

Stephen Friedman Gallery

The Guardian

Artist Denzil Forrester: 'When I Tell people I've moved to Cornwall they say, "Why, there are no black people there!"'

Joshua Surtees

May 2018

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In advance of a retrospective of his work, the painter reflects on the experiences that have inspired him and expresses his anger at the treatment of the Windrush generation



Denzil Forrester at a solo show of his work in New York, 2016. Photograph: Sean Drakes/Getty Images

Born in Grenada in 1956, the artist Denzil Forrester moved to London in 1967. His paintings of London's 1980s reggae club scene and police brutality have been exhibited at Tate Britain and White Columns in New York. From Trench Town to Porthtowan, a retrospective curated by artists Peter Doig and Matthew Higgs takes place from 26 May to 23 June at the Jackson Foundation Gallery in Cornwall, where Forrester now lives.

A number of your paintings were inspired by Winston Rose, who died in a police van in 1981. How did his death affect you?

He was a friend of mine – we lived in the same house on Rectory Road in Stoke Newington in the 60s. I hadn't seen him for a few years and I saw in the local news he was dead. He was killed by police, but it was called "misadventure". I started making paintings about him – I didn't plan to, but I painted his burial. I was doing a nightclub painting and took out the DJ and put a coffin in instead. He was an electrician, and a very good boxer. After they killed him they chucked him on the floor of the van and the social worker saw them sitting with their feet on him. I couldn't stop doing paintings of Winston. They take up all your energy. I didn't realise how draining they were.

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The show's title piece shows a Rastafarian being handcuffed on a beach. What's it about?

I started painting Porthtowan beach [in Cornwall] and I said: "I'm going to draw black people on the beach." But it was too calm, it needed a punch, so I used one of my older paintings Three Wicked Men, which Peter Doig bought for the Tate, to give it a kick up the arse. It was like superimposing something from London on to a beach in Cornwall. I painted Three Wicked Men in 1982 – the title was a reggae record at the time about a businessman, a policeman and a politician.

How did Peter Doig become a fan of your work?

Peter saw my Royal College MA show in 1983 and really liked it. He was then a student at Central Saint Martins. He saw the odd exhibition when I was in group shows in the 90s. Anne Walmsley, who wrote the book *The Caribbean Artists Movement 1966-1972*, met up with Peter in Trinidad six years ago where they discussed my work. In 2015 he told me he would like to show my work at [his London gallery] Tramps and in New York. For this new show, he and the show's co-curator Matthew Higgs stayed with me in Cornwall for two days looking at 40 years of paintings.

What are your memories of the London reggae scene in the 1980s?

I used to go to Phebes, a club in Dalston at the bottom of my road. It's now big posh luxury flats. I'd go to the disco bit upstairs first and leave there about 1am and [soundsystem operator] Jah Shaka would be in the basement with a mono system. The people who followed Jah Shaka in those days, some would come in robes looking like African princes. Shaka would get his first record on, get a huge bag of weed out, light up and away we go.



From Trench Town to Porthtowan, 2016 by Denzil Forrester. Photograph: © Mike Newman.photography

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What do you have to say about the Windrush scandal?

It's disgusting what's happening. The ones getting all this rough treatment are probably the hardest working, as they never left this country and now in their 80s they want to go back and see where they're from and they're treated like shit. But that's the Conservative party, it's full of nasty people – Brexiters, Boris Johnson, Michael Gove. They are racist, but they're smarter now.

The generation born here, they're not so radical, they don't protest, so the government is getting away with a lot of stuff.

Were the impressionists and cubists a major influence on your work?

When I painted the landscape St Just in 1979 I was in love with Monet. I did my degree at Central Art School and we'd literally go to Paris three or four times a year – you'd go see the Monets and come back to your studio. Him and Cezanne made a big impression on me. When I started I was quite cubistic, but the cubists got their stuff from Africa anyway. Picasso just took it and ran with it.

How has living in Cornwall influenced your work?

The light down here is brilliant. It's like painting in Italy, where I lived for two years. I moved here in 2016, so Cornwall hasn't really influenced my work yet, I'm still into the London thing. But it's got the best coast in the country – the beaches are the closest thing to the West Indies.

On camping trips there in the late 80s and early 90s I remember children staring like they'd never seen black people before. Has it changed much?

Yes, Cornwall's changed a lot. Back then you could hardly even get international cuisine. You'd be lucky if you asked for spaghetti and they knew what you were talking about, but it's a more dynamic culture now. You don't find a lot of people of colour here – when I tell people I've moved here they say, "Why? There's no black people there!" My partner comes from an arty family and they went to Cornwall in the 1950s when people like Barbara Hepworth and Ben Nicholson were in St Ives. Even [Mark] Rothko lived in Cornwall. Back then, even if you were a Londoner they'd look at you as foreign!