

ARTIST'S LIFE MADE POLITICAL

All sorts of patients ended up in the two HIV wards at London's St Mary's Hospital, where nurse Sally Rowe worked in the late 80s. A violinist from the philharmonic orchestra. A stockbroker. A dresser in the West End. A man with a male partner whose ex-wife would visit him with their kids.

Nurses like Rowe got to know some of them so well as they cycled in and out of hospital that they went to their funerals. Not normal practice for medical staff, but there was something special about that time, she says, and the way the gay community supported one another. One patient told her he'd lost 35 friends to Aids.

Rowe remembers Derek Jarman as an "incredibly positive", good-looking man who was always surrounded by visitors, although when he died in 1994 at the age of 52, it was at a different hospital across town.

"I knew he was a film director," she says. "But he didn't act like that. He was always really well mannered. Kind and funny."

"And he was obviously a strong person mentally, because gay activism in those days wasn't a big thing."

In his lifetime, Jarman was many things to many people. Film-maker, artist, activist, set designer, writer, poet, performer, gardener. Towards the end of his life, he was even canonised as a saint by a group of queer "nuns", the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, to highlight the UK Government's lack of care during the Aids crisis.

Rowe, who ended up marrying a Kiwi and settling in New Zealand, is one of many Jarman fans who've thrown their support behind a tribute to his legacy, *Derek Jarman: Delphinium Days*, which opens today at Auckland's Gus Fisher Gallery.

It's the first exhibition of Jarman's work held in New Zealand, although his father, Lancelot Elworthy Jarman, was born in Canterbury and played violin in his spare time in the Christchurch Symphony Orchestra. One of the paintings on display, *Ganymede*, incorporates a photograph of Lancelot as a young man in his Royal Air Force uniform after he'd moved to the UK.

Bookending Jarman's career, *Delphinium Days* features a selection of rarely seen early Super 8 films alongside pieces from his late *Evil Queen* series, and tar paintings and landscapes that connect to his

Joanna Wane looks at the enduring legacy of artist, activist and canonised 'saint' Derek Jarman

'When I thought of what a gay person might look like, it wasn't this blue overall-wearing, Super 8 camera-wielding gardener who was so handsome and living his life.'

— Michael Lett

Below:
Jarman's
Drop Dead
(1993) and
Prospect
(1991), both
oil on canvas.

PHOTOS /
COURTESY
KEITH COLLINS
WILL TRUST
AND AMANDA
WILKINSON,
LONDON

famous garden at Dungeness, on a windswept shingle headland in Kent known as the desert of England.

Also included in the exhibition are tender images of Jarman taken by long-time friend Howard Sooley, whose photographs illustrate the last book Jarman wrote, *Derek Jarman's Garden*, chronicling his final years at Prospect Cottage where he continued to paint.

Jarman was with his "muse", actor Tilda Swinton, when he first stumbled across the property, which appears (as she does) in his 1990 film *The Garden*. Swinton made her debut in his most well-known film, *Caravaggio*, on the 16-17th-century painter. But as avant garde and irreverent as many of his projects were, he also found a place in the heart of popular culture, directing music videos for The Smiths, Marianne Faithfull, Bryan Ferry, Wang Chung (*Dance Hall*

Days) and the Pet Shop Boys, including their massive hit *It's a Sin*.

The first public figure in the UK to speak openly about his HIV-positive status, Jarman became a beacon of hope for those isolated from society, says Gus Fisher Gallery director Lisa Beauchamp, who has co-curated the exhibition.

Formerly from the UK herself, she studied Jarman at high school and remembers having a visceral response to one of his pieces, *Morphine*, which was included in an exhibition she curated in Birmingham. From his *Queer* series, created during the Aids epidemic, the oil painting overlays a canvas base made from homophobic front-page headlines from a British tabloid newspaper.

Thirty years after Jarman's death, Beaumont is struck by the enduring relevance of his work. "His activism was central to everything he did and there are so many parallels with today," she says. "Jarman has been such an important touchstone for so many people, and his work is so powerful. Something I've always loved about him is he worked in many different mediums and did them all exceptionally."

Co-curator and fellow gallerist Michael Lett was 15 when he read *Modern Nature*, a diary of Jarman's life at Dungeness and as an HIV-positive man in the 1980s. Exploring his repertoire was transformational for a teenage boy with few positive gay role models at the time. *Sebastiane*, the film Jarman wrote and directed about the martyred St Sebastian, is considered one of the first feature films to bring homoeroticism into the mainstream.

"I come from a religious background where being gay was quite close to being the worst thing you could possibly be," Lett says. "When I thought of what a gay person might look like at that point, it wasn't this blue overall-wearing, Super 8 camera-wielding gardener who was so handsome and living his life, even in the shadow [of Aids]."

Years later, Lett bought one of Jarman's tar



ART TO ACTIVISM

Six New Zealanders on Derek Jarman's legacy

Director David Blyth

Blyth met Jarman at the Berlin Film Festival in 1980, where Blyth's erotic fantasy *Angel Mine* was screening alongside Jarman's punk-rock cult classic *Jubilee*. He later visited Jarman in London where he was working on the script of his next film, about the 16-17th-century Italian painter Caravaggio.

"I was fascinated to see his creative process as he channelled magical worlds from academia's past, bringing Caravaggio to life in a profoundly daring way. Both of us went on as film-makers to push boundaries around experimental cinema and the dark shadow side of sexuality. Derek was not afraid to confront the other worlds of the unconscious, creating visionary works that redefined the cultural, sexual and political language of storytelling."

Artist Judy Millar

It's almost four decades since Jarman's *Caravaggio* screened at Auckland's Civic Theatre in 1986, but Millar remembers the visceral shock of seeing it on the big screen as if it were yesterday.

"A young art student, adrift, trying to figure out so many things; my entire being galvanised by the beauty, the violence, the sheer play of Jarman's film. So, this was what art could be; a fiction to enter, raw artifice. Some years later, back at the Civic, this time to see *Blue*. Another visceral shock, the blueness of the screen colouring even the air in the cinema. The voiceover penetrating: setting up images, artifice carried to another degree. What bravery."

Film-maker Florian Habicht

Habicht (*James & Isey*, *Love Story*, *Kaikohe Demolition*) was studying intermedia and film at Elam in the mid-90s when his teachers played *Blue* for the class. Jarman's final feature film released four months before his death, it consists of a single shot of saturated blue set to differing strands of narration.

"What a movie experience for a young artist who had no idea what path his career would take in the future. The blue screen represented Jarman's blindness from Aids-related complications, and the soundtrack felt like a collage of thoughts to me. I was inspired by his inventiveness to explore new forms of expression, even in the most challenging circumstances. Maybe I was subconsciously influenced by *Blue* when I made my first feature, *Woodenhead*, a musical fairy tale, where we pre-recorded the entire soundtrack, like a radio play, and then went up north to shoot the visuals with a completely different set of actors."

Artists James Ross and Gretchen Albrecht

In 2014, Ross and Albrecht visited friends in Dungeness, the desert-like headland on England's south coast where Jarman spent his final years. His partner, Keith Collins, was still living at Prospect Cottage where Jarman had created an extraordinary

garden, and invited them to visit.

"We were thrilled to see the intimate source material of Derek Jarman the artist: his wonderfully wide-ranging research library, his extensive archive of film material, props and posters; his artworks — paintings, constructions and collages. An unforgettable experience."

"The upkeep was proving to be very difficult for Keith on his income as a Tube train driver; current expenses being met by the judicious sale of Jarman artworks. We could see that the solution, as necessary as it was, could only amount to the diminution of this amazing archive of art and film as collated by a major gay artist, active at the height of his powers in the dark era prior to and during the tragic Aids epidemic, so keeping it as intact as possible seemed not only desirable, but essential."

After Collins' death, a crowdfunding campaign was launched in 2020 that raised £3.5 million, enabling the British charity Art Fund to buy the cottage and gardens, which are now open to the public.

Researcher/advocate

Dr Peter Saxton

The inaugural New Zealand Aids Foundation fellow in the School of Population Health at Auckland University, Saxton is speaking as part of the public programme of events being held during the exhibition.

"Being so out about your HIV status would have attracted horrendous stigma at the time, but Derek confronted that head on. He had such a sense of mission about his work, and I think those qualities translate so well to today's big issues, whether we're thinking of climate change, inequality or our new pandemic. Speaking openly about difficult, uncomfortable issues humanises the experience and chips away at prejudice. He encouraged people living with HIV to see themselves as people who mattered, not just victims or vectors of disease, at a time when gay men were dying awful, often lonely deaths, and that's just as important today."

Poet Sholto Buck

Poems by Buck, responding to two of Jarman's Super 8 films that will be screened at the gallery, have been commissioned to accompany the exhibition. Now based in Melbourne, Buck released his debut collection, *In the Printed Version of Heaven*, at the end of last year.

"When I'm watching something, I write the whole time, amassing a huge amount of text as I observe the images and try to translate them into lines of poetry. Then I chip away and edit it until I have something that feels like a poem. What I love about *My Very Beautiful Movie* [1974] is the relationship between eroticism and a very ethereal, melancholy beauty. My poem, *Fire Island*, tries to capture that. In *Jordan's Dance* [1977] a ballerina in a tutu is dancing around a rubbish fire, so in *Swan* I'm interested in the tension between beauty and decrepitude."

Artist Derek Jarman (left and above) in his London studio in 1992.

Exhibition curator Lisa Beauchamp (top) installs a 1989 painting, *Ganymede*, which incorporates a photograph of Jarman's NZ-born father.

PHOTOS / HOWARD SOOLEY, MICHAEL CRAIG

Right, from top: *Pinxit* (1987); *I.N.R.I.* (1988).

paintings, an "unbelievably fragile" piece embedded with flowers from the Dungeness garden, which he visited on a trip to the UK. He describes this new exhibition as small but from the heart, and he thinks some people who come to see the works will be deeply affected by the memories they trigger.

"Derek was a great artist who made his life political by declaring himself HIV positive at a time when this meant making yourself a target for a huge amount of hate and vilification," he says.

"He made people look at the world differently. And, you know, it's truly tragic to think that he would still be with us if he'd had access to the type of medication we have now. So I look to him as a kind of hero, and feel his status as a saint is deserved." ●

● **Derek Jarman: *Delphinium Days*** is on at Auckland's Gus Fisher Gallery until September 14, then moves to the Dowse Art Museum in Wellington from September 28 to January 26. In Auckland, a public programme of events will include film screenings at the Capitol Cinema, readings and performances, a queer fashion workshop at the gallery, painting workshops for kids and a creative gardening workshop led by artist Sarah Smuts-Kennedy. Go to gusfishergallery.auckland.ac.nz

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