

LUCE GALLERY

DEREK FORDJOUR

7 ottobre – 2 novembre 2016

Luce Gallery, Torino

Derek Fordjour's starting point is an exploration of the "game-ification" of social structures and the inherent vulnerability of the individual situated within a contest. The political implications of such structures, individual and collective strategies, as well as the element of spectacle and related concerns.

Intersection of gaming and art begins with an interest in the athlete in uniform. Frequently, the conversation is dominated by questions of celebrity and the particular sport depicted. The power of the sports and industrial complex is a shadow on the images in the artist's work.

In many ways, the symbol of the player which appeared strong and nearly invincible, situated within a struggle on a public stage, beyond his outward strength, is vulnerable to the outcome of the game, replaceable, owned and accountable to many layers of management.

The experience of confronting these ideas, opened Fordjour's work to broader possibilities around his personal anxiety, as an artist, as a black man, exposed to a subject to uncertainty and various forms of hostility. In this moment of crystallization artist's memory of understanding injustice and racial disparity, a reality of growing up the shadow of legalized segregation in Memphis, Tennessee, came in the form of a simple sporting analogy: with unfair rules, one can never win, despite how hard he plays. As a child, Derek Fordjour, battling external signs of inferiority, this simple analogy reduced large, complex, social and historical problems into one comprehensible narrative.

Another early Fordjour memory is of watching the evening news along with his two, beloved brothers, elder and younger. The evening anchor opened with the following statement: "Good Evening. One in three black males will be in jail, dead or on drugs by the age of twenty-five." He looked at his two brothers, counted us up, and began to sink in fear. This kind of deadly association between his skin and his life expectancy, between data, numbers, statistics and his complexion was a bizarre, ominous, public spectacle. It was an association that he wanted so desperately to resist with the force of his own will and body, but such effort was hopelessly futile. These early moments of realization anchor his interest in the player and game at deep and persistent levels of vulnerability within him.

The social space occupied by both games and art within culture is a fertile point of inquiry and social critique. Sports and the arts are both cultural universals. It's not imaginable a culture, past or present that lacks either of them. What is the relationship between them? Sports should be unapologetically recognized as one of the fine arts, and sports and the arts have the kind of relationships that Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe described as elective affinities. They have no practical purpose and they are both born for what the Johan Huizinga called "the play instinct." Sports and the arts may not be twins, but they do have a sibling relationship within the extended family of culture.

Beyond individual tendencies in early childhood development, both art and play soon become regulated within an institutional context. In the case of art, the debate amongst educational researchers within the field of Art Education has centered, for decades, on an indisputable impulse in the child to express herself through pictures. As Lowenfeld and Brittain assert, "The art room should be a sanctuary against school regulations, where each youngster is free to be himself and to put down his feelings and emotions without censorship".

At the same time education and regulated play are in contrast with the total freedom of expression of the player, either if he's a sportsman or an artist.

The predicament of Bernard Suit's "player" encapsulates the essence of the player as symbol in

Fordjour's work. The "lusory attitude" provides considerable latitude in which to embed psychological content within a narrative context. Often within his work, the game context, spatial environment, or team presence can function allegorically as institutional presence

The notion of hyper-credentialization and an obsession with validation through educational accomplishment suggests the presence of some anxiety. In his work, Derek Fordjour have introduced the presence of medals and trophies as symbols to express this tendency. It becomes a point of inquiry into the attainment of value, questioning validation, and the pursuit of affirmation seeking through accomplishments.

Destructive power dynamic between black talent and white ownership; a chronic psychological burden for black athletes, who had to constantly prove their worth; disconnection of the athlete from his or her community; and the emergence of the apolitical black athlete, who had to be careful what he or she said or stood for, so as not to offend white paymasters.

In this typical way of conceive the structure of a scene the image is centrally concerned with the difference between ownership and access, bringing into question the relationship of the figures to the environment. The patterning on the walls, floor and uniforms allude to patterns of tradition, corruption, nepotism, etc. Historically, African-Americans have managed this dilemma for ages. With specific regard to sports, African-American owned professional teams were organized and thriving before players were poached into larger white leagues. Beyond sports, this is true of Hollywood films and within the space of education. Black colleges suffered tremendously following integration, as students flocked to predominately white institutions. Seeking acceptance and questioning feelings of entitlement and belonging are what motivated this composition.

The artist's earliest encounters with sculptural objects were Ghanaian carvings, both decorative and utilitarian. Remembering his father's gifts after traveling to Ghana when he was a child, as well as the wooden bowls, the sculptural bust is reminiscent of black sportsmen and the raised umbrella evocative of sporting paraphernalia of some kind. However, the cultural markers of the object broaden to occupy a more complex identification, which mirrors the liminal space in which he negotiated during his formative years.

Rather than consider this some sort of quagmire, Derek Fordjour is more inclined to consider it referred to a typical American immigrant story. In fact, the immigrant story is the bedrock of the American population contrary to homespun myths of entitlement. In this way, he seek to create work that appears reminiscent of a bygone era, harkening back to a more authentically American period. But the way in which ideals of an "Americana" sensibility actually function in his work is more congruous with the assimilation of the immigrant experience, rather than the presence of some bucolic small town ideals of segregated bliss.

After several years of failing to merge circus and carnival themes and motifs with athletes and athletic symbols successfully, it was a trip to Ghana that was the turning point for the artist. Witnessing the dark ebony Ghanaian skin against bright patterned and dyed fabrics and neon hued brick homes crystallized his search for the appropriate palette. There are elements of the work that are chiefly African, but they are also constructed in a manner that leaves them open to broader associations.

Influenced by Christophe Ruckharble's figurative and narrative work, like his theatrical elements, distorting the spaces, moving into or above the scenery, so that the floor became one with the picture plane, Fordjour singled out the figures, almost like sculptures in small niches, blending them into the backgrounds, almost becoming indistinguishable patterns, conceptualizing space and figures. While patterns holds primarily symbolic significance in his compositions, functioning as a visual device, increasing optical effect and allowing for a rich interplay between imagined and real space within the picture plane, his interest in pattern references patterns of corruption, collusion, institutional memory and bias, flattened perspective., are referential of Wayne Thiebaud to capture a certain middle class American opulence through straightforward means of representation. Interested in Jules DeBalincourt utopian desire in response to geopolitical anxiety, similarly influenced by Kerry James Marshall's conviction that the black figure deserves an ostensible and unapologetic insertion into the art historical cannon, Derek's Fordjour work is chiefly concerned with an inquiry and examinations of the economics of political disparity that manifest in a variety of complex social systems. Staking a claim on the root cause of certain inarguable inequities, while questioning the ethos of a culture obsessed with winning at all cost, individually and collectively.

In this sense appear clear the artist's vision to remain committed to the search of a kind of truth that achieves a few things. First, to create work that resonates for exhibition and dialogue. Secondly, that the content of the work is paramount and that form and medium act as supports for the presentation of ideas.

Luce Gallery
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