

December 16, 2016
online

A Painter Who Captured London's 1980s Reggae Scene

The British painter Denzil Forrester, who is currently showing at White Columns, talks about how he made art and was a fly on the wall at reggae and dub music venues.

By Chris Cobb



Denzil Forrester, "SAMPLE THE B SIDE" (1982), oil on canvas, 66.93 x 89.37 in.

It's no secret that London in the 1980s was segregated. There was, for one, a stark contrast between the punk rock-obsessed white youth culture and the black youth culture that was madly in love with reggae. In that world, the legendary DJ Jah Shaka and his dub Sound System reigned supreme and would perform live mixes all night long. The British painter Denzil Forrester (then in his 20s) saw it as an opportunity not only to dance but also to make his own art. He then became a fly on the wall at the venues where huge crowds would sway to the beats.

In this way he could use what he was learning at the Royal College of Art to tell the story of that community and the energy he felt all around him. He would typically set up in a corner with his art supplies and sketch what he called "energy that can't be controlled."

During the day, he would be back in his studio transforming those drawings of dancers and club patrons and use them as the basis for large paintings, many of which are now on view at White Columns. This work of the reggae and dub music scene has never been seen in the United States before.

In addition to depicting colorful dancers, Jah Shaka, and the nightlife, some of Forrester's paintings were made in order to bear witness to police brutality — a theme that unfortunately still resonates. Specifically they are about Winston Rose, a friend and former roommate of his who was killed while in police custody in 1981. A newspaper report indicates he was choked to death by the officers who were overseeing him.

British painter Peter Doig co-curated the exhibition with White Columns Director Matthew Higgs. Because of the political and social consciousness that conveys, they felt it was an important time for more people to see it. For Doig, the art speaks about marginalized communities and the alternative scene they built within the context of a segregated society and how a painter responded to all of that. Indeed, as Higgs wrote in an email, "It is also important to emphasize that these aren't 'dance clubs' (per se) but very specific social clubs for the British Afro Caribbean community — during the years of Margaret Thatcher, and the rise of the far right in the UK — the National Front, and British Movement."

Higgs added, "There are clearly parallels to where we find ourselves now — Brexit, Trump etc. — which is why I think the work's potential and message remains so strong and legible."

I met the artist at his opening, and later during his gallery talk with Higgs and Doig, I found myself left with more questions than answers. As a result I began emailing him in order to illuminate a moment in time that now seems oddly historic because nobody knew back then what a huge impact reggae and dub would have on popular culture. What I discovered was that there is always a story within the story — in this case, Forrester articulated a lot of what his paintings left out.

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Chris Cobb: *What does dub mean to you?*

Denzil Forrester: The man most readily identified as the dub inventor is King Tubby. He began playing in Dance halls in Jamaica in the late '60s. Dub opened up a space for early toasters like Big Youth and many others. Dub DJ's used their mixing desks as an instrument. A dub track was originally the B-side of the record. The A-side was the vocal track. The B-side became more experimental using echo, feedback, and repeats. The dub track became very popular in the blues clubs. DJ's like Jah Shaka used dub to toast over and add bits of their own electronic sounds, i.e. police siren, train noises, truck horns, the conch was included as a reminder of carnival. Dub echoes the sound of contemporary cities. Without dub, rap music wouldn't have happened.

CC: *Were you aware of or interested in the punk rock movement happening at the time?*

DF: Punk (in London) began when I was at Central Art School. I had no real involvement in the punk movement other than some were people I knew. There were either punk parties or reggae parties.

CC: *When you were making drawings at those crowded reggae dance parties, were you hiding out or were you one of the dancers?*

DF: Both. I was both a fly on the wall and a participant. I loved the music *and* the people.

CC: *Who was at these clubs with you?*

DF: Mainly people descended from the West Indies but predominantly Jamaicans and a minority of white UK. I was a low-profile person and most of the time I was ignored — very occasionally someone would ask me to draw them. Only once in five years did someone take offense to me drawing them.

CC: *A lot of people in your paintings have their back to you, and the DJ's have their backs to the crowd most of the time. There is this sense that the dancing is serious work and the making of music for them to dance to is serious, too.*

DF: I see the DJ as a witch doctor: the unifier of all the people in that space, giving energy and strength to all at the same time. Dub reggae/blues parties are about groups of people. They are more like house parties than a regular staged nightclub: Jah Shaka is on the same floor level as everyone else — back to the audience, he performs with his machines as I do with my paper and charcoal. The sound system is set up in a corner or modest space. This area becomes an altar, decorated with personal images including of Halei Salasi (the Rastafarianism movement viewed Salasi as the Messiah). And so his personal space is protected by his team should anyone accidentally step into it.

CC: *And this body of work is really an attempt to respond to all of that artistically?*

DF: Yes, each of the drawings was done during the play of one record, around three to four minutes. Gesture drawings are not concerned with what the subject looks like or is — instead, the aim is to draw the action, movement and expression of what the subject is doing.

CC: *So, like going with the flow?*

DF: I would listen and feel the beats and textures of the music, imagine myself in the body or bodies of the person/group I was drawing. So I was mostly unable to see my drawing — because it was too dark. This helped and made me rely on my other senses to make the work. I think the artist has to believe that they are doing what his subject is doing and feel it in their own body.

DF: Gesture drawing is all about energy. Energy that you can't control, energy that you feel and cannot explain in words. It is there in expression, movement, and action.

CC: *Today people take it for granted, but Rastafarianism is an actual religion and so the music itself is a kind of celebration of life. Did you feel that?*

DF: I was excited by the visual appearance of the people as much as the sounds and atmosphere they created. I regularly attended house parties and held my own as well. It was an opportunity to watch people, which gave strength to their identity and some spiritual fulfillment.

CC: *How would you describe what you do? You did not exactly have people sit for their portraits, and you interacted and made art at the same time. Is it a kind of 'conceptual painting' or is there a proper term for it?*

DF: Well, I have to equip myself with lots of drawings to get into the physical aspect of making the painting. The paintings are done in a gestural manner. I try to adapt the same approach in the painting as I did in the drawings: quick and without thinking too much. Guided by what I am seeing and experiencing in the moment. I start with an overall feeling that I want the painting to have — it has to be fluid so that changes can be easily made. It is *not* conceptual. However, the composition of the painting is a conscious decision.

CC: *I am looking at your paintings of dancers and am thinking about another painter of dancers, Edgar Degas — I can't imagine him joining in with the ballerinas. By stepping into the scene, are you then turning your back on painting tradition that separates the artist from the subject?*

DF: I am not turning my back on painting tradition. Neither of us can say for sure how Degas worked. He may not have wanted to join the ballerinas, yet there is a sense that he was feeding off the type of energy of both the dancers and their costumes. They are not cold, analytical works — this is particularly evident in his monoprints and pastels. Van Gogh also worked in a painting tradition but his gestural/mark-making language comes directly from an impulse or feeling in his subject.

CC: *Among the dancers you paint, it seems very few are identifiable people. Aside from Winston Rose or Shaka, are your figures not named?*

DF: I am glad to have someone read my paintings in their own way — it means that they have become an active part of it. I don't have stories or roles for the figures in my work, I am purely concerned with the practicalities of drawing, composition, and color.

Denzil Forrester's song list:

Prince Jazzbo I Roy, "Step Forward Youth"

Fabine, "Prophecy"

Ijahman, "Moulding"

Leroy Brown and Tramps, "Blood Ago Run"

Mawamba Dub, "World, Sound & Power," Chapter Two, track three

Pablo Gard, "Beggarmen's Child"

Colombia Colly, "Jah Lion"

Barrington Levy, "Bounty Hunter"

Keith Hudson, "Brand Kieth Hudson"

Denzil Forrester *continues at White Columns (320 W 13th St, Chelsea, Manhattan) through December 17.*