



DENZIL FORRESTER

ITCHIN & SCRATCHIN

8 Feb – 3 May 2020

Spanning more than 40 years, *Itchin & Scratchin* is Denzil Forrester's most significant institutional show to date, bringing together a selection of paintings and recent drawings by the Grenada-born British artist. Pulsing with music and motion, these scenes are by turns intimate and ecstatic, singular records of the Afro-Caribbean experience in Britain.

From the late 1970s, Forrester was a regular at East London's dub-reggae clubs. There he began to make drawings of MCs and dancers, strobes and sound-systems. On dark dancefloors, Forrester sketched quickly, in the time it took the DJ to play a single track. Later transformed into large-scale paintings, these nocturnal works capture rhythm, movement and energy.

In the late 1960s, around the time Forrester moved from Grenada to London, dub music was being developed in Kingston, Jamaica. It involved creating remixed instrumental versions of vocal tracks, and manipulating them, using echo, reverb and delay. These effects are central to Forrester's paintings, many of which are titled for dub records.

Now based in Cornwall, Forrester visited Jamaica for the first time last year, and here we present a new body of work shaped by Kingston's sound-systems and open-air parties. Across four decades, Forrester's work constitutes a remarkable kind of public address, a way of seeing sound.

The Cave, 1978

"I began to take my sketchbook, A1 paper and drawing equipment and draw. It was dark and smoky. I didn't care what the people looked like – I just wanted to draw movement, action and expression. I was interested in the feeling and energy of the crowd. Particular dance movements and clothing play an important part in my gesture drawings."

– Denzil Forrester

Night Strobe, 1985

After Forrester graduated from the Royal College of Art in 1983, he did a two-year scholarship in Rome. He took with him an unfinished painting, which he later developed into *Night Strobe*. This had grown out of drawings made in a club called All Nations in Hackney. In London, the work had felt lifeless – but seen afresh in the clear Italian light, Forrester noticed how different it felt: "the colours were just singing like mad". Its motif – of dancers and disco ball – is echoed in a later work, the companion piece *Dub Strobe 1* (1990), also presented here.

Dub Strobe 1, 1990

"Dub is a noise that doesn't scream but always pumps out a continuous beat until you can feel it shaking your body. In these clubs, city life is recreated in essence – sound, lights, police sirens, bodies ramming, rushing, swaying, pushing back and forward, and all in a smoke-filled room."

– Denzil Forrester

All Hands on Deck, 2003

"As a young child in Grenada, in the West Indies, carnival was an essential part of everyone's life, so it was a great influence on my painting. The memories of crowds, noise and movement have remained vivid in my mind and therefore my work."

– Denzil Forrester

Stitch Up, 2017

As a boy in the late 1960s, having just arrived in London from Grenada, Forrester had to wait six months before he could start school. During that time, and for a while after, he helped his mother sew bags in the basement of their north London home. Works like *Stitch Up* are domestic scenes – sewing machines, sofa, cushions and speaker-systems – recalling how Forrester and his mother would listen to reggae records while they sewed.

Brixton Blue, 2018

While attending the Royal College of Art in London, Forrester made a number of formative works, chief amongst them *Three Wicked Men* (1982). This diptych was inspired by the death of his childhood friend Winston Rose, who died under police restraint in 1981. Its title was borrowed from a track by Reggae George, about a policeman, a politician and a businessman. Over the years, Forrester has returned to the theme a number of times. This work was commissioned by Art on the Underground, and until September a vinyl mural version is installed at Brixton Underground station.

Itchin & Scratchin, 2019

This exhibition borrows its title from this painting, which was made following Forrester's trip to Kingston, Jamaica, last year. Depicting a crowd and monumental sound-system viewed from above, it returns to a motif that he has been exploring since his very earliest works. Forrester's time in Kingston is recorded in Julian Henriques' documentary *Denzil's Dance* (2019), which will be screened at Nottingham Contemporary on Thu 27 Feb, 6.30-8.30pm (booking recommended).

Midnight Rose, 2019

"Because of the deep hypnotic ancestral beat, dub music makes one feel purified, strong, and free of the complicated network we live in. The idea of finding tranquil moments within a complex, cluttered environment is used as a basic structure for my painting."

– Denzil Forrester

Works on paper, 2019

In the 1980s, Forrester began to teach at Morley College in south London, a position he held for the next 30 years. As a teacher, he returned often to *The Natural Way to Draw* (1941), a book by Kimon Nicolaides, which he had discovered in New York. It confirmed for Forrester that he should draw not what he saw, but what figures were doing. Motion, gesture, energy – these were to be Forrester's guiding principles. All of the drawings presented here were made in 2019, during and after Forrester's trip to Kingston, Jamaica.

Related Events

We offer free events related to our exhibitions and research strands. For more events, visit nottinghamcontemporary.org

Artist Talk

Thu 27 Feb, 6.30-8.30pm

Join an evening tracing 40 years of Denzil Forrester's work as a painter, as well as educator and curator, with the artist, Nottingham Contemporary's director Sam Thorne, and writer and director Julian Henriques, including a screening of the new documentary *Denzil's Dance* (2019).

Free. Booking is recommended.

Exhibition Walkthrough

Wed 1 Apr, 2pm

Sam Thorne, Director at Nottingham Contemporary, shares insights into Denzil Forrester's life and work as a painter, as well as educator and curator. The exhibition of large-scale paintings spans the dimly-lit nightclubs of 1980s East London to the present-day open-air clubs of Jamaica.

Free. No need to book – just drop in.

Histories of Listening

Sat 28 Mar, 12–8.30pm

Sun 29 Mar, 11am–5pm

Through talks, poetry and listening sessions, this two-day programme explores global histories of labour and rhythm as a social language. Artists and speakers include: Space Afrika, Manuel Ángel Macía, Diana McCarty, Jota Mombaça, Diana Policarpo, Tabita Rezaire, Salomé Voegelin, and more.

Part of the *Sonic Continuum* series.

Free. Booking is recommended.

Exhibition curated by Sam Thorne with Olivia Aherne
Public Programme by Sofia Lemos with Ryan Kearney