

Stephen Friedman Gallery

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The Da Vincis of the dancefloor – meet the artists capturing clubland
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Drawing a crowd ... Denzil Forrester's Night Flames, 2012, inspired by his love of dub reggae. Photograph: courtesy the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery

Why take a selfie in a sweaty club when you can buy a painting of your banging night out instead? We meet the ravers turning 3am euphoria into pulsating art

It would be around midnight when Jah Shaka's truck pulled up outside Phebes nightclub in east London, and his crew would start humping his big sound system speakers into the dark, cramped, low-ceilinged basement ready for an all-night dub reggae session. As the excitement built and the basement filled with people, Denzil Forrester would squeeze behind the long, narrow bar that ran down one side of the room, prop his A1 sketchbook on the counter ... and start sketching.

It wasn't the easiest place to work. It was dark, hot and crowded, the air fogged with weed and tobacco smoke. Then, when Shaka fired up

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the system and the heavy bass kicked in, it would take a while for Forrester to adjust to the vibrations passing through his body.



'By the end of the night I'd have about 40 pieces' ... Denzil Forrester. Photograph: Sean Drakes/LatinContent/Getty Images

“I'd try and draw to the length of a record, so three to four minutes. I'd use the energy of the crowd, the movement, the action, the expression. Usually, it was just a slight back and forth movement, because there wasn't space to do a lot of energetic dancing. By the end of the night I'd have about 40 pieces, and maybe 20 would work.”

The ones that did would be used as source material for large-scale paintings completed in his studio, mixing imagery from the club with social commentary.

Forrester is one of several artists who have turned their youthful clubbing adventures into art careers later in life. Born in Grenada, he grew up in Stoke Newington, north London, and studied at the Central School of Art and Design, then at the Royal College of [Art](#). He loved Monet and Matisse's use of colour, but was unsure how to apply that to his own painting. At Jah Shaka's nights, though, he found his inspiration as an artist – as well as a sense of belonging.

“When you're young, you have a lot of creative, expressive energy, and a lot of West Indian families, they were very strict and embarrassed! So those nightclubs were a sanctuary, a place where people could express themselves. They could open up, and that energy came

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through me, into the painting. I wasn't just there as an onlooker. I was part of it."



'That energy came through me' ... Denzil Forrester's 2018 painting Velvet Rush. Photograph: Courtesy the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London.

His has been a long, slow path to success, with very few works selling until recently, when fellow painter Peter Doig became his champion. But his work is now being bought by museums, and a large-scale public work will be unveiled in Brixton underground station in September. Forrester also says he's increasingly selling to people in their 50s and 60s, like him, who went to clubs like Phebes and now have the money to invest in art.

"There's little documentation of that time," he says. "There's hardly even any photography of those nightclubs."

Mark "Wigan" Williams is another artist whose work grew out of British club culture. In 1989, Wigan partnered with musician Sean McLusky to take over a narrow, two-floored club space in Soho, painting every part of it with his colourful graphics, and calling it the Brain. "I did these fluorescent murals on a tribal theme. We had a bar area based on the [Korova] Milk Bar in A Clockwork Orange. The whole club was an art piece in itself, really."

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*'You'd be chatting with Paul Weller and in the corner there would be the Stone Roses, and perhaps Liam from Oasis at the other bar' ... Mark 'Wigan' Williams.
Photograph: Graham Whitby Boot*

From theatre productions to magazine covers, all kinds of creative projects were hatched in the Brain's booths. A Guy Called Gerald and Orbital played live in the tiny upstairs dancefloor, and everyone from the Farm to George Michael would hang out. Kraftwerk turned up one night.

“Because it was very underground, people felt they could come along and not get hassled,” says Wigan, wondering if such a relaxed atmosphere would be possible now. “It was pre-surveillance culture. Clubs now are all about taking selfies. Then, you'd be casually chatting away with Paul Weller, and in the corner there would be the Stone Roses, and perhaps Liam from Oasis at the other bar, just having a drink.”

Like Forrester, Wigan started drawing in clubs in his teens, taking his sketchbook to the soul all-nighters at Wigan Casino and earning the nickname he now uses as his signature. After studying art in Hull he moved to London in 1983, making a living designing club flyers, putting his graphics on T-shirts that he sold in Camden market, and contributing illustrations and Polaroid portraits of clubbers to i-D magazine.

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The Mud Club Busbys Discotheque London, 1985, from Clubland Chronicles by Williams. Photograph: Courtesy the artist

It all felt quite organic, he says, as he moved to painting murals in clubs in London then later in Japan and New York – where Andy Warhol and Keith Haring were fans. Sometimes he'd even paint while the venue was open, improvising his art while the DJs were playing. Wigan has since produced five books on illustration for Bloomsbury, lectured at art colleges and in 2010 founded the Museum of Club Culture in Hull.

Vinca Petersen's clubbing years came later, with the advent of rave. She barely remembers life without a camera – she took her first photographs at the age of six or seven, and it felt natural to keep snapping through her adolescence and when she moved to a London squat and got involved in the free party scene.

After the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act of 1994 made life in the UK difficult for Petersen and her friends, they left for a nomadic life in Europe, living in trucks and putting on parties. "I didn't just pass through that door at weekends," she says with a laugh. "I passed through and didn't come back!"

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Photographer Vinca Petersen

Despite a life she describes as chaotic, she continued taking pictures, recording the traveller lifestyle with a complicit, insider eye and amassing an impressive archive of photographs supplemented by diaries, letters, club flyers and other souvenirs. Just before her son was born in 2005, she settled in Ramsgate, did an MA in art, and set about organising this material into limited-edition books.

Future Fantasy is a record of her teens, featuring school friends, her first parent-free camping trip and the move to London at 17, where she became immersed in the rave scene. No System is a record of her years on the road. Both books sold out their initial print runs and won her art-world recognition: her traveller photographs are currently on display at Tate Modern. Petersen also has work in upcoming shows at Turner Contemporary, Margate, and the Saatchi Gallery in London as well as solo shows next year at the Martin Parr Foundation in Bristol and Northern Gallery of Contemporary Art in Sunderland.

Although their lives have moved on, the ghost of the dancefloor still pulls at all of these artists. Forrester now lives in Cornwall, his clubbing days largely done. But at the end of 2018 he went to Jamaica

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for the first time, visiting dub nights there and drawing to the length of a record for the first time in years. This time, there was a film crew with him, making a documentary that will be shown in the UK this June. Much of it felt the same: the music, the dancing, the sense of freedom and release. The big change was the intrusion of technology. “They were all dancing with their phones!” Forrester says incredulously.



'I passed through and didn't come back' ... Vinca Petersen's Riot Girl from the series No System. Photograph: Vinca Petersen

Wigan, meanwhile, now works full-time on a series of intricately detailed illustrations of classic nights he calls The Clubland Chronicles. Meticulously researched using his own drawings, Polaroids from the time, social media groups on which clubbers share memories, DJ playlists and interviews with people who were there, he captures the interiors, faces, fashions, music and snippets of overheard conversation in nights from the Dirtbox to Boy's Own, the Hacienda to the Brain. Social history with a slightly satirical edge, they're the clubland equivalent of a Hogarth print.

With prices from £30 to thousands, Wigan is selling to people who were at those nights, but also to millennials. He's even getting interest from China, where he recently collaborated on a clothing range featuring his graphic work. “It was an interesting time,” he says of 80s and early 90s clubs he depicts. “There was such a multicultural mix, and there was a sense of community that seems to be missing in this age of anxiety. It's nice to be able to capture it.”

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As for Petersen, she says her work since has been about chasing that feeling she first felt in raves, capturing or creating moments of release and abandon that she calls “subversive joy”. She drove a battered bouncy castle from the UK to Ghana, stopping at schools and orphanages along the way to record local children at play. She also takes disadvantaged people from the UK to Ukraine, where they support and play with a group of disabled men, and have helped to change the institution where they live from a prison into a home.

“Britain has become a nation where any kind of gathering seems terrifying to the authorities.”

“I’m just trying to give a little flash of possibility,” she says, “a glimpse that sticks in people’s heads and perhaps grows from that seed.”

But with so many venues closing down, she worries that her son’s generation will be denied the sense of creative possibility clubs can inspire.

“Britain produces so much interesting, creative stuff, but it has become a nation where any kind of gathering together seems terrifying to the authorities. So where can young people, who’ve been at school all day, been at home with parents, gather to scream and shout, dance and run around?”

“From pagan festivals that have been taken away to the sterilising of any other festival, it’s got squeezed and squeezed. And what happens when it pops?”

• The Clubland Chronicles is at the Westbank Gallery, London, 2-16 May. Denzil Forrester’s paintings are at Stephen Friedman Gallery, London, until 25 May. Photographs from Vinca Petersen’s No System are in the Diaristic Photography display at Tate Modern, London.