

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Denzil Forrester in Rome

30 Old Burlington Street,
London, W1S 3AR

5–31 October 2020

Virtual artist talk:
Monday 5 October, 5–6pm



Stephen Friedman Gallery is pleased to present 'Denzil Forrester in Rome', a selection of large-scale paintings and works on paper by Grenada-born, British artist **Denzil Forrester**. In 1983, Forrester was awarded a two-year scholarship by the British School at Rome in Italy. The works made there represent a defining moment in the artist's practice in which his frenetic depictions of London nightclub scenes are treated with the clarity and intensity of Rome's natural light and rich art history. Initially intended for Frieze Masters, the gallery will present Forrester's solo project in a specially designed space at 30 Old Burlington Street in October.

'Denzil Forrester in Rome' explores the formative role of Forrester's fellowship at the British School at Rome from 1983 to 1985. Exhibited together for the first time, these works reverberate with light and colour, synthesising Forrester's new-found experiences of Rome with his West Indian roots and love of London's dub scene. Sam Thorne, Director of Nottingham Contemporary, describes how on his arrival in Rome, Forrester felt that "the colours were just singing like mad". In Italy, Forrester continued to work directly from sketches made back in London of nocturnal revellers dancing to the sets of legendary DJs such as Jah Shaka. Removed from the original experience, he could revisit the subject from memory with renewed intensity.

Forrester incorporates numerous art-historical and architectural references in these works. The artist's sweeping compositions from this period were inspired by aerial configurations of Rome's circular piazzas, as well as fountains encountered in the gardens of the Villa Borghese adjacent to the British School at Rome. Forrester has said: "The figurative content in the Rome paintings is inspired by watching Romany people use the fountains to wash their clothes. After spreading them to dry, they would fall asleep on the bank." The artist has also spoken of his fascination with Old Masters such as Caravaggio and the lasting impression of the intensity and drama of the Italian master's works. The sense of movement, bold arrangement of colour, dynamic use of line and fragmented picture planes within Forrester's scenes also evoke Italian Futurism. A painting that the artist made after he returned to the UK is also on view to demonstrate the enduring influence of the residency on his work.

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Gallery Hours

Tuesday–Saturday, 11am–5pm

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A highlight in the presentation is a monumental diptych titled 'Blue Tent', one of the largest works that Forrester created in Rome. While making studies in the gardens of the Villa Borghese, a park adjacent to the British School at Rome, Forrester came upon a large, blue tent being erected in preparation for a performance. Transfixed by the movement of the fabric in the wind, Forrester went on to integrate the structure into a large nightclub painting he was working on – here, the folds of fabric are evocative of arms and legs criss-crossing one another. Forrester wanted 'Blue Tent' to capture the dynamism of the music played at the Notting Hill Carnival, complete with looming sound systems, jostling bodies and expressive costumes.

Born in Grenada in 1956, Denzil Forrester moved to London in 1967. He now lives and works in Cornwall. Forrester received a BA in Fine Art from the Central School of Art, London, in 1979 and an MA in Fine Art from the Royal College of Art, London, in 1983.

For four decades, Forrester's works have captured the transcendental rhythms of the London reggae and dub scene of the early 1980s. Combining ecstatic, gestural forms with vivid colour, Forrester's dynamic compositions immortalise the characters and vibrant energy of London's underground nightclubs. In contrast to the joyful liberation depicted in these works, his paintings simultaneously explore the racial and social injustice experienced in 1980s Britain. Policemen frequently feature as menacing figures in his works, whilst others depict the events surrounding the untimely death of his friend Winston Rose.

Forrester's first solo exhibition at Stephen Friedman Gallery opened in April 2019, accompanied by a monograph with texts by Peter Doig, Matthew Higgs and Sam Thorne. A large-scale public artwork by Forrester for Brixton Underground Station, London was unveiled by TFL in September 2019. Forrester's mid-career survey 'Itchin & Scratchin' will travel to Spike Island, Bristol in October 2020 from Nottingham Contemporary, Nottingham. Forrester's work will feature in a major exhibition at Tate Britain, London in 2021 devoted to Caribbean connections in British art since the 1950s.

Forrester's works can be found in the collections of Tate, London; Arts Council Collection; and Harris Museum & Art Gallery, Preston, among many others. His work has been exhibited internationally at venues including The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; Tate Britain, London; Ashmolean Museum, Oxford; Whitechapel Gallery, London; Royal Academy of Arts, London; and Gallery of Modern Art, Glasgow. His work was the focus of three solo shows curated by Peter Doig and Matthew Higgs at White Columns, New York (2016); Tramps, London (2016); and Jackson Foundation, St Just, Cornwall (2018).