

# Foreword

I first saw Denzil's paintings at his Royal College of Art degree show in 1983. It was thrilling and unusual to see depictions of East London's blues and dub clubs painted in such a dynamic way. I was humbled and in awe of the ambition and realness of these vital, imposing works.

It was an exciting time for painting and to be a painting student – London had hosted important exhibitions of Max Beckmann and Phillip Guston, and the huge survey show at the Royal Academy in 1981, 'A New Spirit in Painting', introduced us to a new wave of German and American artists working mostly in a figurative, expressionist tradition. However, Denzil's work stood out because it portrayed a world that was scarcely pictured in the fine arts; one that was known to me through music, and one that captured the impact that artists and dub poets such as Linton Kwesi Johnson were having at the time.

Denzil's paintings depicting the brutal murder of his family friend Winston Rose at the hands of the police were as powerful and poignant as any contemporary song or ballad being composed about these sadly frequent occurrences. But Denzil's work felt as much connected to the world of painting and painters as it did to that of music: Edward Burra, Jörg Immendorff, Jah Shaka, Dennis Bovell and Price Jazzbo, to name just a few.

Denzil's work in the 1980s was well known within a certain alternative scene, but this scene was not afforded much exposure in the commercial gallery or museum world – with a few exceptions, like the Whitechapel Gallery's 1986 show 'From Two Worlds'. The powers that ran the visual art sector were way behind those involved in music and literature in terms of understanding what was vital and important in Black culture.

In the early 2000s, the art historian Anne Walmsley was visiting Trinidad and she gave me a postcard with an image of *Deado 2* (1982, p. 127) from Denzil's series about Winston Rose. Its powerful, overhead view of a police van with its roof removed to reveal police boots on a manacled man's back reminded me of seeing Denzil's work at the RCA in 1983. I wondered what he had been painting in the years in between and I tried to make contact. We finally met in 2015 in Dalston, not too far from the clubs he had drawn in over thirty years ago: Phebes, All Nations and Four Aces.

Seeing Denzil's work again and learning more about how it was made and what inspired him convinced me that a new generation of artists would be as excited to see it as I was. I believe Denzil is one of the most important painters to come out of London in the early 1980s and his early works remain as relevant and vital today as when they were first made. With the help of Tramps, London, and White Columns, New York, we mounted two separate exhibitions of Denzil's work from the 1980s in their respective spaces and, more recently, an exhibition that mixed new and old work at the Jackson Foundation in Cornwall.

However, a revelation for me has been seeing the recent work coming out of Denzil's studio. It has a subtlety and form that has perhaps come about because he is reflecting upon his past. These new paintings are dreamlike and emerge as much from his imagination as from his studies of real life. Paintings such as *Stitch Up* (2017, pp. 42/43), *Velvet Rush* (2018, pp. 32/33), *Duppy Deh* (2018, pp. 22/23) and *Reading with Ma Pets* (2018, p. 27) are every bit as strange, powerful and poignant as anything Denzil has ever painted.

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