt this here as well, seeing from 20 feet away the riot of hues and tints in "STRWMN," and the pointillist figuration Fordjour makes out of newspaper, acrylic, charcoal, cardboard, and oil pastel cohere in a way that makes every object seem to dance. Then, up close, I perceive the rough and tumble of layered surfaces, the astonishingly precise choices he's made to render creases and shadows.



Installation view of *SELF MUST DIE* exhibition at Petzel gallery

In the second gallery, where "STRWMN" is installed, Fordjour points to the aspects of our lived lives that deserve to be celebrated and the many ways we come together to do so:

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carnivals, athletic contests, circuses, and bands. He demonstrates a truth: We make our own glory. And this is what I would rather go home to any day.

SELF MUST DIE by Derek Fordjour continues at Petzel Gallery (456 West 18th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) until December 19.

<https://hyperallergic.com/608739/derek-fordjour-self-must-die-petzel/>