

Reframing Jarman

The first NZ exhibition of legendary avant-garde English painter and director Derek Jarman spotlights his Kiwi connections. **BY LINDA HERRICK**

When *Delphinium Days*, a selection of works by the English avant-garde artist, film-maker, gay activist and gardening guru Derek Jarman, opens in Auckland this month, the multimedia show will include two small paintings he made in memory of his father, a New Zealander.

Lancelot Elworthy Jarman, who was born in Christchurch in 1907, was an engineer who emigrated to Britain in 1928 and trained with the RAF, flying bombers during World War II.

The two paintings are not pretty. Jarman covered the canvas with thick molten tar embedded with objects. *Battle of Britain* features a model bomber crash-landed in a black sea. *Ganymede*, which references a Greek myth, bears an oval photo of Lancelot stuck on the tar surrounded by red slashes and whirls. Jarman's relationship with his father had its tensions.

The two works belong to a group of his 1989 *Black Paintings* featured in *Delphinium Days*, alongside photos, films from Jarman's catalogue of short Super 8 rarities, screenings of his feature-length classics, memorabilia, input from the Elworthy branch of his New Zealand family, and a programme of talks and workshops.

The show opens at Auckland's Gus Fisher Gallery before moving to Wellington in September to the Dowse Art Museum in Lower Hutt, relocated from the City Gallery Wellington because of its earthquake-strengthening work.

Delphinium Days is named after a line of poetry recited by Jarman in his last film, *Blue*. He died of Aids-related ailments in 1994, just after his 52nd birthday. The show was initiated by Gus Fisher contemporary art curator Lisa Beauchamp, supported by fellow Jarman devotees Auckland gallerist Michael Lett and City Gallery senior curator Aaron Lister.

Jarman may be known here for his famous garden at Prospect Cottage in southeast England, or some of his indie films (*War Requiem*, *The Last of England*, *Caravaggio*, all starring his friend and muse Tilda Swinton); or his music

videos for bands like the Pet Shop Boys, Orange Juice and The Smiths, but his paintings have never been exhibited in New Zealand.

Beauchamp, who hails from Somerset, first encountered Jarman's work when she was at school, shortly after his death.

“

Even as he was going through so much, going blind, facing death, he was still so committed to adding so much to the world.

“I had a really good art teacher who introduced me to his work, particularly to his garden,” she recalls. “I wrote an essay on his garden, but I have never visited it. I circled back to him later in life, when I was working in Birmingham on an exhibition that included a work from his *Queer* series, called *Morphine*, from 1992. The base was laid with tabloid newspaper headlines from papers like the *Sun* and the *News of the World* – horrific ‘Filth!’ headlines outing a gay couple.

“With the Aids epidemic, there were lots of misconceptions; hatred fuelled by the tabloid press. I remember seeing that painting and being awestruck. You can feel the anger emanating from Derek’s brushstrokes and the way he has applied the paint. I remember thinking how much things have changed – or haven’t changed, really.”

After joining Gus Fisher in 2018, Beauchamp started thinking about Jarman’s links to New Zealand. “Why have we never shown any Jarman works here? I thought it might be interesting to remember there is a familial connection, and references to his father’s heritage are mentioned in a few of his artworks and his writing. So that’s how it came about.”

The small *Black Paintings* join three huge oils from the *Queer* and *Evil Queen* series, which Jarman completed shortly before his death. The titles reflect his response to his illness: *Blind Maniac* (referring to his near-blindness), *Drop Dead*, and a pithy acronym (which may offend some) of the word Aids.

“These paintings pulsate with colour,” says Beauchamp. “Paint has been applied rapidly, dripped, flung, dragged and smeared. *Blind Maniac* has black foil enmeshed in layers of thick paint. Jarman would write the title across the centre, often using a cutlery knife to etch the words.”

Delphinium Days also includes a poignant series of photos, taken by his close friend Howard Sooley, of Jarman in the garden he started making in an act of supreme optimism after being diagnosed as HIV-positive in 1986.

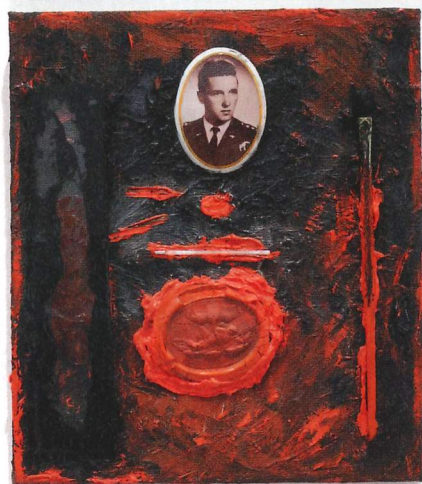
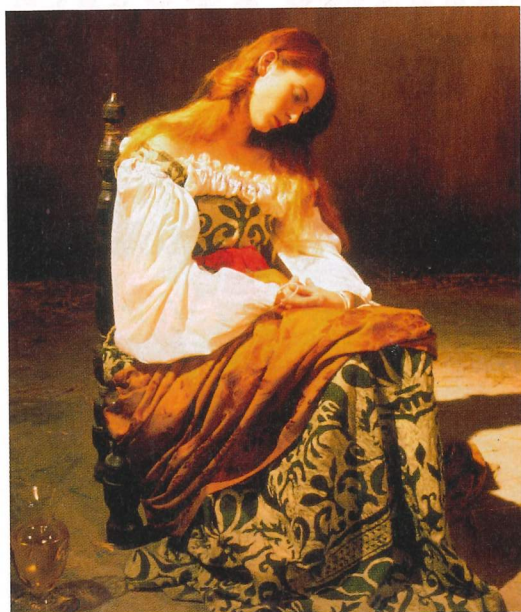
After receiving a small legacy from his father, who had died the same year, he bought Prospect Cottage, a fisherman’s shack on the windswept southeast coast overlooked by the Dungeness nuclear power stations. It became his sanctuary and solace. Jarman coated the cottage with protective tar and set about making the garden in a fascinating learning process described in his journal, *Modern Nature*, published as a book in 1991 that has never gone out of print.

The small, unfenced garden, now administered by Creative

Brushstrokes in anger: Derek Jarman pictured in the early 1990s with one of works protesting homophobia amid the Aids crisis.



HOWARD SOULEY



Master strokes (clockwise from top left): Jarman's friend and muse Tilda Swinton in *Caravaggio*; Jarman's home, Prospect Cottage, on Kent's windswept coast; *Prospect*, an oil on canvas painting, 1991; *Ganymede*, featuring an oval photograph of Jarman's father, Lancelot.

Folkestone, has become a magnet for thousands of visitors each year and the distinctive black cottage is used as an artist's residency.

The show also features memorable photos from the day in 1991 when the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence – an international group of gay male nuns – travelled to Dungeness and canonised Jarman as the first gay saint, an event he recorded as “the happiest day of my life”.

Lister hopes *Delphinium Days* will help broaden Jarman's New Zealand fan base. “There may be a general lack of awareness here of who he is but I have found a huge number of artists, writers and thinkers who hold him really close and love him. We can bring them something really special.

“But there is probably a bigger group of people who will know his work more than you think, as a kid of the 80s, and

the music videos. Even as he was going through so much, going blind, facing death, he was still so committed to adding so much to the world, in terms of challenging the system and bringing that sense of joy that can lift us all. There are so many ways he can speak to different people.”

The film screenings feature two of his early experiments using a Super-8

“**There has been this amazing warmth towards Derek, where the mere mention of his name has been met with so much excitement and emotion.**”

camera: *My Very Beautiful Movie* (1974), shot in Fire Island in New York, and *Jordan's Dance* (1977), an anarchist spree featuring punk icon Jordan dancing around a burning Union Jack.

In Auckland, the Capitol Cinema is screening three feature films: *Caravaggio* (1986), with a youthful Sean Bean emoting madly for his very first screen death; *The Garden* (1990), Jarman's “musings on queerness” (“sometimes self-indulgent,” said the *Guardian*); and *Blue* (1993), a contemplation of life and death created with words and music set to a static ultramarine screen, made when his vision was reduced to flashes of blue.

The film programme for Wellington is yet to be confirmed, although Lister says *Blue* will feature.

Lister has been crafting an essay on the Lancelot-Derek relationship, which is touched on throughout *Modern Nature*.