



Denzil Forrester: Some Considerations

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Although Denzil Forrester became visible as a practising artist in the early 1980s, having graduated from the Royal College of Art painting department in 1983, his highly distinctive artwork has rarely been closely associated with a number of Black artists who similarly emerged into visibility during the same period of time. In mentioning this, I seek to reference the fortuitousness of whatever factors inform his general, frequently uninterrupted disassociation from other bodies of Black British artists. Because while a number of Black artists who emerged in the early 1980s seems destined to be forevermore associated with, or barricaded within, one particular moment in time – with all the problematic curatorial and art historical consequences that flow from that – over the course of three and a half decades Forrester has been able to maintain and develop his practice, leading to a wonderful and clearly discernible flourishing of his abilities as a painter, without being hemmed in by the art world's oftentimes clumsy considerations of *race*.

It is perhaps the pronounced ways in which Forrester has stayed true to the act of painting that has led to him producing some of the most arresting, ambitious and distinctive painting by an artist of his generation. Historically, Forrester has taken as his subject the twin themes of reggae/dub dance hall and the music, sights, sounds, and movement of carnival. At times, his work has touched on other themes, such as the death in police custody of Winston Rose, an acquaintance of Forrester when both were young men. His canvasses – on occasion large, oversize affairs – range from dark, brooding and sometimes menacing works, through to bright, liberated paintings resonating with vibrant colours. Sometimes, the scenes he depicts are located in dark, almost tomb-like or nocturnal environments. On other occasions Forrester takes the focus of his attention to the streets, allowing the sun and copious amounts of light into his paintings, much like carnival itself. In the words of art critic John Russell Taylor: 'The something that Forrester's paintings are about is distinctive and unmistakable. From the time when he first encountered the clubs, their dancing and their dub music, they have provided the basic scene for his large paintings.'¹

Forrester is one of a number of Caribbean-born artists – including the likes of Tam Joseph, Eugene Palmer and Veronica Ryan – who established distinctive, substantial artistic practices in Britain. While there are copious amounts that differentiate such artists from each other, there is perhaps a degree of commonality in the extent to which they, and a great many other migrants from the same region, in making the Atlantic crossing, had to come to terms with moving from less populated rural spaces – in which large numbers of people looked like them – to more densely populated urban spaces, in which they became part of what was regarded as a 'minority' presence. This much was articulated by Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi:

The writer Adeola Solanke suggests that, '[Forrester] had to adjust to the notion of a world with people who weren't Black and to a world of concrete rather than forest' (Solanke, 1986, p. 10). Forrester also contended with the movement from a small island country with a Black

majority to a bigger geographic space where Black people were in the minority. Forrester's condition of displacement is part of the immigrant experience shared by Palmer and Joseph, and the first-generation [migrant] artists. In fact, it becomes an important context from which [these] artists explore the intersection of their individual experiences and the collective Black British experience.²

Matters relating to migration and cultural identity are of course fiendishly complex and ultimately differ in varying measure from one individual to another. There are though, within Forrester's paintings, clearly discernible reflections of the consequences and effects of his transition from boyhood in Grenada to young adulthood in London. Migrants, both children and as adults, had to fashion lives for themselves that were overwhelmingly characterised by the built, urban environment, the *concrete jungle*, to use Bob Marley's memorable term, when they settled in Britain. Caribbean migrants tended to come from the countryside areas of their respective countries, yet upon arrival in Britain they became quite emphatically removed from, or disassociated from, the British countryside. In this regard, counties such as Devon and Cornwall were in effect off-limits to the vast majority of Britain's Black citizens.

While the parental generation of young immigrants in some respects never really stopped being Bajan, Grenadian, Guyanese, Jamaican, Trinidadian, and so on, it fell to their children – second-generation Caribbean youth – to fashion a slew of new identities, and it is among the spaces within which these new identities were formed that Forrester's practice has germinated and thrived. Chief among the new Caribbean-derived identities was a new Black [British] identity which existed in marked contrast to the *West Indian* designation of older Caribbean migrants and which pretty much rendered as irrelevant the delineation of identity along the lines of the specific and individual countries from which their parents came. As noted by Ernest Cashmore, in his study of Rastafari in Britain: 'Young West Indians saw themselves not as fractionated and culturally diverse but as one people, sharing similarities of backgrounds, of present circumstances and, more importantly, of future.'³ The major central factor and component in this new Black identity was music, specifically reggae. And it was the Jamaican-ness of reggae and its profound influence on Forrester's demographic that created so many of the cultural influences visible within Forrester's paintings.

With a pronounced Pan-Caribbeanness – which resisted distinction among young Black Britons on the basis of country of background – informing a new Black identity, and with reggae music as its central component, a new, Black British cultural identity among Forrester's demographic was in the making. Inevitably, distinct articulations of Jamaican elements dominated this youthful cultural expression, and by the late 1970s reggae music, and its dub variant, joined Jamaican speech patterns as the dominant signifiers of Black British countercultural expression. This in turn led to a sense of Blackness among Black British youth that was particularly strong, sophisticated, and fit for purpose, even as it contrasted with their parents' generation, who were said to lack 'a single cohesive culture which could bind them together'.⁴ In encountering Forrester's visual articulations of reggae and dub-related investigations, we see what were invaluable monuments to a seismic moment in British countercultural history at the time of their making. Of course, this value

remains in Forrester's paintings, indeed, with the ongoing evolution of Black Britain, his paintings from the mid-1980s become ever-more important articulations.

We might therefore conclude that perhaps one of the most important features of Forrester's work from the 1980s is the way in which, inadvertently perhaps, it has created a series of historical documents related to the making of Black Britain. The late 1970s and early 1980s saw the burgeoning of the British sound system: mobile, countercultural reggae enterprises characterised by dub music, MCs, DJs, and fiercely partisan followings of young Black people, primarily males. The clubs and other venues in which sound systems operated are graphically depicted in Forrester's paintings, and it was these spaces he haunted as an artist, seeking to capture the sights, sounds, personalities and carryings on of revellers and night owls. Some of that which Forrester observed was perhaps what we might expect – exuberant dancing, rhythmic movement – but in his sketches the artist also captured people playing dominoes, and in some instances, improbably perhaps, catching a nap (fig. 1). The fascinating bringing together of these and other elements is what gives a number of Forrester's paintings an almost otherworldly sensibility, resulting from the surreal interactions that human beings are capable of, in particular spaces and times.

Similarly, Forrester's paintings have captured, or pointed at, the tension and the menace of the intrusive and unwelcome policing of the blues club environment that was often an embodiment of how society viewed Black cultural expressions, particularly those influenced by Rastafarian and the attendant 'dread' lifestyle and practices. In his iconic painting *Domino Hunters* (1985), Forrester depicts a club scene, complete with prancing revellers and carousing youth. The painting's unsettling elements are discernible in the background of the painting, and take the form of two motionless police officers, silently and without apology conducting surveillance: the embodiment of menace, they seek to demonstrate a certain *territorial* control of a space which might otherwise be perceived as being off-limits to them. Those congregating in the social space are, or so it seems, somewhat indifferent to the police officers who have, momentarily at least, occupied the space.



Fig. 1 *Night Owls*, 1995

Upon graduating from the Royal College, Forrester benefited from a two-year Rome Scholarship, and then, from 1986 to 1988, a Harkness Fellowship, which took him to New York. These prestigious awards gave Forrester opportunities to develop his practice in environments rich with art history and an abundance of cultural signifiers that contrasted with those of Forrester's London, though he maintained his interest in, and attachment to, the themes that had become a settled dimension of his painting. It would be a grave error though to read Forrester's paintings – chronicling the tragedy of Winston Rose, or depicting the nocturnal carryings on of youthful reggae enthusiasts – as in any way literal, verbatim, or documentary. They are none of those things. But what they most assuredly are, are fascinating artistic investigations that utilise a broad range of visual and cultural elements, including those emanating from his own lifestyle of earlier times.

Publicity material relating to one of his exhibitions stated that 'Denzil has evolved a style which combines the expansive vivacity and glowing colour of his Caribbean roots with a highly effective translation of traditional and modernist European painting. The staccato fragmentation of forms, and dynamic jagged planes [...] suggest the influence of Italian Futurism, and of German Expressionist painters such as Beckmann.'⁵ While different writers, critics and art historians are able to identify or steer us towards various art historical influences in Forrester's paintings, it is perhaps Nzewi who has offered or cited a particularly intriguing influence. Alongside Italian futurism and German expressionism we can add, according to Nzewi, the clearly discernible influence of wider manifestations of expressionism, and in particular, the work of Wassily Kandinsky.

In *Carnival Dub* (1984) (fig. 2), Forrester explores the political values of the blues club and carnival culture as emblematic of Black British urban presence. The painting can also be viewed as a project of nostalgia in which Forrester recalls the colorful memories of the Caribbean carnivals of his childhood in Grenada. In the painting, Forrester emphasizes a colorful play with lines, forms, and rhythm in his attempt to find calm in the gaiety of the carnival and music of the blues club. [...] The staccato elements of abstraction visible in the work presuppose music and movement, and compare to the expressive abstract



Fig. 2 *Carnival Dub*, 1984

experiments in Wassily Kandinsky's *Composition Series* (fig. 3), produced between 1911 and 1913. Yet while Kandinsky concerned himself with the transcendence of representation, or what can be referred to as an urgency to recover the inner feelings of the human soul, Forrester weaves together elemental abstraction and figural demands of Black British aesthetics to address Black cultural experience in *Carnival Dub*.⁶

Earlier I referred to the fact that counties such as Devon and Cornwall were effectively off-limits to all but a seemingly intrepid minority of Black citizens. Black Britons, somewhat quarantined within sections of decidedly urban Britain, would continue to avoid taking holidays in beautiful rural parts of Britain – which in addition to Devon and Cornwall, included destinations such as the Scottish Borders or Highlands, the Peak District or the Lake District. An obvious concern was not wanting to encounter additional racism, or venture into spaces that represented a fear of being conspicuous, in ways over and above such challenges in the urban spaces they routinely occupied; a fear which was by no means irrational. In recent years, Forrester has relocated from London to Cornwall, thereby finding himself smack-dab in the middle of these important considerations. A recent feature on Forrester in *The Guardian* opened with the artist exclaiming 'When I tell people I've moved to Cornwall they say, "Why, there are no black people there!"'⁷

The Guardian piece appeared at the time of Forrester's exhibition *From Trench Town to Porthtowan* at the Jackson Foundation, St Just, Cornwall, in 2018. Coverage such as that particular interview chose not to frame Forrester as the latest in a long, fascinating and distinguished line of artists charmed by Cornwall's light, varying landscape, spectacular coastline and beaches and its relative isolation. At one point in time or another, acclaimed and eminent artists such as Ben Nicholson, Barbara Hepworth, Naum Gabo, Peter Lanyon, Roger Hilton, Patrick Heron, Terry Frost, and Bernard Leach all made homes and set up studios for themselves in Cornwall, and no early-to mid-twentieth century history of British art is complete without references to Cornwall and the St Ives School. In relocating to Cornwall Forrester is indeed in stellar and august company. He is, furthermore, a longstanding visitor of several decades' duration, having first visited the rugged



Fig. 3 Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944), *Watercolor No. 14*, 1913.

and dramatic landscape of this county at England's south-westerly tip while he was an art student. Testament to this can be found in Forrester's painting of the Cornish landscape, a depiction created on one of these early visits, and a painting that is, quite literally, worlds away from his subsequent investigations of Black youth congregating in blues dances, or the life-taking consequences that have occurred with horrific regularity, as a result of police mistreatment of Black people.

John Lyons has offered the view that 'Denzil's respect for tradition is a manifestation of the will to find an identity within two cultures, Afro-Caribbean and European, for both have played a vital role in his process of maturing as an artist.'⁸ This impulse of Forrester's towards synthesis was very much evident in the painting that lent the exhibition at the Jackson Foundation its title. Trench Town is the name by which one of Kingston, Jamaica's gritty, unvarnished and hardscrabble neighbourhoods was casually known. Made famous by the song by Bob Marley and the Wailers, *Trench Town Rock* (1971), Trench Town, 'Kingston 12' is sometimes given as the birthplace of rock-steady and reggae music, and was, as could be deduced from the paean *Trench Town Rock*, that part of the capital in which Marley's family made their home when he was a youngster. The song, with its infectious rhythm and full of Jamaican colloquialisms and proverbs, was Marley's personal dedication to stay true to his community and called on people 'whether big fish or sprat' to respect and nurture the much-maligned district, even as Marley sought to be ever more 'hit' and 'brutalised' by the music.

One good thing about music, when it hits you feel no pain
Hit me with music, hit me with music now
This is Trench Town rock
Don't watch that
Trench Town rock, big fish or sprat
Trench Town rock, you reap what you sow
Trench Town rock, and only Jah-Jah know
Trench Town rock, I'll never turn my back



Fig. 4 *From Trench Town to Porthtowan*, 2017

Trench Town rock, I'll give the slum a try
Trench Town rock, I'll never let the children cry
Trench Town rock, cause you got to tell Jah, Jah why...

Porthtowan, on the other hand, is a small Cornish village, with a spectacular beach, one of a great many in the county, and its name derives from the Cornish *Porth Tewyn*, the meaning of which is *cove of sand dunes*. Forrester's sophisticated and perceptive impulse towards synthesis, as reflected in *From Trench Town to Porthtowan* (2017) (fig. 4) is elaborated on in an answer he gave to Joshua Surtees, who wrote *The Guardian* feature and wondered why the show's title piece shows a Rastafarian being handcuffed on a beach. To which Forrester replied, 'I started painting Porthtowan beach and I said: "I'm going to draw black people on the beach." But it was too calm, it needed a punch, so I used one of my older paintings *Three Wicked Men* (1982, pp.130/131) [...] to give it a kick up the arse. It was like superimposing something from London on to a beach in Cornwall.'⁹

If we allow ourselves, we can appreciate Forrester's paintings for their multiple examples of cultural and visual synthesis, manifest at every turn. In keeping faith with the act and process of painting itself over the course of four decades, Forrester has generated a large body of work in which his love of painting is self-evident, as indeed are the copious ways in which multiplicities of meaning are a distinct presence in each of his works. As much as we can read his paintings as compelling investigations of form, movement, light and colour, we can also read his images for the variety of life-affirming and all too human stories they tell. We each have our own ways of appreciating Forrester's singular practice, but perhaps one of the dominant elements is his paintings is their interaction and dialogue with reggae music, particularly that which Black Britain took to its heart and wove into its culture during the years that marked Forrester's coming of age as a young man and as an artist.

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¹ John Russell Taylor, 'Denzil Forrester World Painter' in *Denzil Forrester: Two Decades of Painting*, catalogue, 4 Victoria Street, Bristol, 4 June – 6 July 2002.

² Ugochukwu-Smooth C. Nzewi, 'The Individual and Community: Aesthetics of Blackness in the works of three Black British Artists' in *Critical Interventions*, Vol.7, No. 2, 2013, p. 25. Nzewi's quote came from Adeola Solanke, 'Juggling Worlds' in *From Two Worlds*, catalogue, Whitechapel Art Gallery, 30 July – 7 September 1986.

³ Ernest Cashmore, 'Rasta Renaissance' in *Rastaman: The Rastafarian Movement* in England (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1979), p. 68.

⁴ Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (London: Hutchinson, 1987), p.161.

⁵ *Dub Transition, A Decade of Paintings 1980–1990*, catalogue, Harris Museum & Art Gallery, Preston, 22 September – 3 November 1990, touring.

⁶ Nzewi, op.cit., p. 28.

⁷ Joshua Surtees, 'When I tell people I've moved to Cornwall they say, "Why, there are no black people there!"', *The Observer*, 12 May 2018, available online at <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/may/12/denzil-forrester-retrospective-interview> (accessed 28 March 2019).

⁸ John Lyons, 'Denzil Forrester's Art in Context' in *Dub Transition, A Decade of Paintings 1980–1990*, catalogue, Harris Museum & Art Gallery, Preston, 22 September – 3 November 1990, touring, p. 20.

⁹ Surtees, op.cit.

