

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Andrew Kreps Gallery

Denzil Forrester:
Two Islands, One World

Curated by Sheena Wagstaff

Stephen Friedman Gallery &
Andrew Kreps Gallery

October 25 – December 18, 2024

Opening:
Friday, October 25, 6–8pm



Stephen Friedman Gallery and Andrew Kreps Gallery present *Two Islands, One World*, a two-venue exhibition by Grenada-born, British artist **Denzil Forrester**. Curated by Sheena Wagstaff, Chair Emerita at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and former Chief Curator of Tate Modern, the show will bring together new and historical works spanning five decades of his career. This presentation follows institutional exhibitions in 2023 at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City and ICA Miami.

The dual exhibition showcases Forrester's depictions of London's reggae and dub nightclub scene during the 1980s. Each space also highlights other significant bodies of work: Andrew Kreps Gallery focuses on memories from the artist's childhood and adolescence, while Stephen Friedman Gallery presents three significant historical paintings depicting police brutality and the untimely death of his friend Winston Rose.

Forrester was born in Grenada in 1956 and moved to London in 1967. At this time, immigrants from the West Indies had arrived in the UK seeking opportunities and the promise of a new life. Against a backdrop of racial oppression and resistance, his formative years as an artist unfolded. Forrester's recent work reflects his memories of leaving Grenada and, on arriving in London, sewing shopping bags in their basement with his mother, to sell to support the family.

By the 1980s, Forrester, now a young adult, was frequenting London's dub and reggae clubs. Immersed in the clubs' vibrant energy, he would sketch the ecstatic dancers from behind the bar. In his North London studio the next morning, Forrester would transform these intimate drawings into paintings, using vibrant colors to mimic the pulsing lights that flooded the clubs. In early works like *The Cave* (1978), he constructs a dynamic, Cubist-like composition where geometric forms convey rhythmic movement. As Wagstaff describes, "To experience the vibrant sights and sounds lived by Forrester in his time is to celebrate his remarkable artistic skill, acute powers of observation, rich compositional rhythm – and courage."

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Forrester's practice also extends beyond the dancefloor to confront the racial and social injustices of the time. The artist exposes police brutality in several early works investigating the tragic death of Winston Rose, a close friend and neighbor. These are presented in one room of the show, enabling for a place of reflection. Describing the documentary power of Forrester's work, Wagstaff writes: "Each of Forrester's paintings has a profound sense of precision with which they speak to this historical moment. Their poignancy is enhanced through an exhilarating irradiation, fracturing, or evacuation of light, from the revelation of bodies massed and united in rhythm and movement, flashing glimpses of DJ's and dancers in darkened basements, to the somber scenes of the death of his friend Winston Rose in police custody."

Throughout the exhibition, images can be seen to repeat over the decades, much like the dub technique in music. Works such as *Jungleheart* (1995) and *DJ Mix* (1998) feature the same, distinctive character. Forrester continues to use drawings from the 1980s to inform his practice today, combining figures like London Dub DJ, Jah Shaka, with scenes of Cornish nightlife. Since moving to the coast in 2016, his palette has transformed – saturated with pink and purple hues, inspired by the brilliant light characteristic of Cornwall. *Tutti-Frutti* (2024) and *Jah Guide Shaka* (2023), some of the most recent paintings exhibited, are meditations on memories, reinterpreting decades' old iconography.

Speaking of Forrester's new work, artist Peter Doig reflects, "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. [...] However, a revelation for me has been seeing the recent work coming out of Denzil's studio. It has a subtlety and form that perhaps comes 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."

Notes to editors

Forrester's work will also be on view in *The Street*, a group exhibition curated by artist Peter Doig at Gagosian, New York.

His work *Dub* (1985) is currently on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, as part of the permanent collection hanging.

Forrester's major painting *Three Wicked Men*, 1982 is on display at Tate Britain, London. It is part of the museum's permanent collection.

On October 29, 2024, Forrester will participate in an artist talk on his work at the New York Studio School. More information on <https://nyss.org/lecture/denzil-forrester/>

The exhibition follows two important, institutional exhibitions: *Duppy Conqueror* at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art; and *We Culture* at the ICA, Miami. These exhibitions were accompanied by a comprehensive publication, including essays by leading art historians and musicologists, alongside poems by Linton Kwesi Johnson.

About the Artist

Forrester was born in Grenada in 1956, and he currently lives and works in Cornwall, United Kingdom. He moved to London in 1967 and attended the Central School of Art and Design and the Royal College of Art. His work has been exhibited in numerous institutions, including the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami; Kemper Museum, Kansas City; Hayward Gallery, London; Ashmolean Museum, Oxford; Whitechapel Gallery, London; Barbican Art Gallery, London; Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago; and Tate St Ives, Cornwall. He participated in the 58th Carnegie International, Pittsburgh.

Artist's statement

Growing up in Grenada, carnival was an integral part of life and became a profound influence on my painting. The vivid memories of crowds, noise, and movement have stayed with me, shaping much of my work. The West Indies is a place full of bright, vibrant colors, where nature plays a central role, much like the carnival itself.

When I moved to London, it was a stark contrast. Gone was the vibrant nature—replaced by damp earth, dark skies, and rows of houses. These two very different islands—one colorful and alive, the other seemingly dull—awakened my visual senses, driving me to create images that reflect both worlds.

In 1980, I began frequenting all-night blues clubs, where reggae music filled the air. The rhythm of this music, the distinct dance movements it inspired, and the specific clothing worn by club-goers all started to heavily influence my painting. The early 1980s were a magical, active time, brimming with imagery that I found deeply fulfilling. These blues clubs, steeped in city life, offered a kind of spiritual fulfillment. The lyrics of reggae spoke about society's "bad men"—the police, businessmen, and politicians—and their harmful policies. But beneath it all, the deep, hypnotic ancestral beats of dub reggae made one feel purified, strong, and free from the tangled networks of modern life.

This search for tranquil moments within chaotic environments became the foundation for my paintings. Dub music doesn't scream; it pulses with a continuous beat, shaking your body until you're absorbed in it. In these clubs, city life is encapsulated—sounds, lights, police sirens, bodies pushing and swaying in a smoke-filled room. Sometimes, this atmosphere is interrupted by figures dressed in blue, creating a stark visual break.

The crowded, overlapping images in my paintings mirror the dense atmosphere of these blues clubs. At the same time, they're influenced by the decorative spaces of blue sky that break through the forest canopy back in Grenada. The patterns of light filtering through leaves are akin to the fragmented reflections from mirror balls in the clubs. I've used this device in several works, including *Three Wicked Men* (1982).