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What to See in New York City Galleries This Week

By KAREN ROSENBERG



“Sample the B Side,” a work from 1982 by Denzil Forrester. Denzil Forrester and White Columns, New York

Denzil Forrester

White Columns 320 West 13th Street West Village Through Dec 17

As an art student at the Royal College of London in the early 1980s, Denzil Forrester spent his days in the painting studios and his nights in the reggae dance halls and at pop-up house parties of East London. There, in cramped and dimly lit rooms vibrating with the blasts from six-foot speakers, he drew with charcoal and pastel on A1 paper as he bobbed along with the crowd to D.J. Jah Shaka. Later, back in the studio, he turned these sketches into colorful, frenetic paintings that linked “sound, nature and the city,” as he said in 1986.

These bracing works are making a long-overdue United States debut, in a deeply immersive show at White Columns. Organized by this alternative space’s director, Matthew Higgs, and the painter Peter Doig, who has admired Mr. Forrester’s work since they were both art students in London in the 1980s, the show coincides with an exhibition at Tramps gallery in London.

Canvases on the earlier side of the show’s span (1980-85) revel in the architectural folds of patterned head scarves, the slouch of Rastafarian hats and the circle-in-the-square geometries of the speakers, as in 1981’s “Shaka at Dawn.” Later works seem to loosen up, though without losing the specificity of the dance hall; in 1983’s “Crowns of Dub,” heads and headgear are absorbed into a churning central mass.

These works are field studies of a particular subculture, and fascinating as such, but they also reflect an intense yearning for communal experience and community in general. So does a painting from a parallel series, “Tribute to Winston Rose,” which memorializes the 1981 death in police custody of a friend of Mr. Forrester’s, and instantly shifts the ecstatic group portraiture and theatrics of the club pictures into a funereal register, with an open coffin ringed by mourners under a glowing streetlight. Like the others, it’s a painting with deep, enduring reverberations.