

# Super 8

The Super 8 camera is free.

Derek Jarman was given a Super 8 camera in 1970. It opened a new range of filmmaking possibilities which Jarman pushed beyond the 'home movie' tradition that this technology was made for—and the normative domestic and familial experiences it was designed to capture. By the time Jarman made his first feature film *Sebastiane* in 1976, he had already made over forty Super 8 films.

Jarman's Super 8 language is based on improvisational freedom and experimentation that refuses fixed form or meaning. He would shoot footage through prisms and filters and superimpose and collage it together to create a sense of fragmentary, psychedelic visions or dreams. Films were projected and then refilmed to create multi-layered imagery one step further removed from the world they were taken from. These films would be screened at different speeds, and have their soundtracks switched out. The visual and formal qualities of the Super 8 films drew from and fed into Jarman's painting practice as much as his feature films. They have been described as his 'secret garden'.

On Jarman's death, his friend and collaborator James Mackay set about restoring, preserving, and tending to the legacy of the Super 8 films, which are now recognised as a vital part of Jarman's output.

## **My Very Beautiful Movie** 1974

Super 8 film transferred to HD Video, 6:28 mins, stereo  
Final version released in 2021 featuring new soundtrack by Simon Fisher Turner  
Courtesy of LUMA Foundation and James Mackay

*My Very Beautiful Movie* 1974 is a languid celebration of the magic found in landscapes, everyday experiences, and the people we choose to share them with. Shot in black and white and then with a glass prism held in front of the camera to re-film the images and add colour and distortion, it transforms Fire Island into a meditative and profoundly human environment of the imagination. Describing the experience Jarman wrote: "The shrubs in the woods that lay along the shore were heavily scented, full of fireflies, silent floating will-o'-the-wisps. The silence and deep satisfaction of being alone attracted me as much as the possibility of a chance encounter. I would spend every night wandering, then sit by the seashore watching the rising sun."

## **Jordan's Dance** 1977

Super 8 film transferred to HD Video, 16:15 mins, silent  
With Jordan, Steve Treatment, Jean Marc Prouveur and Howard Malin  
Courtesy of LUMA Foundation and James Mackay

*Jordan's Dance* is a raucous and political film connected to London's punk scene. Set in a derelict industrial space, it stars punk icon Jordan in a debauched ballet performance around a blazing pyre in which a Union Jack flag burns. It would form the basis of Jarman's second feature *Jubilee* 1978, one of his anti-Thatcherite State of the Nation films. Jarman often screened his Super 8 films silent, but sometimes also accompanied by different musical pieces. For *Jordan's Dance*, one of Jarman's suggestions was Brahms' Violin Concerto, and in the film *Jubilee* he sets these sequences to an 1884 composition by Minkus for the ballet *Giselle*.

# Black Paintings

Personally, I hope there is no afterlife. I find the idea of resurrection frightening. No heaven, no hell—just a void...which is of course the black in these paintings. The black is that infinite void.

The Black Paintings were made in the wake of Jarman's HIV diagnosis and the death of his father in 1986. They have been described as 'small universes of anger, pain and sanctity'. Scratched words and found objects rich with symbolic meaning are embedded into their surfaces. The recurrent religious iconography alludes to Jarman's Christian upbringing, while broken shards of glass and medical paraphernalia represent "My world in fragments, smashed in pieces so fine I doubt I will ever re-assemble them."

Jarman's move to Dungeness in 1986 changed the Black Paintings. He started pouring molten tar onto the canvases, placing and dropping objects into their sticky, bubbling surfaces. While some of these objects were still sourced from markets and junk shops, the majority were collected during beach walks or taken from his garden. Jarman claimed that these objects found him, and that their use represented a combination of deliberate and subconscious decision-making. In this way, these paintings or assemblages become an extension of his garden and environment, as well as his existence.

Jarman made these small, icon-like works over the last eight years of his life. They evoke the black of the mourning shroud, the protective melanosis of the moth, his 'spirit guide' Goya, and of that infinite void which Jarman's late works stare down with black humour.

From left:

**Untitled (Ganymede)** 1990

Oil and mixed media on canvas

**Battle of Britain** 1989

Tar and mixed media on canvas

**Dead Souls Whisper** 1986

Oil and mixed media on canvas

**Pinxit** 1987

Oil and mixed media on canvas

**Untitled (Wired Glass/Thermometer)** 1990

Oil and mixed media on canvas

**They've Done It In** 1987

Oil and mixed media on canvas

**The Dead Sea 11** 1986

Oil and mixed media on canvas

**Imperial Dreams, Material Nightmares** 1988

Oil and mixed media on canvas

**God Bless American Express** 1987

Oil and mixed media on canvas

**This Precious Stone** 1986

Oil and mixed media on canvas

Courtesy of Keith Collins Will Trust and Amanda Wilkinson, London

# The Garden

The gardener digs in another time, without past or future, beginning or end. A time that does not cleave the day with rush hours, lunch breaks, the last bus home. As you walk in the garden you pass into this time—the moment of entering can never be remembered. Around you the landscape lies transfigured. Here is the Amen beyond the prayer.

Derek Jarman discovered Prospect Cottage during a bluebell hunt with Tilda Swinton and his companion HB (Keith Collins). He had previously visited Dungeness, on the south-east coast of Kent, while capturing images for a film and was entranced by the otherworldly atmosphere and extraordinary light. In 1986, the same year he received his HIV diagnosis, Jarman purchased this old fisherman's cottage and embarked on the creation of a garden that would become one of his most treasured and fulfilling works of art.

Dungeness is an expansive headland and one of the largest shingle formations in the world. Often referred to as Britain's only desert, its barren landscape bears the brunt of coastal winds, strong sunlight and low rainfall. It also houses the now retired Dungeness B Nuclear Power station.

Jarman was told that the high salt-laden winds and an almost total absence of soil at Prospect Cottage would make gardening impossible. However, through a combination of wild and introduced plants, and use of novel planting techniques, his garden bloomed. Jarman found that the Dungeness climate suited certain plants—poppies with their moisture seeking roots and anything fleshy and glaucous-leaved like the native purple sea kale flourished. Yucca trees and harakeke were planted and there was an abundant vegetable and herb garden.

The garden at Prospect Cottage was a visual cornucopia, featuring concentric stone formations, domes of santolina flowers, upright dragon-toothed flints, and rusted metal and beachcombed items. Other objects included old iron hooks, fishing boat floats and spiral lengths of iron.

Jarman's friend and photographer Howard Sooley was integral to the garden's creation as a keen plantsman. The photographs he took demonstrate the importance of Dungeness as refuge and retreat, which Jarman revered as his Gethsemane and Eden. From 1986 until his passing in February

1994, Jarman transformed the most inhospitable of places into one of breathtaking beauty. The garden's verdant flora became a metaphor for Jarman's brave and persistent struggle against the effects of his illness. And yet slowly, the garden began to contrast with Jarman's struggle with his illness. As HB notes, "The flowers blossomed while Derek faded."

## **Prospect** 1991

Oil on canvas

Courtesy of Keith Collins Will Trust and Amanda Wilkinson, London

This painting is a faithful depiction of the Dungeness landscape with colours that echo the scarlet field poppies and blue viper's bugloss growing wild in the area. Jarman made a number of these small landscape paintings on site at Prospect Cottage, and they connect to his time at the Slade School of Art, where training was rooted in an English tradition of landscape painting. Whereas Jarman's early landscape paintings were characterised by a minimalist aesthetic, these later works reflect a different approach of thick impasto surfaces and bold hues that can be seen in his larger canvases made around this time.

Howard Sooley

## **Derek Jarman, Prospect Cottage, Dungeness**

1991–93

Photographic prints

Courtesy of Howard Sooley

In 1990, Howard Sooley was sent by magazine *The Face* to meet Derek Jarman and recalls their walk along the Dungeness beach discussing plants and films as 'genius.' Jarman described Sooley's portraits as both flattering and revealing. Vibrant depictions of the garden combine with tender portraits of the artist at his most vulnerable. With an openness characteristic of the artist himself, these images are a true depiction of a place which both men held dear. Many of Sooley's images would be reproduced in the landmark book *Derek Jarman's Garden* (1995).

# Saint Derek

The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence are an Order of queer and trans nuns with houses across the globe who use religious imagery to shed light on issues of sex, gender, and morality. Amid the AIDS crisis in Britain, The Sisters of the London house wanted to take a stand and protest the negligence of the government which had resulted in the death and suffering of many. Their mission was to 'expiate homosexual guilt from all and to replace it with universal joy'.

Inspired by Jarman's openness about his sexuality and HIV status, the nuns decided to canonise him as the first living gay saint in Britain. On 22 September 1991, the fifth anniversary of his HIV positive diagnosis, the nuns travelled to Dungeness to canonise 'Saint Derek of Dungeness of the Order of the Celluloid Knights'. The ritual included a procession, the hymn Amazing Grace, a laying on of hands, and a mass communion.

Gordon Rainsford and Denis Doran's photographs capture joy of this event with Jarman dressed in the robe from his film *Edward II* 1991, designed by Sandy Powell. Jarman described this as one of the happiest days of his life, and noted that, after the service ended, they all had tea in the garden and went down to the sea.

Gordon Rainsford

## **Derek Jarman's canonisation by The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence** 1991

Photographic prints

Courtesy of Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence Archive, Bishopsgate Institute, London

Gordon Rainsford's work as a freelance photographer provides an unparalleled archive of LGBTQIA+ Britain between 1985 and 2005. He documented many Pride marches, the protests of Outrage! and ACT UP London and attended vigils for those lost during the AIDS crisis. Here, four of Rainsford's photographs capture Jarman's canonisation. One shows Jarman surrounded by nuns during the laying of hands. In another, he joyfully paddles in the sea following the ceremony.

## **Hymn Sheets from the Canonisation of Derek Jarman** 1991

Digital reproductions

Courtesy of Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence Archive, Bishopsgate Institute, London

Denis Doran

## **Derek Jarman's canonisation by The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence** 1991

Photographic prints

Courtesy of Denis Doran

Denis Doran worked as a photographer for various publications between 1980 and 1993. Growing up in the North East of England, he documented working class life in and around his seaside home. Along with Gordon Rainsford, Doran photographed Jarman's canonisation at Prospect Cottage. One iconic photograph captures the moment when the crown was placed on Jarman's head, bestowing on him the title 'Saint Derek'.

# The Final Paintings

I'm not afraid of death but I am afraid of dying.  
Pain can be alleviated by morphine but the pain of social ostracism cannot be taken away.

In 1993, Derek Jarman created what would be his last painting series, *Evil Queen*. Characterised by words gouged into the centre of the canvases, these paintings evoke Jarman's own personal response to his illness and follow on from an earlier text-based painting series, *Queer*, which took the tabloid press's homophobia and stigmatisation of the AIDS epidemic as stimulus.

Despite the bleakness of the subject matter, these paintings pulsate with colour. Paint has been applied rapidly and spontaneously. Several paintings were often completed in a day. In *Drop Dead* and *Arse Injected Death Syndrome*, paint has been dripped, flung, dragged and smeared across the canvas, while *Blind Maniac* has black foil enmeshed in layers of thick oil paint. Jarman would write the title across the centre, often using a cutlery knife to etch the words into the impasto surface. These phrases were often recycled slang and insults that held double meanings in the context of Jarman's illness. *Arse Injected Death Syndrome* was likely used in the tabloids as an offensive slur based on the AIDS acronym (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome).

Other paintings in the *Evil Queen* series include phrases like *Dizzy Bitch*, *Do Lalley*, and *Ataxia-Aids Is Fun*, each a reference to the blindness and loss of coordination that Jarman was experiencing at this time due to his illness. *Fuck Me Blind* was a favourite expletive of a friend's Australian flatmate, which Jarman emblazoned across the surface of another painting as a bitter nod to his condition. Jarman took ownership over these phrases and highlighted their double meanings in order to draw attention to the entrenched social stigma that he and others experienced.

Suffering from near blindness and being too physically weak to make these paintings alone, Jarman took on a directorial role. His assistants Piers Clemmett and Karl Lydon became his hands and eyes, working to Jarman's highly detailed instructions.

These final paintings reveal much about Jarman's personality in the weeks before his death. Even at the last moment, his response to his illness and artmaking was laced with a cuttingly tongue-in-cheek sense of humour. Carrying the urgency and activism that remained steadfast throughout his entire practice, these paintings are emphatically angry and demand attention. As noted by Robert Mills, "perhaps these works are speaking and perhaps even delivering a proverbial 'fuck you' from beyond the grave."

**Drop Dead** 1993  
Oil on canvas

**Blind Maniac** 1992  
Oil on canvas with black metal foil

**Arse Injected Death Syndrome** 1993  
Oil on canvas

Courtesy of Keith Collins Will Trust and Amanda Wilkinson, London

Opposite:

**Crucifixion** 1989  
Tar and mixed media on canvas  
Private Collection, Sydney

**I.N.R.I.** 1988  
Oil and mixed media on canvas

Courtesy of Keith Collins Will Trust and Amanda Wilkinson, London

*I.N.R.I.* is Jarman at his most blasphemous. Set against a ground of squashed and rusty beer and soft-drink cans, a He-Man action figure from the Masters of the Universe franchise is sexually rather than spiritually bound to the crucified Christ. Two versions of He-Man's nemesis Skeletor watch on, surrounded by the Arma Christi, the instruments of the Passion of Christ.

This assemblage was part of several works Jarman made in response to Margaret Thatcher's Government, a profound source of shame for him. In 1988 the British Conservative government's enactment of Section 28 stated that local authorities, and especially schools, 'shall not intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality'.

*I.N.R.I.* challenges the hypocrisy of homophobia by juxtaposing 'acceptable' objects and behaviours from both the sacred and profane realms that have long been embedded with queer love and desire. The title refers to the initials of the Latin inscription on the crucifix 'Iesus Nazarenus, Rex Iudaeorum' which translates to 'Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews'.

# Blue

In the pandemonium of image  
I present you with the universal Blue  
Blue an open door to soul  
An infinite possibility  
Becoming tangible

Derek Jarman's final film is a single static shot of International Klein Blue with an accompanying sound track and voiceover drawn from his poetry and hospital diaries. Jarman was physically and visually impaired as he made the film, due to the AIDS-related illness that would take his life months later. It centres Jarman's somatic and corporeal experience of living with the virus, starting with a side effect of the blindness created by lesions on his eyes. As his world was getting darker, Jarman started seeing flashes of bright blue.

Jarman stressed that making *Blue* was an act of affirmation. It brings together many of his long-standing concerns as an artist and filmmaker. In the monochrome he found a way to move beyond the tyranny of image and narrative, to embrace abstraction and the void, and blur the possibilities of film and painting. Collaboration was always key to his process. The film is narrated by his regular collaborators John Quentin, Nigel Terry and Tilda Swinton, as well as Jarman himself. The soundscape was made by Simon Fisher Turner.

*Blue* premiered at the Venice Biennale in June 1993. It was also broadcast simultaneously on British television and radio. Listeners were able to write in and request an International Klein Blue postcard to stare at during the broadcast.

## **Blue** 1993

35mm film transferred to HD video, 79 mins, 5.1 surround sound  
Production co: Basilisk Communications  
Courtesy of LUMA Foundation and James Mackay