



Derek Fordjour, *Birdman*, 2022.
Photo: Craig Smith



Derek Fordjour, *Masons, Magicians, Showgirls & Kings*, 2022.
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In Derek Fordjour's mixed-media painting *Birdman* (2022), a man in a top hat balances on a tightrope, surrounded by a swarm of doves. As is typical in the artist's work, this image is marked by a kind of Pointillist stillness. Despite the chaos and frenzy that would characterize such a scene, Fordjour renders both performer and birds in an impossible state of calm arrest, recalling precedents by Georges Seurat, David Hockney, or Edward Hopper—though the circus tent's concentric swirls of lavender and teal stripes invite special comparison to Paul Signac's elusive portrait of Félix Fénéon (1890). These canonical painters frequently depicted scenes of upper-class pastimes—regattas, luncheons, and cabarets—associated with the white leisure class. Fordjour subverts these coded expectations by rendering a Black performer, alluding to histories of racial exclusion and minstrelsy. *Masons, Magicians, Showgirls & Kings* (2022) likewise draws focus to tropes of orientalism and colonial exoticism in the entertainment industries. Black-silhouetted men are hidden within a crowded array of gilded mummies and well-dressed patrons outfitted in turbans and feathered headdresses. In such works, Fordjour places emphasis on the simultaneity of hypervisibility, invisibility, and commodification.

Fordjour's works are always process-intensive and textured. The artist begins by affixing cardboard squares or foil to his canvas, to form a topographical underlayer, then wraps this surface in newspaper pages culled from the *Financial Times*. The use of newsprint has roots in Cubist collage, Dada photomontages, and the encaustic works of Jasper Johns, yet the "intended audience and content" of this specific masthead, as Charles Moore has pointed out, "is associated with wealth and whiteness." He then adds acrylic and oil paint, sometimes deconstructing and reassembling strips of canvas as the image begins to take shape.

Born in Memphis to Ghanaian parents, Fordjour has often represented vignettes related to Black history, culture, and ritual; his subjects commonly include athletes, marching bands, and drum majors but also more recently, the rites of passage within grief and mourning. Fascinated by the subjects of crowds and spectatorship, he explores both the commodification of Black physicality and the hierarchies that are revealed by group dynamics.

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