

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Denzil Forrester

A Survey

25 April–25 May 2019

Private View

Wednesday 24 April, 6–8 pm



Stephen Friedman Gallery is pleased to announce a survey exhibition of large-scale paintings from the past 40 years by Grenada born, British artist Denzil Forrester. Forrester's first exhibition with the gallery includes new and historical work and is accompanied by a substantial new publication featuring essays by Sam Thorne (Director of Nottingham Contemporary and Contributing Editor of Frieze) and Eddie Chambers (Curator and Professor of Art History at the University of Texas, Austin). The exhibition precedes the unveiling of a large-scale public artwork commissioned by TFL for Brixton Underground Station, London, in September 2019. Forrester will have a major solo exhibition of new works at Nottingham Contemporary, Nottingham opening in January 2020.

Forrester's vibrant, colourful works immortalise the dynamic energy of the London reggae and dub nightclub scene during the early 1980s, a subject that has endured throughout four decades of the artist's practice. Pulsating with rhythm, the artist's expressive depictions of dance halls and clubs capture crowds of people moving in unison with the beat of the music and encircled by totemic sound systems. Flashes of vivid colour, gestural brushstrokes and frenetic compositions characterise his work.

Discussing the influence of this era on his practice, Forrester explains: "In 1980, I started going to all-night 'blues' clubs. The music playing in these clubs was reggae which generated particular dance movements and specialised clothing, all of which play an important part in my painting. In these clubs, city life is recreated in essence: sounds, lights, police sirens, bodies pushing and swaying back and forth. It's a continuation of city life with some spiritual fulfilment. The idea of finding tranquil moments among a complex and cluttered environment is the basic structure for my paintings. The figures and images in my work are crowded together, whereas the spaces in-between echo the music of the 'blues' clubs, but are also reminiscent of the light that breaks through a forest, or the light that reflects from a nightclub's mirrored ball."

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Gallery Hours

Tuesday to Friday, 10am–6pm
and Saturday, 11am–5pm

Social Media

Facebook: /Stephen-Friedman-Gallery

Instagram: @stephenfriedmangallery

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Forrester's works began in the nightclubs, taking his sketchbook with him and drawing in situ before developing the larger, painterly compositions in the studio. Each drawing would be dictated by the length of the record, roughly four minutes long, before moving on to the next sketch in sync with the changing soundtrack. The dynamic sets of legendary dub DJ Jah Shaka and his roving sound system had a formative influence on the development of Forrester's work at this time. The artist regularly homed in on the eye-catching dancers, capturing their vibrantly patterned costumes and expressive dance moves. Forrester still uses drawings from this period to form the basis of his paintings today.

Away from the dance halls of East London, Forrester's works are also significant in their rich documentation of black British culture and the West Indian community during the 1980s, often through the lens of his own biographical experiences. Whilst some works depict the artist as a child living in Grenada, others record Forrester and his family sewing bags to make a living when they first moved to Stoke Newington over 40 years ago. In contrast to the joy of his nocturnal revellers, Forrester's voyeuristic paintings also subliminally reveal the racial and social injustice experienced in '80s London; policemen frequently loom in the background of his works, whilst others capture the events surrounding the untimely death of his friend Winston Rose.

Forrester's treatment of colour is notably intense and the artist himself has talked of his early obsession with master colourists such as Monet and Cézanne: "...in 1979 I was in love with Monet. I did my degree at Central Art School and we'd literally go to Paris three or four times a year – you'd go see the Monets and come back to your studio. Him and Cézanne made a big impression on me. When I started, I was quite cubistic, but the cubists got their stuff from Africa anyway." Forrester's debt to early cubism is also revealed in his treatment of space, often toying with perspectival depth to generate movement in his work.

In addition to highlighting the cornerstones of his 40-year practice, the exhibition will serve to reassess the critical significance of Forrester's work by underscoring his unique contribution to the history of British art.

Born in Grenada in 1956, Denzil Forrester moved to London in 1967. He now lives and works in Cornwall. Forrester received a BA in Fine Art from the Central School of Art, London, in 1979 and an MA in Fine Art from the Royal College of Art, London, in 1983.

His works can be found in the collections of Tate, London; Arts Council Collection, UK; and Harris Museum & Art Gallery, Preston, amongst many others. His work has been exhibited internationally at venues including The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; Tate Britain, London; Ashmolean Museum, Oxford; Whitechapel Gallery, London; Royal Academy of Arts, London; and Gallery of Modern Art, Glasgow. His work has recently been the focus of three solo shows curated by Peter Doig and Matthew Higgs at White Columns, New York (2016); Tramps, London (2016); and Jackson Foundation, St Just (2018). He will be included in the forthcoming group exhibition 'Get Up Stand Up Now – Generations of Black Creative Pioneers' at Somerset House, London, in June 2019. He was awarded a scholarship by the British School at Rome in 1983–85 and a Harkness Fellowship in New York in 1986–88.