

Derek Jarman

Shadow Is the Queen of Colour

Private view: 11 April 2019, 6-8 pm

Exhibition dates: 12 April 2019 - 22 June 2019

The paintings in this exhibition were made during 1989-1990, a moment when Derek Jarman was in the midst of creating his garden around Prospect Cottage in Dungeness. During this period, he also made *The Garden*, 1990, a film in which the life of Christ was re-imagined as the life of a gay couple. His diaries from these years formed the publication *Modern Nature*, a lyrical rendition of the pain he experienced as he contended with AIDS, the anger he felt at the current political situation and the joy of working on the garden and spending time in the visually 'post-apocalyptic' landscape of Dungeness.

Jarman's parallel artistic practices collide as never before during these years and the central theme of *The Garden* is introduced in this exhibition by two paintings: *Flesh Tint*, 1990 and *Matthew, Mark, Luke and John*, 1989. The other paintings in the show are made with tar, which covers the canvas and in which is embedded a collection of objects, such as driftwood and barbed wire found on Dungeness beach, prayer books and a crucifix, as well as old photographs and feathers (which relate to a tarring-and-feathering episode in *The Garden*). As with the previous series of black paintings, from 1986, the creation of these paintings often had a performative element and Jarman describes the making of two of them in *Modern Nature*.

We lit the bonfire with driftwood and boiled up the tar as the sun set.

In the gathering shadows we completed new paintings: a mirrored Coke can surrounded by demons; and a ship in a bottle – filled with black gold and smashed. The glass fell on to the canvas like a tallship in full sail; the tar eddied about it, the broken masts of the ship swallowed in the black – black that breaks down forms and distinctions, swallows shadows.⁽¹⁾

Jarman was a political activist and was one of the first public figures to speak out about AIDS. He campaigned tirelessly for gay rights, but also spoke out against the commercialisation of the art world and the need to take care of the environment. These concerns were later poetically addressed in a chapter of his book *Chroma*, 'Shadow Is the Queen of Colour', which provides the title of this exhibition, where he quotes from Pliny on man's love of gold and nature's way of protecting itself.

Pliny was certain that Luxuria was the enemy. There was a time before, before men wore gold rings, before they raised statues to themselves in precious metals. A time when Mother Nature was not pillaged and plundered, for yellow, and blue, and vermilion, though nature could hold her own against man, poisoning him not only with plants and animals, but also with colours. Pliny says that painters wore bladder masks to protect themselves from the dust of vermilion as they painted the statue of Jupiter.⁽²⁾

Jarman's work also draws upon his personal history. In *The Garden* he sits at his writing desk reflecting upon his life; in *Modern Nature* he incorporates childhood memories; and, in these paintings, old photographs are embedded in tar, while a model aeroplane alludes to his father's career in the RAF. The tar supplies a visceral quality to the works, though the objects immersed in the surface appear frozen. In the case of the tar-covered clock in one of the paintings, we are offered an image of the freezing of time. These paintings have a presence that seems at once energised and static. They could be viewed as shadows of the two years in which they were painted, the black tar embracing emblematic objects that reflected Jarman's struggles during this time in his life. As Mario Perinola suggests in writing about Jarman's last film, *Blue*, 1993, the 'staged authenticity' that suffuses Jarman's work when he draws on autobiographical sources 'is not a limitation of the work. On the contrary, it's its greatness'⁽³⁾.

Forthcoming exhibitions of Derek Jarman's work include a retrospective at The Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, curated by Seán Kissane, which opens in November 2019 and will travel to Manchester City Gallery in 2020, curated by Jon Savage. *The Garden* has recently been re-mastered and will be screened at the Metrograph Cinema, New York, from 29 May to 4 June 2019 and at the BFI Southbank Cinema, from 21 June to 27 June 2019.

With special thanks to Garry Clayton, Diane Gelon, Karl Lydon, James Mackay, and Tony Peake.

The gallery would like to dedicate this exhibition to the fond memory of Keith Collins

⁽¹⁾ Derek Jarman, 1991. *Modern Nature - The Journals of Derek Jarman, 1989-1990*, with an introduction by Olivia Laing, p. 120. London: Vintage.

⁽²⁾ Derek Jarman, 1994. *Chroma*. p. 23. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

⁽³⁾ Mario Perinola, 2004. *Art and its shadow*, p. 41. London: Continuum.