

artnet news

Peter Doig Wants to Make Denzil Forrester, a Painter of the Afro-Caribbean Experience in England, Much More Famous
Naomi Rea
May 2018

artnet[®]news

Peter Doig Wants to Make Denzil Forrester, a Painter of the Afro-Caribbean Experience in England, Much More Famous

We spoke to Peter Doig and his co-curator, Matthew Higgs, about a great and long-overlooked painter of the Windrush generation.



Denzil Forrester

There is a lot going on in Cornwall: The international art festival Groundwork will see Steve McQueen head to the Southwest of England, while last weekend Tate St Ives opened a major survey of Patrick Heron's work. Up next this weekend, Cornwall is getting a show of paintings by the long-overlooked black British artist, Denzil Forrester. A member of the Windrush generation, Forrester was born in Grenada and came to London as a child in 1967. He is now based in Cornwall, where his solo show takes place in the tiny former mining town of St. Just.

It is the latest in a series of shows of the 62-year-old artist's work that has been co-organized by fellow artist Peter Doig and the director of New York's White Columns, Matthew Higgs.

Doig, whose paintings sell for millions at auction, tells artnet News that he first encountered the work of the Grenada-born artist at Forrester's graduation show at the Royal College of Art in the early '80s; At the time Doig was a student at St Martins in London. The two did not actually meet in person until 2015. "I am as interested in some other

Stephen Friedman Gallery

artnet news

Peter Doig Wants to Make Denzil Forrester, a Painter of the Afro-Caribbean Experience in England, Much More Famous

Naomi Rea

May 2018

artists' work as much as I am in what I'm trying to do myself," Doig says. Doig and Higgs' support is paying off. Last year, Forrester's *Three Wicked Men* was acquired by Tate Britain.



Denzil Forrester, *From Trench Town to Porthtowan* (2016).

The new exhibition is called "From Trench Town to Porthtowan," after one of Forrester's recent paintings. It opens on May 26 and runs through June 23 at the Jackson Foundation Gallery in Just-in-Penwith.

Forrester's previous exhibitions selected by the two artists focused on the painter's early work, and some of these appear in the show in Cornwall, such as ones depicting the arrest in 1981 of a family friend, Winston Rose. He died in a police van taking him to a psychiatric hospital after being restrained by 11 police officers.

Black British Culture



Denzil Forrester, *Domino Hunters* (1985).

Stephen Friedman Gallery

artnet news

Peter Doig Wants to Make Denzil Forrester, a Painter of the Afro-Caribbean Experience in England, Much More Famous

Naomi Rea

May 2018

Forrester's early paintings documented the Afro-Caribbean community in London in the 1980s, a time of rising tension between the police and the members of the young black community, which resulted in the 1981 Brixton Riots in south London.

The artist painted one of the regular police raids on blues and dub nightclubs, such as Phebes, All Nations, and Four Aces in Hackney, East London. He distilled the local dub-reggae scene in several rapid gesture drawings, which he later transformed into large scale paintings in his studio. The work is significant for its divergence from the fashions of the art scene of the day, both stylistically—by leaning into the narrative and away from lyrical abstraction—and in the subject matter—black British culture.

Asked why he thinks Forrester's work from the 1980s was largely overlooked at the time, Doig explains that there were few narrative figurative painters working in the city who were acknowledged by the mainstream British art world, and that this was compounded for a visual artist whose work addressed black life and culture. "Denzil's work in the '80s was well known within a certain alternative scene, but this scene was not given much exposure in the commercial gallery or museum world—with few exceptions, like the Whitechapel's 1986 show 'From Two Worlds,'" Doig says, adding that "the powers that ran visual art culture were way behind those involved in music and literature, in terms of understanding what was vital and important in black culture."



Denzil Forrester, *Jah Shaka* (1983).

Doig says that there was also "a backlash against any type of expressive painting post 'New Spirit in Painting,'" the major exhibition at the Royal

Stephen Friedman Gallery

artnet news

Peter Doig Wants to Make Denzil Forrester, a Painter of the Afro-Caribbean Experience in England, Much More Famous

Naomi Rea

May 2018

Academy of Arts in 1981. This would not have helped Forrester when he returned to London in the late '80s after spending time in New York.

Doig has worked with Matthew Higgs on a number of shows before, from an early '90s exhibition at the original Cubitt Gallery in London to shows at Tramps, Doig's gallery in London, and White Columns in New York, which Higgs directs. They've also worked together on exhibitions of Forrester's work in London and New York.

"Denzil's work—over the past four decades—is ultimately rooted in, and provides a commentary on, the Afro-Caribbean experience in London (and beyond)," Higgs tells artnet News.

"Denzil's work aligns the personal with the political," Higgs says, explaining that the underground British reggae scene of the late 1970s and early 1980s—pioneered by DJs such as Jah Shaka—unfolded in a highly complex social and political environment. "Denzil's early work not only records this culture—almost as a documentarian might—but it also provides us with a profound insight into the social and cultural climate of Britain at the onset of the Thatcher years," Higgs adds.



Denzil Forrester, *Death Walk* (1983).

But the real emphasis of the new show, Higgs tells us, will be on works Forrester has made in the past 15 years, many of which were painted

Stephen Friedman Gallery

artnet news

Peter Doig Wants to Make Denzil Forrester, a Painter of the Afro-Caribbean Experience in England, Much More Famous

Naomi Rea

May 2018

since he moved to Truro in 2016, which is around six miles from the popular beach at Porthtowan.

Forrester's newer work includes large autobiographical paintings depicting scenes from his early life in Grenada, such as learning to read with his guardian in Hermitage, through to his life in London where he moved at aged 10, such as stitching bags with his family in Stoke Newington in the 1970s, as well as scenes from his new home.

"The issues that informed his early work still reverberate in his recent paintings, and the exhibition at the Jackson Foundation in St. Just will reflect this," Higgs says. "Denzil's work ultimately continues to be about 'community': the home, places of work, and the social spaces that we share with others."

"From Trench Town to Porthtowan," runs May 26 through June 23 at the Jackson Foundation Gallery in Just-in-Penwith, Cornwall. See more images of Forrester's work below.



Denzil Forrester, *The Rose* (2014)

Stephen Friedman Gallery

artnet news

Peter Doig Wants to Make Denzil Forrester, a Painter of the Afro-Caribbean Experience in England, Much More Famous

Naomi Rea

May 2018



Denzil Forrester, *My Singer* (2018)



Denzil Forrester, *Stitch Up* (2017)

Stephen Friedman Gallery

artnet news

Peter Doig Wants to Make Denzil Forrester, a Painter of the Afro-Caribbean Experience in England, Much More Famous

Naomi Rea

May 2018



Denzil Forrester, *End Game* (2003)



Denzil Forrester, *Blues* (1978).