

Teacher/Group Leader Notes

Denzil Forrester: Itchin & Scratchin

Diane Simpson: Sculpture, Drawing, Prints 1976-2014

Sung Tieu: In Cold Print

8 February – 3 May 2020

This Spring Nottingham Contemporary presents three solo exhibitions. Denzil Forrester's large-scale paintings depict the energy of London's nightclubs in the 80s and present-day Jamaica. Diane Simpson's sculptures are inspired by the history of clothing and architecture. Sung Tieu's installation explores sound weapons and belief systems. All the artists explore repetition and the re-working of ideas and process.

They are very different artists with different interests and practices which could be used to kickstart conversations about art, the role of an artist and what artists choose to make their art about. It gives visitors of all ages the chance to compare diverse approaches and to articulate ideas and preferences and make connections.

Our exhibitions can be used to spark imaginations and debates, build confidences and support core skills for learning. These exhibitions can connect to the following subject areas: Art, Design, Technology, Fashion, Music, History, Maths, Literacy, Politics, Sociology, PHSE and English Language learning.

Gallery 1

Diane Simpson: Sculpture, Drawing, Prints 1976-2014



Diane Simpson, Samurai 10, 1983, Courtesy the artist. Photo by Tom Van Eynde.

Diane Simpson was born in Chicago, USA in 1935. For the past forty or more years she has created sculptures and preparatory drawings that evolve and develop from a varied range of subjects, including clothing, ordinary household objects and architecture. Her wide selection of materials (wood, metals, linoleum, fabrics) reflect her interest in how the industrial and domestic worlds exist side by side.

Beautifully handmade, Simpson's sculptures are constructed from parts made from everyday materials that fit seamlessly together. There is a carefully considered balance in her sculpture. The minimal, flat shapes create a complex sense of 3D space and depth. They are slotted together, a bit like flat pack furniture; however, this doesn't mean they are quick to make. Diane's working process which she has stuck with throughout her career is very skilled, exact and time-consuming.

Clothing and architecture plays important roles in Diane's work. Through her exploration shape in her sculptures, she reveals their connections to the design of various cultures and periods in history. Detail in the sculpture comes from the contrasting textures of the materials, sometimes highlighted by being shaded with wax crayons. The titles of the sculpture give us clues as to where her shapes come from e.g. 'Samurai', 'Sleeve sling', 'Apron', 'Neckline', 'Peplum'. She tends to make work in series, producing several works on the same theme.

Diane makes drawings with a pencil and ruler on graph paper of shapes she has selected from historical clothing and design. She flattens and rotates the shapes by 45-degrees, using techniques borrowed from architecture and engineering. Simpson translates these drawings or 'blueprints' (term for technical drawings) into three-dimensional sculptures that replicate the 45-degree angle perspective so that the shapes become distorted and abstracted.

In the exhibition Diane's preparatory drawings on graph paper are exhibited alongside her sculpture. As well as looking like technical drawings, they are reminiscent of the flattened perspective seen in Chinese and Japanese art and Persian miniatures.

Gallery 2

Sung Tieu: In Cold Print

Sung Tieu was born in Vietnam in 1987, grew up in Germany and is now living between Berlin and London. This is her first major solo exhibition in the UK.

'In Cold Print' is a newly commissioned immersive installation. The gallery is divided by a maze of steel fences and concrete pillars. It is filled with sound, images and text. Tieu is continuing her ongoing investigation into the use of sound as a weapon and its psychological effects. The installation is unsettling as it echoes the paranoia and underhand tactics of the Cold War between communist and capitalist countries.



Sung Tieu, installation view, 'Song for Unattended Items' Royal Academy of Arts. Photo Andy Keate.

Tieu's installation relates to the so-called "Havana Syndrome". In late 2016, US embassy staff in Cuba started to complain of bursts of unexplained sound that left them dizzy and gave them headaches. They thought the sounds might be coming from the water system. When medically examined they were found to have brain injuries resembling concussions. They believed these to be caused by a secret sound weapon being played to them as they lived and worked.

The US government considered this to be a political attack. The Cuban government denies the accusation. Some scientists question whether such a weapon could exist and have tried

to prove such an attack is not possible. One theory is it was the sound of the mosquito invasion which caused the Sika virus outbreak at the same time.

For 'In Cold Print', the artist reconstructed the alleged sound attack. She spent four hours in an MRI scanner having her brain activity recorded as she was exposed to it. Images of brain scans taken both when Tieu was listening to the sound and when she wasn't are engraved onto mirrors displayed in the installation. It's hard to tell the difference between the images; Tieu is questioning how reliable gathering proof can be.

Tieu made the soundscape we hear in the exhibition with a composer and a neuroscientist and psychologist. It includes electronic impulses, insect-like sounds, coded messages and a recording of Nottingham Contemporary's own water pump. The speakers playing the soundscape are hidden in laundry bags which also contain military clothing made in textiles from Vietnam.

Six newspaper spreads written by Tieu in the style of a journalist are shown on large screens. Reading them influences how visitors experience the sound. For the first few weeks of the exhibition, the 'articles' argue for the existence of the sound weapon. For the following weeks they change to argue against its existence. This shifting experience can be used to explore questions around 'fake news' and the process of determining fact from fiction, evidence and opinion.

Gallery 3 & 4

Denzil Forrester: Itchin & Scratchin

Denzil Forrester was born in Grenada in the Caribbean in 1956. He moved to London when he was 10 and was one of only a few Black artists who studied at the Royal College of Art in the early 1980s. He has spent most of his adult life in London, moving to Cornwall in 2016. London's urban life is his main source of inspiration, especially the clubs playing reggae music from the West Indies. He has remained artistically separate from the British Black art movement of the 80s and 90s, preferring to not engage with the artworld or to be defined by others.

The exhibition shows large-scale vivid, colourful paintings that capture the dynamic energy of the London reggae and dub nightclub scene during the 1980s and 90s, a subject that Denzil has continued to work with for 40 years. His paintings rework the same themes and compositions again and again, echoing the reverberations and rhythmic repetition in dub reggae.



Denzil Forrester, 'Dub Dance', 1993. Copyright Denzil Forrester. Courtesy the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London

“When you’re young, you have a lot of creative, expressive energy, and a lot of West Indian families, they were very strict and embarrassed! So those nightclubs were a sanctuary, a place where people could express themselves. They could open up, and that energy came through me, into the painting. I wasn’t just there as an onlooker. I was part of it.”

His paintings typically begin as quick sketches on A1 paper, drawn in the darkness of the busy dancefloors.

“I’d try and draw to the length of a record, so three to four minutes. I’d use the energy of the crowd, the movement, the action, the expression... By the end of the night I’d have about 40 pieces, and maybe 20 would work.”



Denzil Forrester, 'Brixton Blue', 2018. Copyright Denzil Forrester. Courtesy the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London.

Some of Denzil’s paintings show the uneasy and often explosive relationships the police had with young Black men. A close friend of Denzil’s died in police custody and it led him to paint what he calls his police paintings.

“I painted them like I drew the nightclub scenes, with speed and gesture. It was so horrific I didn’t want to think about it, I just needed to express it”.

Having visited Kingston Jamaica for the first time in 2019, Denzil is also showcasing new work that captures the vibrant atmosphere of the city’s sound systems. Six new paintings are exhibited alongside original, preparatory drawings that Forrester made whilst immersed in Jamaica’s nightlife.

‘Itchin & Scratchin’ shows the breadth of the artist’s practice, his use of recurring images and continued commitment to exploring the energy of London’s music scene of the children of the Windrush generation.

“You have to paint something that means something to you. You might have the knowledge, the skill and the craft, but if it doesn’t mean anything to you, painting loses its totality. That’s how interesting artworks come about, from something that’s deep within you”.