





Ghosts, Echoes, Returns

Sam Thorne

1.

It's the late 1970s. The first thing you need to know about Jah Shaka – DJ, MC, magician – is that his sound-system is mono: the kind with chunky, five-inch valves. This sounds technical, but it's important. Unlike stereo speakers, where the sound is circular, with mono the music hits you hard and direct, like a punch. The second thing you need to know about Shaka is that he disdains the stage. He performs on the dancefloor, surrounded by the crowd, on the same level. If you haven't seen him play (and, forty years on, he's still touring), some of his energy is captured by Franco Rosso's 1980 film *Babylon*, set amidst London's sound-system culture. Shaka makes a brief, yet effervescent appearance, bouncing between turntable and effects box, on the mic, moving with the crowd.

It's the late 1970s and the first thing you need to know about Denzil Forrester is that he is freshly enrolled at the Central School of Art and Design. The second thing, equally as important, is that he starts to go to dub reggae dances across East London. For the next ten years, he can be found at Rasta clubs, places like Phebes, which later became Wicked Willows, or All Nations in Hackney. There is one constant: every Friday night, Jah Shaka is playing. As Forrester has said: 'I see the DJ as a witch doctor: the unifier of all the people in that space, giving energy and strength to all at the same time.'

Phebes, in Dalston, is long gone, but in its heyday it had two vast rooms. On Friday evenings, the young art student would head first for the disco room upstairs, loosen up and wait for Shaka. Downstairs, later: MCs toasting, Shaka playing, crowd at capacity. Forrester would bring along a roll of A1 paper, finding that sketchbooks didn't capture the atmosphere. On a single night, he



Fig.1 *In the Zone*, 1982

might make as many as a dozen drawings, each done quickly, in the time it took for a record to be played. Four or five minutes tops. These drawings were done in pencil, Conté crayons or charcoal, but were made quasi-blind, the already dark room having become thickened by smoke. Sometimes, Forrester wouldn't know which colour he'd used, only finding out later. These drawings, he recalls, often had more action than the actual dancers themselves, tightly packed into the space. Squeezed behind the bar, Forrester's drawing was a kind of shadow performance, he recognises, an echo of Shaka's own: 'he performs with his machines as I do with my paper and charcoal.' (fig. 1)

Around dawn Forrester would get home. By noon, he would be in his studio, taking a look at his drawings, sometimes for the first time, while the feeling from the night before hadn't yet dimmed. As he once remarked to Benjamin Zephaniah: 'I go drawing at night and during the day I paint at home.' From night to day, from the club to the home, from drawing to painting, from fast to slow. These are the transpositions that structure all Forrester's works. 'When I came to make the paintings, I had the physical experience of *having been there* in the club. The main thing was being there.'

2.

A decade or so earlier, in 1967, Forrester had moved from Grenada to north London. Around that time, though not yet known to this eleven-year-old, something was stirring back in the Caribbean. Working in the music studios of Kingston, the sound engineer King Tubby was busy cutting records with musicians like Lee 'Scratch' Perry and Augustus Pablo. Tubby hit on the idea of the dub technique almost by accident. In essence, this entailed stripping the vocal from its backing track, then manipulating the instrumental version using a range of effects: echo, reverb, feedback, dropout, delay. On the A-side was the vocal track, on the B-side, the remixed instrumental – the original song's ghostly double. As David Toop, in his book *Ocean of Sound* (1996), writes: 'When you double, or dub, you replicate, reinvent, make one of many versions [...] Dubbing, at its very best, takes each bit and imbues it with new life, turning a rational order of musical sequences into an ocean of sensation.'

Might we describe Forrester's painting practice as somehow analogous to this dub technique? I tend to think of him working on 'versions' rather than in 'series'. For example, a busy dancefloor echoes through three paintings – *The Cave* (1978, p.145), *Night Strobe* (1985, p.111) and *Dub Strobe 1* (1990, p.89) – which for me constitute a trilogy separated across 15 years. The architectural space remains similar, but each work has its own shifting and specific energy: painterly and gestural, of course, but somehow also aural. In another early painting, *Dub Skank* (1979, p.143), a dancing figure's movements seem to stutter, caught and suspended in mid-air. Like the dub technique, Forrester's paintings concern 'delay', in varying senses. Sometimes they are separated from their source by a matter of hours, as when he works from drawings made the night before. Sometimes, the delay is much longer, as when he returns to the theme of a painting made three decades before. These paintings constitute an alternate and closely observed record of several generations of dub reggae culture. They are never simply documents of a night or scene, so much as ruminations, evocations, extrapolations.

Several of Forrester's titles are borrowed (or sampled) from dub records, such as *Three Wicked Men* (1982, pp.130/131) and *Catch a Fire* (c. 2010, p.55). But they are sonically attuned in other ways too. In his earlier works, you don't have to try too hard to hear their two-word monosyllables as percussive: *Dub Skank*, *Death Walk* (1983, p.125), *Blue Jay* (1987, p.103). Later works are almost synaesthetic, full of light and sound: *Night Strobe*, say, or *Dub Strobe 1* – the latter was the cover image for Forrester's 1990–1991 touring exhibition, titled 'Dub Transition'. The background of *Street Music* (1989, p.99) is all speakers, seemingly incandescent, emanating light as well as music. Flashes, strobes, sirens, bass, all entwined. As Forrester has noted: 'dub echoes the sound of contemporary cities'.

Looking at *Duppy Deh* (2018) (fig. 2), I recall reading that 'dub' is an abbreviation of 'duppy', slang for 'ghost'. With this in mind, the dub plate is something like a spectral double, haunting the original version of a song. There is a certain melancholy strain to Forrester's work, which, like dub, continually reanimates or finds new forms for earlier sounds and places. Even paintings of celebration and community contain in them some sense of loss. Ian Penman, writing in *The Wire* magazine in 1995, gets close to what I'm thinking about here, when he described dub as 'a form of magic which does indeed make people disappear, leaving behind only their context, their trace, their outline. (Where does the singer's voice go when it is erased from the dub track?).'

3.

In the early 1980s, after graduating from Central, Forrester went on to the Royal College of Art to do an MA in painting. He had become interested in German expressionism, and, even in later paintings such as *Night Owls* (1995, p.83), you can sense the on-the-brink energy of Max Beckmann's nocturnal world of masquerades and cabaret. While at the RCA, Forrester made a number of formative works, chief amongst them *Three Wicked Men*. Now in the collection of Tate, it is a work that he has returned to – or that has returned to him – half a dozen times in



Fig. 2 *Duppy Deh*, 2018

the intervening decades. Its title was borrowed from a track by Reggae George, released a year earlier, in which the three eponymous men are a policeman, a politician and a businessman. In Forrester's versions, the latter figure is typically replaced by a Rasta.

Again and again, Forrester draws and paints the people and places that are – or once were – close at hand. *Three Wicked Men* was inspired by the death of his friend and childhood housemate Winston Rose, who died in a police van in 1981, having been forcibly detained under the Mental Health Act. Forrester attended the inquest, and wrote his RCA thesis on the subject. Over the years, Rose's death has remained with him, a presence that haunts various works. As Forrester told me, the nightclub drawings helped take him to the Winston Rose drawings. Everything is connected: 'I couldn't have made those paintings if I hadn't gone to the nightclub. And then I couldn't have done *Three Wicked Men* if I hadn't done the Winston Rose works.'

After Forrester graduated from the RCA, he travelled on and off for several years. The first trip was for a scholarship in Rome, in 1983–1985. Forrester took one then-unfinished work, *Night Strobe*, with him. This painting had grown out of drawings made in a club called One Nations, in a large Victorian house in Hackney. In London, it had felt lifeless, but, seen afresh in the clear Roman light, he noticed how different it felt: 'the colours were just singing like mad', he recalls. *Night Strobe* has myriad striated planes and lines. Some appear to emanate from a disco ball suspended above the crowd, others from an out-of-sight DJ booth below; some of these laser-like beams even appear to project from the dancers themselves. Two cities, two experiences, two kinds of light. Forrester's works are always in transit from one place to another.

A year after returning from Rome, he left London again, this time for a two-year scholarship in New York. After Rome, New York felt dirty and noisy, almost monochromatic, with graffiti providing the only colour. In *Blue Jay* a figure is seen from behind, held limb by limb, crucifix-like by four police officers, their shiny-tipped helmets looking more like hoods. It is one of a loose group of 'blue paintings', made years apart, which stretch from his time in New York to *Spice* (c. 1997, p.79) and on to *Brixton Blue* (2018). The latter is the most recent of his Winston Rose works, which was commissioned by Art on the Underground for Brixton tube station.

Between scholarships, Forrester began to teach at Morley College, a position he held for the next thirty years. As a teacher, he often returned to the book *The Natural Way to Draw* (1941), which he had first discovered in New York, and which confirmed for him that he should draw not what he saw, but what figures were *doing*. Motion, gesture, energy – these were to be Forrester's guiding principles. This classic primer was written by a Greek-American artist and educator named Kimon Nicolaidis, who had served in World War I, during which he had been one of the first-ever camouflage artists. When I first read this I wondered what the term meant: assuming it had to do with producing camouflage on the spot, I thought of improvising, of going unseen. And, without leaning too much on the analogy, I thought of Forrester, going unseen at dub reggae nights. Not unseen exactly, but hanging back, drawing quickly, from behind the bar – a part of the crowd, but apart from it too.

4.

At a certain point, around the late 1990s, Forrester began to move away from paintings of nightclubs. Instead of making paintings based on the direct, still-vibrating experiences of the night before, he began to look back to an earlier time, soon after he had arrived from Grenada. Aged eleven, he'd had to wait six months before he could start school. During that period, and for a while after, he helped his mother sew bags in the basement of their Stoke Newington home. They'd work until late, a few nights a week; 'everything revolved around bags', he remembers. To keep him sweet, his mother would buy him the latest Bob Marley album: 'it kept me sewing'.

In these paintings, his nights (as a young man) in the basement clubs and his evenings (as an adolescent) come to be merged or, better, mixed together. Works like *End Game* (2003, p.65) and *Family Living* (2004, p.59) are domestic scenes, of Singer sewing machines and tumble dryers, but done in a dancehall style. DJs are recast as seamstresses, bass bins become washing machines. These works speak to the back-and-forth between house and club, birth family and elected family, private and public. That Forrester's journey into community, being together, communality and momentary kinships should have been embarked upon at the beginning of the Thatcher years, in the decade of *no such thing as society* is crucial, it seems to me. These are alternative history paintings, done in a minor key.

In 2016, Forrester left London and moved to Truro. He had visited West Cornwall decades earlier, while a student at Central, and the sandy beaches and turquoise bays had reminded him of his childhood in the West Indies. On setting up his studio in Truro, he attempted to make some paintings of beach scenes. He found that these weren't working, until he returned once again to *Three Wicked Men*, from almost 35 years before: 'The painting suddenly came alive.' The result was *From Trench Town to Porthtown* (2017, p.35). London night is transposed into the Cornish daylight; a Rasta is framed by two blue-suited policemen.

The American art historian David Joselit has argued recently that the two key terms for contemporary painting are 'passage' and 'transitivity'. That is, a painting represents the journey from the stuff of experience to the stuff of paint on canvas, not to mention the sometimes fraught passage from one to the other. In this reading, every painting is an embodiment of dislocation. In Forrester's work, this movement is always at stake: a quick sketch turns into a large painting; a nightclub transmutes into a scene of violence; Cornwall is overlaid with Trench Town. His paintings are, in different senses, concerned with what is added by memory and experience, and what gets lost. They are passages of sorts, between location and dislocation, of times past and present, of night and its ghostly double, day.

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