


DEREK JARMAN DELPEI INIMUM DAYS

Aotearoa New Zealand

15 June 2024

—26 January 2025



Blue of my heart
Blue of my dreams
Slow blue love
Of delphinium days

DELPHINIUM DAYS: AN INTRODUCTION

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Co-Curators
Derek Jarman: Delphinium Days

This project began through a shared love of Derek Jarman. Like many, we have come to Jarman's practice in myriad ways, each with our own points of connection. From reading *Modern Nature* as a teenager in Whangaparāoa, to experiencing his viscerally charged paintings in Birmingham or being lost in an achingly beautiful wash of monochromatic blue at the Serpentine Gallery, Jarman has had a profound impact on each of us.

Embarking on this exhibition thirty years since the artist's passing, our research and conversations have been met with much warmth. We have experienced some unexpected coincidences along the way, including a chance meeting with a retired nurse who met Jarman when he was receiving treatment at St Bartholomew's Hospital, London, and the discovery of a letter from the artist replying to a man who wrote to him from Auckland. During a conversation with an ex-film producer who was a close friend, we were informed that one of the most important things to remember when curating this show was how devastatingly handsome Jarman was, and, of course, by virtue of being so handsome and talented, many artists were jealous of him. This fleeting, cheeky comment stayed with us, as did the many conversations we had with those near and far who each helped to reveal something about him as a person.

Creatively, Jarman was undeniably prolific. Whilst best known today as an experimental filmmaker, he painted throughout his life. His films and paintings constantly informed one another. He was an exceptional writer, his autobiographic diaries and defiant testimonies of gay

sexuality and the AIDS epidemic became a powerful voice in advocating for gay rights at a time of extreme prejudice and vitriol in society. Also a theatre and costume designer, Jarman's output extended to music videos, most notably Pet Shop Boys *It's a Sin* (1987). However, arguably his most enduring legacy is his much-loved garden and home of Prospect Cottage in Dungeness, Kent – a landscape where nothing was meant to grow but everything did. As Jarman's refuge and retreat, the garden became an extension of his studio, a blank screen from which to fill and a canvas of his own making. Referred to by Jarman as the fifth quarter and the end of the globe¹, Dungeness fuelled his creativity – the garden's resilience against the harsh climate becoming emblematic of his own battle against the effects of his illness.

As we look back on his work from the present, its relevance remains ever palpable.

In an interview in 1991, Jarman was asked to reflect on the achievements of the last 21 years and the battles ahead. Citing acceptance and a need for people's hearts to be changed as well as legislation, Jarman goes on to say:

It needs the “I” to be put back into everything. I don't believe people who write “them”. They should always write “I”. Everyone is an “I” in the AIDS epidemic... It is always us not them. It's a shift in how we look at things, that's what we really need.²

Derek Jarman's connection to Aotearoa New Zealand is bound up in the more tempestuous relationship he shared with his father Lancelot who was born in Canterbury in 1907. Lancelot Elworthy Jarman trained as an engineer in Ōtautahi Christchurch, and later left Aotearoa for Britain to join the RAF, eventually becoming a highly decorated pilot. In Britain, he would meet and soon marry Elizabeth Evelyn Puttock, or 'Betts' as she was known. Their son Michael Derek Elworthy Jarman was born in Northwood in 1942. Lancelot and Betts would visit Aotearoa in 1951, and again in the late 1970s or early 1980s. They planned to retire here.³ Derek Jarman never made the journey.

Jarman writes with admiration about his father's talents as a piano player, an amateur film maker, and, most intriguingly, as a maker of 'sculptured beautiful Deco candlesticks' for

modernist designer Syrie Maugham.⁴ His parent's gift of the book *Beautiful Flowers and How to Grow Them* (1909) when Jarman was only four years old prompted a lifetime of botanical interest that would later flourish in the garden at Prospect Cottage.

Jarman grew up observing his father's treatment as a 'colonial', who could 'scarcely conceal his dislike for a system in which he was an outsider.'⁵ At times he attempted to connect his sense of outsidership to the family's shared dark complexion that saw him nicknamed a racial slur at school.⁶ This even led to a quickly-closed-down discussion with his father enquiring if the family might have Māori heritage.⁷

The conservative politics of his father's generation were more often a battleground for Jarman. In *The Last of England* (1987) he incorporates home film footage shot by Lancelot showing a young Derek and his sister playing in the garden of the family's barbed-wire-monitored RAF encampment. In another scene, the family eats dinner to an overlaid soundtrack of bombs and war. Jarman called the film a response to his father's and the country's militaristic ways, and it draws a parallel between the experience of war within Lancelot's generation, and Jarman's own communities' loss from AIDS.

Following Lancelot's death in 1986, Jarman embarked on a series of black paintings which were meditations on grief and the void. More specifically, these paintings respond to a family secret that fully came to light through the process of sorting through his father's possessions. Following Betts' long illness and death a few years earlier, Lancelot had developed kleptomania, for which he had been arrested and had to go through a humiliating public trial.⁸ On clearing out the house, Jarman and his sister came to understand the extent of the compulsion. He called it 'the maddest inheritance', a hoarder's paradise of unexpected and bizarre objects.⁹ Jarman's own assemblages of this time combining found and scavenged objects feel attuned to this realisation of his father's secret, and, perhaps, their shared but differently realised impulses and energies. Among the discoveries in the house were typed copies of hundreds of letters Lancelot had written to family in Aotearoa as a young man, along with some photographs.¹⁰ One of these photographs might just be embedded in a painting within this exhibition, serving to reunite Lancelot, and in turn his son, with Aotearoa, and through their complex father-son dynamic.

1. Derek Jarman, *Derek Jarman's Garden* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 14.
2. *Gay Culture*: Derek Jarman Interview (Getty Images: ITN, 1991)
3. Tony Peake, *Derek Jarman: A Biography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 270.
4. Derek Jarman, *Dancing Ledge: Journals Vol 1* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 62.
5. Ibid.
6. Peake, 44.
7. Derek Jarman, *Kicking the Pricks* (London: Constable, 1987), 62.
8. Peake, 261.
9. Ibid.
10. Peake, 373

FIRE ISLAND

by Sholto Buck
(after Derek Jarman's *My Very Beautiful Movie*)

Before the orgy, a friend told me he cried
watching Derek Jarman's *My Very Beautiful Movie*.
I was sitting on his bed, slowly taking off my shirt.
I embarrassed myself then, saying declaratively
that I hadn't seen it and movies do not make me cry.

My friend laughed. I've been known to fall
in love with what breaks me. An attempt
to cross boundaries, a poem, a wedge
of light sliced in the dune.

The film is six minutes long, and I watch it
in the Melbourne Airport without sound, so I can write
about my life. On the screen, a thin man is naked
on the beach, a starfish curling

in his hand. The image looks like water
pooling in an eyelid. A warping piece of glass
and the slope of his hard shoulder. The star

is a porous shell. Shattered
piles of wood on sand. He makes
a shape with his elbow. His leg,
silhouettes into a dick.

Gay guys come to fire island to look at water,
and to participate in orgies. A story
that's been told. My face reflects
on airport glass and back

to the wooden ruin, the part of the sand that is a border
between wet and dry. I am concentrating
on what's in front of me. This horizon is
a flat and definite reality.
A shelf you could lean an arm on.

The wool of a wave flows in. I pause on
his speedo in the sand. The starfish rests
between his lips and thumb, counterpoised
by the horizon. A lilac line

cut between a cell-red blob.
Scans and scans of ocean
glass. The sky lowers on the star, turning
pink and moving slowly out of focus.





by Sholto Buck
(after *Jordan's Dance*)

This is a formal experiment in violence, addressed
to the joke of purity. She dances
against pleasure. Nature, entropy, dereliction, fat.

The tutu and the garbage fire. Diaphanous
heat exudes from each and both imply the swift
collapse of beauty. This loss is inept
to the expression of grace that is
our birthright. Wet dirt. I am standing under
a bridge. Linear shadow.

She does a slow-motion bounce. Ash floats
through the air like bugs.

What we might call urban. A muscly guy
wearing a Greek god on his face. The word carnivalesque,
the burning Union Jack. It makes me think
of Leda and the Swan, she is playing
both parts. Whirling bright,

a catastrophe. Minimal

and brutal costuming, I can see it
coming apart, my black suit
jacket at the shoulder. Gleaming
hair scissors.

Sholto Buck is a poet and artist based in Naarm Melbourne. He has a PhD in Creative Writing from RMIT, which explores photographic looking in poetry. He previously attended Elam School of Fine Arts at Waipapa Taumata Rau, The University of Auckland. His first book of poetry, *In the Printed Version of Heaven*, was recently released by Rabbit Press. He is currently working on a second book of poems that includes a response to Derek Jarman's film *Sebastiane* (1976). Buck was invited to write in response to two Super 8 films included in the exhibition – *My Very Beautiful Movie* (1974) and *Jordan's Dance* (1977).

THE GARDEN

by Derek Jarman

I walk in this garden
holding the hands of dead friends.
Old age came quickly for my frosted generation,
cold, cold, cold, they died so silently.
Did the forgotten generations scream
or go full of resignation,
quietly protesting innocence?
I have no words,
my shaking hand cannot express my fury.
Cold, cold, cold, they died so silently.

Linked hands at 4 a.m.,
deep under the city you slept on,
never heard the sweet flesh song,
Cold, cold, cold, they died so silently.

Matthew fucked Mark fucked Luke fucked John
who lay on the bed that I lie on,
touch fingers again as you sing this song.
Cold, cold, cold, we die so silently.

My gilly flowers, roses, violets blue,
sweet garden of vanished pleasures,
Please come back next year.
Cold, cold, cold, I die so silently.

Goodnight boys, goodnight Johnny,
Goodnight, goodnight.

Derek Jarman: Delphinium Days has been co-developed by Gus Fisher Gallery and City Gallery Wellington Te Whare Toi. The exhibition is co-curated by Lisa Beauchamp, Curator of Contemporary Art at Gus Fisher Gallery, Aaron Lister, Senior Curator (Toi) at City Gallery Wellington Te Whare Toi, and Michael Lett.

The exhibition was made possible with the lead support of Tony Kerridge and Micheal Do, with additional support of the City Gallery Wellington Foundation, the Delphinium Days Exhibition Circle, and those who wish to remain anonymous. The Auckland public programme is brought to you by Burnett Foundation Aotearoa with additional support from the Gerrard and Marti Friedlander Charitable Trust, the Sir William & Lady Manchester Charitable Trust and cinema partners, The Capitol Cinema. With thanks to the Keith Collins Will Trust and Amanda Wilkinson, London. Films courtesy of LUMA Foundation and James Mackay.

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ISBN: 978-0-9951286-6-8
Design by Sarah Gladwell

**Derek Jarman:
Delphinium Days**
15 June – 14 September 2024

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Tuesday – Friday 10am – 5pm
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gusfishergallery.auckland.ac.nz

**Derek Jarman:
Delphinium Days**
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