Joey Holder, *Semelparous*, 2020, still from the 7-minute, 47-second 4K video component of a mixed-media installation additionally comprising digital prints, wood, MDF, and paint.

and muscle mass and basically resemble mobile sacks of eggs. Eels are semelparous, meaning they reproduce only once during their lifetime, investing all their energy, body weight, and existential drive (so to speak) in that single journey.

Although European eels are critically endangered (their population is down by roughly 90 percent since the 1970s in great part due to illegal overfishing), Joey Holder's 2020 video installation *Semelparous*—housed in the empty swimming pool of an abandoned North London health club—shows huge quantities of the slimy, restless creatures. Whether filmed at a South Korean fish farm or rendered in naturalistic computer graphics, the eels push forward unstoppably, limbless and determined, proceeding rapidly in their distinctive slithering S-shaped motions. This pattern has been stylized by the artist in a drawn motif that was repeated in fence-like structures surrounding the screen and superimposed on the on-screen footage like a recurring—if unexplained—transparent blueprint.

The nearly eight-minute *Semelparous* opens with a digitally rendered close-up shot of the lunar surface, soon superimposed with a night-sky constellation map (on-screen text later informs viewers that eel migrations are synchronized with weather and planetary systems); vertical serpentine symbols resembling the medical profession's caduceus; moon phases; and more. A curling trail of smoke retraces the now-familiar S curve. Things quickly turn weirder, with a rapid-fire sequence that juxtaposes footage of eels with Google image-search pages featuring items ranging from Egyptian sun symbols to religious emblems and pentagrams, illustrations of lizard-faced shamans, Warhammer plastic figurines with hybrid bodies combining bat wings and Viking horns, Scandinavian drum markings, and a $300,000 blown-glass bong whose tangle of tubing faintly recalls the eels' smooth cylindrical bodies. Creepiest of all, a blinking, bedridden, female AI creature (possibly an ailing sex doll, given her blond-maned youthfulness and implausibly wide "blow-job mouth") is inexplicably recovering in a hospital bed. What follows again features predominantly aquatic motifs: a 3D computer rendering of gulper eels, monstrous deep-sea creatures also possessing rubbery visages and impossibly wide mouths and a pair of hyperactive octopuses attempting to escape a plastic crate, their ceaselessly wriggling tentacles recalling—you guessed it—crawling eels.

In previous projects, Holder (who studied biology and chemistry before earning her MFA from Goldsmiths, University of London) explored the unique yet thriving ecosystems of deep volcanic ocean trenches or drew connections between pharmaceutical companies and secret societies, both of which attempt to unlock the mysteries of the universe using rarefied knowledge. Her unusual editing style favors morphing and overlapping imagery that suddenly vanishes into an all-black screen, then recommences as if beginning a new life cycle. A deliriously pounding soundtrack (remixed from a track by Indonesian hardcore duo Gabber Modus Operandi) combines a primal heartbeat with witchy chanting and a dramatic cinematic score suggesting some epic climax.

Holder is talented at making so many contradictions successfully coexist, as demonstrated by her setting a video teeming with slippery life in a dark, empty, now-dry spa. Everything here is in flux, not unlike the Sargasso Sea, itself just a shifting patch of Atlantic Ocean defined only by moving currents. Holder's worldview equates multiple hidden corners of earthly life, from the eels' migrating, shape-shifting bodies to bioluminescent ocean-bottom beasts, from hospitalized robots to wealthy potheads selecting from a thriving subspecies of multicolored, gold-encrusted "super expensive bongs" online. Every niche is equal in the desperate endeavor to cope and mutate, to adapt to wherever the hell the earth is headed next. Holder's survivalist, high-tech vision is as valid as any, and more compelling than most.

—*Gilda Williams*

NOTTINGHAM, UK

Denzil Forrester

NOTTINGHAM CONTEMPORARY

Denzil Forrester's recent rise as a significant force in painting has been as unexpected as it is apposite. Following shows in 2016 at New York's White Columns and London's Tramps, and in 2019 at London's Stephen Friedman Gallery, his recent most exhibition, "Itchin & Scratchin," was an attempt to represent his forty-year career.

Forrester arrived in the UK from Grenada in 1967, when he was eleven. In the London of the 1980s, his early works didn't simply reflect black communities' countercultural expression through music and the reggae, dub, and dancehall clubs where it thrived and where he was a persistent presence with his sketch pad; his paintings actively helped shape these scenes by establishing their visual identity. At Nottingham Contemporary, the first room was divided by a short, standard white partition wall such as one might see at an art show in a municipal library, seeming to strike a radical everydayness in contrast to the kind of elaborate display structures one might expect to see in one of Britain's leading midsize art institutions. The earliest of the works installed here, *The Cave*, 1978, represents a formative attempt at a geometrically angular yet harmonious depiction of a gathering of people. As a rudimentary representation of a club rendered in dark, muted tones brightened only by the occasional red or green hat worn by some of the dancers, it contrasted with the works from the 1990s and 2000s that shared the space with it—bright rural landscapes recalling Forrester's island childhood; the juxtaposition is illustrative of the artist's early transition from the tropical Caribbean to the gray, wet UK.

Brixton Blue, 2018, and *Stitch Up*, 2017, also reveal the interweaving of

Denzil Forrester, *Itchin & Scratchin*, 2019, oil on canvas, 107⅞ × 81⅛".

Forrester's personal and cultural dualities. The first shows two policemen standing like marionettes in profile, grappling with a black figure—recalling earlier works in which Forrester evoked the death in police custody of his friend Winston Rose—while the latter conjures the artist's family home in London in the late '60s, when his mother put him to work sewing garments as he listened to reggae. Presumably imaginary speaker stacks show that, in the young man's mind, he was not at home but out in the club.

The second gallery held larger, slightly more simplified works, all made in the past three years. Of these, the monumentally complex *Night Strobe*, 1985, and *Itchin & Scratchin*, 2019, combined with *Dub Strobe 1*, 1990, in the first room next door to present different versions of dazzling club interiors over time. Shown from the same overhead perspective, the attendees seem to dance in a state of slow, synchronized reverie, rising as if resurrected. Striated lines emanating from mirror balls suggest the intimate and volatile character of the dancers' euphoria while recalibrating the viewer's visual experience.

Forrester's pictorial language can be described as a kind of sonic dub cubism. Just as John Coltrane's version of the Rodgers and Hammerstein chestnut "My Favorite Things," released in 1961, reordered a sonic artifact of the era's middlebrow white culture by translating it into a different temporal structure—scrambling, slowing down, speeding up, and stretching out the song, reinventing the rhythm and harmony's molecular structure—Forrester opens up European painting by literally spacing the composition out. Influenced by his long-term subject Jah Shaka, who has run a roots-reggae Jamaican sound system in the British capital since the '70s, Forrester uses his own idiom of pictorial echo, reverb, and delay, through a deep gestural rhythm that emanates and shudders through the body. His citations of Max Beckmann, Jörg Immendorff, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, and Stanley Spencer embody a simultaneous homage to and liberation from tradition.

—*Andrew Hunt*

DUBLIN

Mairead O'hEocha

TEMPLE BAR GALLERY + STUDIOS

Mairead O'hEocha's most recent paintings are strangely vibrant studies of dead creatures—brightly hued depictions of taxidermied beasts and birds at once gorgeous and ghoulish. Her subjects are the stuffed, posed, and lifeless occupants of antique display cabinets in Dublin's natural-history museum, a Victorian-era institution that is itself, in its impeccably preserved, nineteenth-century style, frozen in time: a museum of a museum. Dubliners call it, with morbid affection, the Dead Zoo.

Such a setting—a place where natural forms are arrested and arrayed, fixed and framed for leisurely contemplation—is an apt inspiration for the orderly intricacies and time-stopping tendencies of O'hEocha's art. Over the past decade and a half she has finessed a wide-ranging aesthetic of complex, bittersweet stillness. Her breakthrough work, from around 2007, introduced her as an amiably wistful wayfarer, a painter of miscellaneous, more or less mundane places: garden centers and suburban bungalows, public squares and gas stations. These images are of hushed, unpeopled scenes: small, subdued oil-on-board pictures suggestive of sudden quotidian reverie, moments of estranging dispassionate quietude on uneventful days. O'hEocha's muted, delicate realism begins in the limited light—the overlapping grays and fleeting sunburst glows—of Irish weather. But her paintings have, over time, confected a more exquisite luminosity. However downbeat the scene, urban, rural, and coastal landscapes have become to varying degrees crystalline and kaleidoscopic, composed of squares, strips, and shards of beautifully unbelievable, out-of-the-ordinary tones: soft-pink and baby-blue pastels, strong citrusy highlights of orange, peach, lemon, lime.

Mairead O'hEocha, *Two Owls*, 2020, oil on board, 24¾ × 33⅛".

Though O'hEocha's more recent paintings have retreated from the exotic, varicolored splendor of this transformed outdoor world, they have found similar tonal blooming and formal growth in alternative, indoor subjects. An extraordinary experiment in the minor genre of floral still life—in paintings made between 2015 and 2017—intensified the developing dialectical imperatives of O'hEocha's art: coolheaded painterly calculation set against visual and sensory excess, multidirectional light and abundant color in contest with background darkness and inevitable decline. Death haunts these radiant pictures just as it also bedevils the refined representations of natural diversity in O'hEocha's "Dead Zoo" paintings, gathered in the exhibition "Tale Ends & Eternal Wakes" during this year's long, sad, baleful spring. The show included six paintings—three small (on board) and three large (on canvas)—each eliciting equal degrees delight and dread. In addition, O'hEocha chose, for the first time, to show a group of ink-on-paper drawings: fifteen sketched encounters with the museum's displays, hung salon style across one full gallery wall.

Often, O'hEocha's paintings flaunt self-conscious charm, but their attractions are assertive and unsettling, too. The mauve, pearly purple and pale-lemon plumage of the paired birds in *Two Owls* (all works cited, 2020), for instance, is rendered with resplendent subtlety—in fascinated tribute, perhaps, to the former living dynamism of these now-static predators. But O'hEocha leaves deep, wide hollows where the owls' eyes should be, imagining the animals as figures of zombified horror. She also underscores the specific context of permanent museum display: The owls rest on pink perches; two bats pose on glass shelves; an orangutan stares out from the dark confines of a display case. Within these unchanging microenvironments, the animals seem, in their preserved state, both precious and pitiable. Likewise, *Mountain Goat, Natural History Museum, Dublin* is a melancholy marvel of curious, motley coloring, its fleece glowing—pink, blue, green, a little golden—against the shadowy background of a cabinet interior. *Two Kingfishers* is on the surface sweet and consoling, conjuring a bright, appealing image of natural companionship. And yet this avian couple is forever locked within a tiny fragment of artificial nature. Enclosed in a compact container, the birds coexist bloodlessly within a constructed world. For O'hEocha, perhaps, this restricted existential predicament is not so different from our own. Look at the colored light inside the display case: Isn't it the same as the light beyond?

—*Declan Long*