

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Artforum
Denzil Forrester
Andrew Hunt
July/August 2020

ARTFORUM

Denzil Forrester

Nottingham Contemporary



Image: Denzil Forrester, *Itchin & Scratchin*, 2019, oil on canvas, 107 7/8 × 81 1/8".

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 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

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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.