

Stephen Friedman Gallery

# Denzil Forrester in Rome

5 – 31 October 2020

**Stephen Friedman Gallery is pleased to present 'Denzil Forrester in Rome', a selection of large-scale paintings and works on paper by Grenada-born, British artist Denzil Forrester.**

In 1983, Forrester was awarded a two-year scholarship by the British School at Rome in Italy. The works made there represent a defining moment in the artist's practice in which his frenetic depictions of London nightclub scenes are treated with the clarity and intensity of Rome's natural light and rich art history. Initially intended for Frieze Masters, the gallery will present Forrester's solo project in a specially designed space at 30 Old Burlington Street in October.

'Denzil Forrester in Rome' explores the formative role of Forrester's fellowship at the British School at Rome from 1983 to 1985. Exhibited together for the first time, these works reverberate with light and colour, synthesising Forrester's new-found experiences of Rome with his West Indian roots and love of London's dub scene. Sam Thorne, Director of Nottingham Contemporary, describes how on his arrival in Rome, Forrester felt that "the colours were just singing like mad". In Italy, Forrester continued to work directly from sketches made back in London of nocturnal revellers dancing to the sets of legendary DJs such as Jah Shaka. Removed from the original experience, he could revisit the subject from memory with renewed intensity.

Forrester incorporates numerous art-historical and architectural references in these works. The artist's sweeping compositions from this period were inspired by aerial configurations of Rome's circular piazzas, as well as fountains encountered in the gardens of the Villa Borghese adjacent to the British School at Rome. Forrester has said: "The figurative content in the Rome paintings is inspired by watching Romany people use the fountains to wash their clothes. After spreading them to dry, they would fall asleep on the bank." The artist has also spoken of his fascination with Old Masters such as Caravaggio and the lasting impression of the intensity and drama of the Italian master's works. The sense of movement, bold arrangement of colour, dynamic use of line and fragmented picture planes within Forrester's scenes also evoke Italian Futurism. A painting that the artist made after he returned to the UK is also on view to demonstrate the enduring influence of the residency on his work.

Forrester's works can be found in the collections of Tate, London; Arts Council Collection; and Harris Museum & Art Gallery, Preston, among many others. His work has been exhibited internationally at venues including The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, USA; Tate Britain, London, UK; Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, UK; Whitechapel Gallery, London, UK; Royal Academy of Arts, London, UK; and Gallery of Modern Art, Glasgow, UK.

Right: Denzil Forrester in front of the British School at Rome (1983).



DENZIL FORRESTER

When I was a young kid in the West Indies I had to attend church four days a week, I hated each and every second of it.

All the children thought the church was the most frightening and haunted place in the land. At the age of nine I became an altar boy, and after several months of eating the bread and tasting the wine, I made the mistake of helping myself to \$1 from the collection one Sunday afternoon. I was caught by the priest and thus was expelled from the church forever.

The picture most West Indians had hanging on their walls was Leonardo da Vinci's Last Supper, or a close up of Christ in a blessing gesture.

These colourful imported pictures were deliberately brightened, because of the tropical atmosphere of the West Indies it was therefore easier for people to relate to. The main reason why Christianity did not embody the visual spirit and illusion of the West Indians was because it came from another completely different culture.

I moved to England when I was eleven and a half and my interest in religion, especially the visual side, reappeared at the age of sixteen.

I am now living in an area where I am able to observe many different religious cultures and the visual effects it has on its members, e.g. clothes, headgear, posture.

I'm currently particularly involved in the Rastafarian sect. Obviously time spent living and working in Rome would be invaluable as it would give me yet another opportunity to observe another different style of life both past and present.

#### Proposed programme

I would try and produce six drawings a day to begin with, to enable me to get used to the different light, colour and environment. This would also be to formulate ideas for painting. Although the first month would be spent mainly on drawing, I would also begin painting on my arrival in Italy, as I think it would be exciting and important to record my immediate reactions and feelings about Rome at a time when my thoughts have not become too organised. My drawings would be done directly from the subject, e.g. buildings, people, etc. My paintings however will be done in the studio therefore not only drawing on what I have gathered in Italy, but from what I have been affected and influenced by during my whole life.

11 February 1983

Denzil Forrester, Esq,  
c/o Painting School,  
Royal College of Art,  
Exhibition Road,  
London SW7 2BJ

Dear Mr Forrester,

I am writing to tell you that you have been appointed to the Rome Scholarship in Painting for 1983. May I offer you my congratulations.

I enclose the Regulations for the award, and some additional notes, and I would suggest that sometime during the next week or two you would come for a preliminary talk, because there are doubtless various matters we should go over.

Would you please acknowledge the receipt of this letter as soon as possible.

Yours sincerely,

C.A.H. James  
Hon General Secretary





**Denzil Forrester**  
 Young Coconut Island 1, 1983  
 Oil on canvas  
 269 x 201cm  
 (105 7/8 x 79 1/8in)





**Denzil Forrester**, *Blue Tent*, 1984,  
Oil on canvas, 310 x 404.7cm, (122 1/8 x 159 3/8in)





**Denzil Forrester**  
 Study for Blue Tent, 1984  
 Pastel on paper  
 55.5 x 75.5cm (21 7/8 x 29 3/4in)  
 Framed: 74.5 x 95.5cm (29 3/8 x 37 5/8in)



**Denzil Forrester**  
 Untitled, 1984  
 Work on paper  
 55.5 x 75.5cm (21 7/8 x 29 3/4in)  
 Framed: 74.5 x 95.5cm (29 3/8 x 37 5/8in)

Denzil Forrester.

During my 1st year in Rome I have spent 5 weeks drawing and the rest painting in the studio. Although my painting is still strongly influenced by the work I have done in London, certain elements from Rome are creeping in. I have been inspired by the architecture and colours here.

My 1st painting ~~was~~ used Roman fountains and the colour of Italian buildings.

For my 2nd painting I used drawings done in the Borghese Gardens of a huge circus tent. The image sparked off my imagination leading me to think of the tent as a huge bird ready to take off. I began the painting with this image and the other parts of this work gradually grew around it. The drawings used for my 3rd painting were ones done over a period of 2 weeks, again in the Borghese Gardens. I was particularly interested in the heads and carvings of flowers and leaves that surrounded a sun dial. I felt that this was going to be the painting most heavily influenced by my stay in Rome and was excited by this. Unfortunately after beginning this work the primer on the canvas began to crack badly and I had to stop.

Therefore in my second year I would hope to further these ideas started in my 1st year.

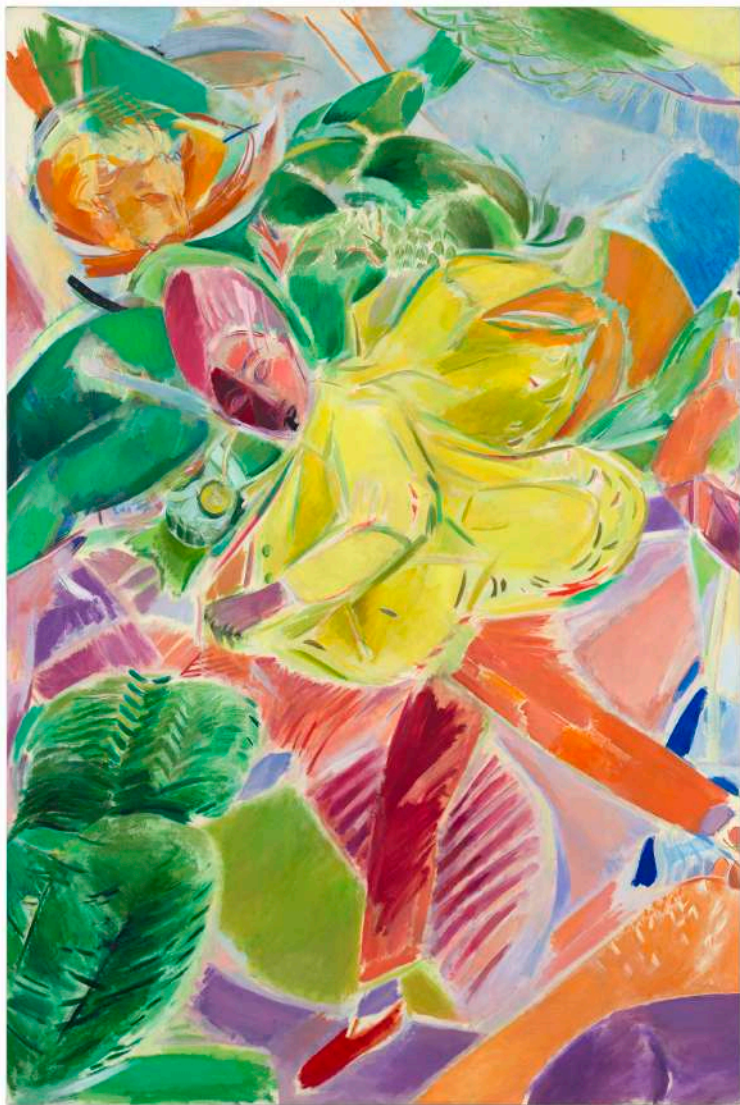
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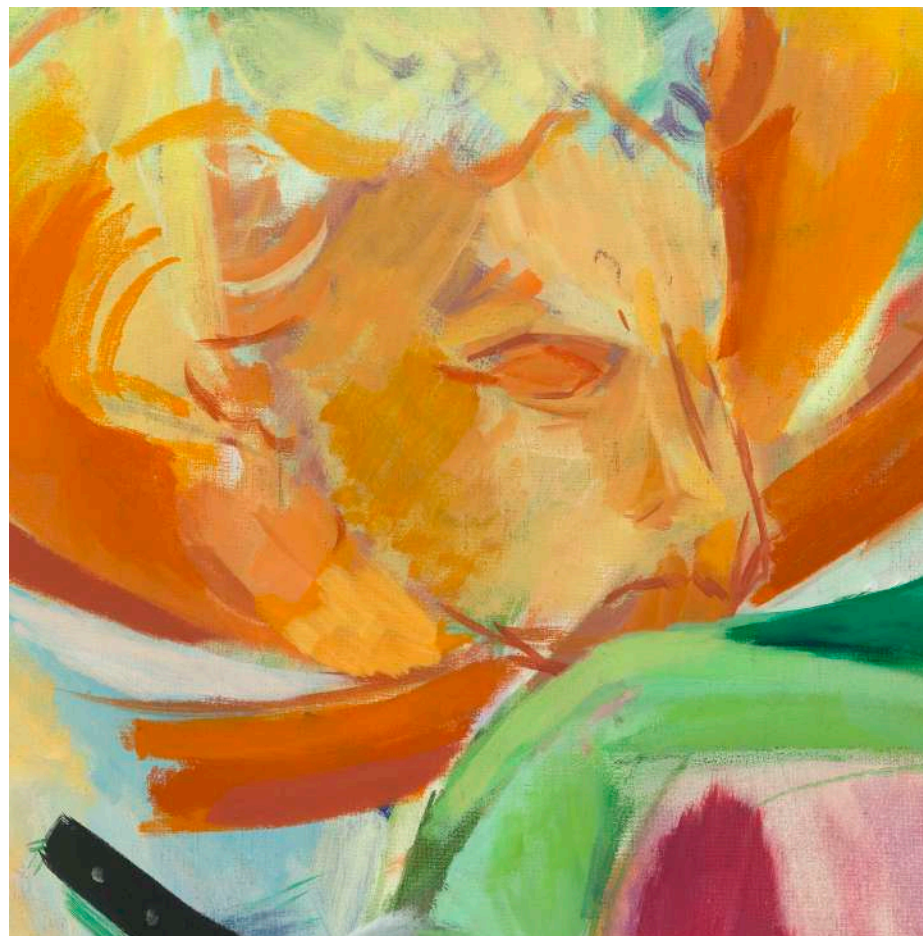
Left: Denzil Forrester's report following his first year at the British School at Rome (1984).

Above: Denzil Forrester in Rome (1984).





**Denzil Forrester**  
Running through Borghese Gardens, 1986  
Oil on canvas  
304 x 204.5cm  
(119 3/4 x 80 1/2 in)







Denzil Forrester, Baptism, 1984,  
Oil on canvas, 203.5 x 302cm, (80 1/8 x 118 7/8in)





Phillippa Clayden (Denzil Forrester's partner) sitting on a fountain in the gardens of the Villa Borghese (1983).





**Denzil Forrester**  
Villa Borghese 2, 1989  
Oil on canvas  
200 x 276cm  
(78 3/4 x 108 5/8in)

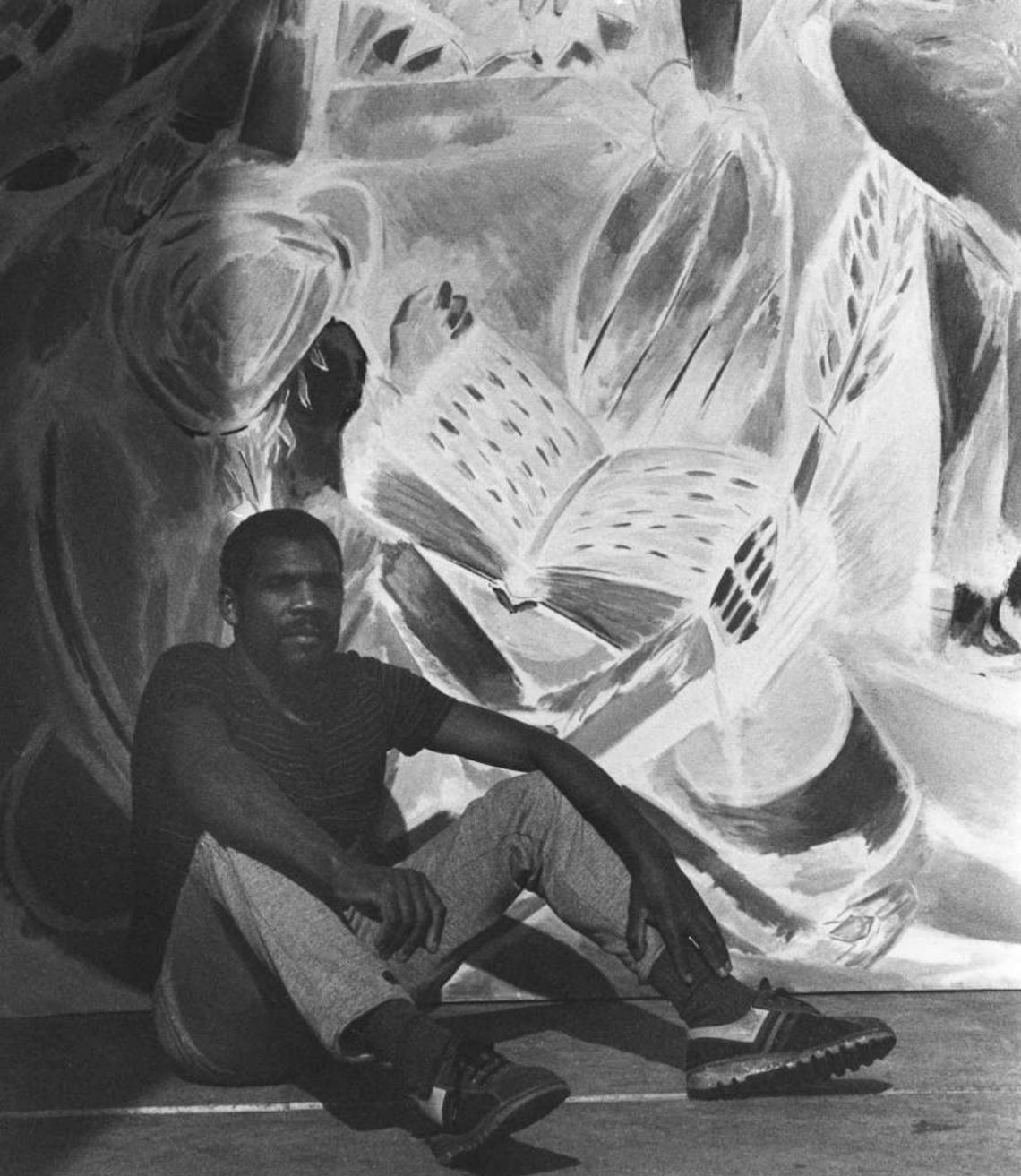


**Denzil Forrester**  
 Study for Borghese Fountain, 1984  
 Compressed charcoal and pencil on paper  
 56 x 76cm (22 1/8 x 29 7/8in)  
 Framed: 74.5 x 95.5cm (29 3/8 x 37 5/8in)



**Denzil Forrester**  
 The Unveiling, 1984  
 Pastel on paper  
 56 x 76cm (22 1/8 x 29 7/8in)  
 Framed: 74.5 x 95.5cm (29 3/8 x 37 5/8in)





Above: Portrait of Denzil Forrester in front of 'Wolf Singer' (1984).

Right: Extract from a letter from Denzil Forrester to the British School at Rome at the end of his fellowship (1985).

the school to built a partition around my sleeping area, and put in an extractor fan. Although I found it a strain living eating and working with the same set of people I have since found that it has improved my communication with people which has been specially helpful in the teaching jobs I now have.

There was a strong difference between the first and second year, the first year group of people were much more unified, which produced regular useful weekend trips with the school van to different parts of Italy. I'd like to put in a special thanks to Amanda the assistant director who worked hard to keep things running smoothly. The transition from one director to another made the second year more difficult.

Although my work improved in the second year the atmosphere was generally poor. The situation was complicated because two of the key people (STAFF) were not available for half the year, and the new director seemed to have very little knowledge about the general running of the place, and information about special passes et. The opportunity to spend two years in Rome painting has been invaluable and my thanks goes to all those who made it possible.

1 Oct 1985

Denzil Forrester

