

Independent: Jameson Green Interview with Derek Fordjour

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Jameson Green, Head hanging from tree, 2011

Interview with Derek Fordjour

Derek Fordjour: One of the things I find intriguing about your paintings is your use of absurdity and violence in otherwise innocuous situations. How do you reconcile the relationship between the sublime and the grotesque?

Jameson Green: The sublime and the grotesque exist in tandem in my mind. I think of this quote from Nietzsche quite a bit: "I am a forest, and a night of dark trees: but he who is not afraid of my darkness, will find banks full of roses under my cypresses."

There is grandeur and beauty in tragedy. Imagine you are walking along a field, a beautiful green pasture as far as your eye can see. As you walk along this pasture, you see a severed head resting perfectly in the golden sun. What's interesting here is the context of this situation: if this were an animal's head, we would see it as natural — unfortunate for the poor creature, but natural nonetheless. We would assume it was prey for another animal, and this was simply its fate. A discovery such as this would not prevent most of us from moving on and continuing to take in the beauty of this gorgeous scene. However, if it were to be a human head we came upon, a sense of horror would strike us immediately. Countless questions would rush our thoughts; we would become repulsed by the sight of it. There are rules for us! That violence is unimaginable! Who (not what) could have done this?

The sun-drenched pasture light changes; context alters this reality. I ask why? Aside from the obvious relatability of this poor soul, why must we assume we behave any differently than the savagery of nature? This separation we have from our selves and nature is fascinating to me. We distance ourselves from the ugliness inside of us and in the world. It will ruin this beautiful life we have so we tell ourselves we are all good people and I say No. We are ugly monsters, capable of doing more damage to one another than good. We lie, we cheat, we steal, and we kill. Like every other living thing in this world, death threatens us. It's the ugliness that makes us acknowledge the beauty and the precious things in our lives. You have to lose something to really know its value. I find the absurdity of that to be the most beautiful thing about life.

DF: In looking at your work I feel the legacy of painters as far reaching as William H. Johnson to Philip Guston. Describe your relationship to the art historical canon and which of these influences were most impactful on your development.

JG: Art History, particularly figurative art history, makes my heart race. I get so immersed in these artists' stories that I've created a dialog with many of them in my imagination. I feel a strong sense of responsibility to the craft and to the history. It's not just me in my studio when I'm working. It's all there in me: the history of painting, American history, my history. The past informs the present, and within its existence, my future is born. I am a part of painting's future, and ultimately, a part of America's future.

It's not hard to tell I come from the school of Picasso. From him, I have learned a great deal about technical discipline and flexibility as well as the ability to delve deep into another artist's visual language and take from it what I need. Before Picasso, I grew up loving many of the illustrators of the 19th century, like Norman Rockwell, Maxfield Parrish, and my favorite J.C. Leyendecker. Some of my family members had copies of cheaply framed African American folk art in their homes, and through that, I was exposed to the work of Charles White, and Jacob Lawrence. These two influences were always in the back of my mind as I was growing up, although at the time I didn't know it. I was a big comic geek, and my mother kept an old collection of cartoons from the 1940's on VHS. I watched these more times than I can count. I would stay late at the library during the summer, reading through available comic books, and all the while drawing and creating my own stories.

I actually wasn't exposed to the traditional western Art History canon until High school. There, a friend gave me a large book on Picasso which changed my life. I discovered a whole world of artists, and from there the flood gates were open! The simple power of Picasso, the magic of line in Schiele, the sheer gravity of Philip Guston's psychological and metaphorical compositions. The whimsical manipulation of paint in Dana Schutz, the captivating drama of Rubens' flesh! The reality of Caravaggio, the acute and other worldly awareness of space in Andrew Wyeth, the sophistication of line traversing the landscape of human form in Klimt, the grandeur and awe of Michelangelo, the curious soul of Bill Traylor! The tragic power of Goya, the undeniable spirit and sharpness of Jacob Lawrence, the captivating pain in Kara Walker, and certainly not last or least, the absolutely remarkable sensitivity of life itself in Van Gogh! I could go on and on, but these names only scratch the surface. During the many stages of my artistic life, every one of these artists has taken some hold over my process.

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DF: What attracts me to your paintings is how distinct your voice is and that there appears to be something urgent in your compulsion to paint. What is at stake for you and why do you make the works that you do?

JG: Central to my life philosophy is live life to the fullest by giving the world the best you that you can. For many kids who grew up in the same type of environment as me, death and loss were very present. Until recently, I never thought of my life past 30, and that pressured me to maximize whatever I did. I was blessed to have learned early that my voice could be powerful when I painted or drew people closely observed.

I've seen a lot, which is not to say that I know a lot. In fact, it's quite the opposite: I don't know enough and this is why I paint. The pain in my life has spawned an obsession with finding the reason. My paintings start with a question, and through the process I search for answers. I can't say I ever find them. It's all really odd. I have this insatiable thirst for finding The Answer, but I don't know if I ever will. All I do know, is that it needs to be sought after and I possess a very good tool for doing just that.



Jameson Green, *Boyhood Summer of '96, 2021*