

GARDENING ON BORROWED TIME

21 SEPTEMBER - 20 OCTOBER 2023

Camilla Bliss
Charlie Boothright
Xiaochi Dong
Alfie Rouy
Nic Sanderson
Billy Sassi

*"The word paradise is derived from the ancient Persian – a green place.
Paradise haunts gardens, and some gardens are paradises. Mine is one of them."*
- Derek Jarman, Derek Jarman's Garden, 2012, p.40.

STUDIO WEST is proud to present 'Gardening on Borrowed Time' a multidisciplinary group exhibition inspired by Derek Jarman's Garden at Prospect Cottage. Almost 30 years after the legendary artist, activist and filmmaker's untimely death from AIDS-related illness, the exhibition celebrates an aspect of the eternal legacy of a trailblazing talent taken too soon: a vivacious garden cultivated against all odds in the harsh desert-land of Romney Marsh in Dungeness, Kent.

*"There are no walls or fences. My garden's boundaries are the horizon.
In this desolate landscape the silence is only broken by the wind, and the gulls squabbling
round the fishermen bringing in the afternoon catch."*
- Derek Jarman, Modern Nature, January 1989, p.3.

Apocalyptic and seemingly unwelcoming, Romney Marsh is dominated by a momentous 1950s nuclear power station that towers ominously over the barren landscape. Miles-long stretches of scarcely populated shingle stands between the whirring man-made structure and the roaring waves of the English Channel. Perched unassumingly between the two is an ink black fishing hut with canary yellow windows, Derek Jarman's beloved Prospect Cottage. Surrounding the humble homestead, is the most magnificent and unlikely of sites: a garden bursting with life where bees dance, poppies sing and wild sea kale shimmers silver in the sunlight.

*"I was always a passionate gardener.
Flowers sparkled in my childhood as they do in a Mediaeval manuscript."*
- Derek Jarman, Derek Jarman's Garden, 1995, p.11.

For Jarman, this garden was the realisation of a lifelong dream. Throughout his childhood, he sought solace in nature and cultivated an almost encyclopaedic horticultural knowledge, having been gifted the 1926 illustrated manual, 'Beautiful Flowers and How to Grow Them' for his fourth birthday. Amidst the gale-force winds and salty sea mist, few could have created such a

unique spectacle. A garden unlike any other, sprouting up out of the barren landscape like a mirage and populated by extraordinary sculptures – enigmatic stone circles, driftwood totems and talismanic strings of pebbles dangling from rusting iron posts – and elegantly placed flotsam and jetsam. Railway sleepers, a long-forgotten wooden boat and the metal balls of fishing floats all mingle jovially amongst the shaggy tufts of iridescent wild sea kale, blooming red valerian, bright yellow poppies, towering fox gloves and bushy santolina. The garden, much like many of Jarman's films, was cajoled into existence through trickery and artifice: large quantities of compost were buried beneath the shingle surface to give the plants a chance. Brought to life as unexpectedly as a magician pulling a rabbit from a hat, it has now outlived its creator.

"At first, people thought I was building a garden for magical purposes - a white witch out to get the nuclear power station. It did have magic – the magic of surprise, the treasure hunt."

- Derek Jarman, *Derek Jarman's Garden*, 1995, p.47.

Diagnosed with HIV in 1986, the year before he purchased Prospect Cottage, Jarman tended his garden in the face of death. In his 1993 book on colour, 'Chroma' he wrote, "I built my garden with the colours of healing", and indeed it sustained him through seven years of illness. As he nursed his garden to life in an inhospitable terrain, he too was nourished by the newly sprouted and brightly blooming foxgloves, periwinkle, poppies and purple iris. Titled 'Gardening on Borrowed Time', after a note scribbled next to a planting plan in one of Jarman's sketchbooks, this exhibition responds to the complex symbolism that has subsumed his rugged, rural paradise in the years following his death; a site of queer pilgrimage, a beacon of hope, a living memorial, a place for healing and a metaphor for unwavering resilience in a world that had turned its back.

"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."

- Derek Jarman, *Modern Nature*, April 1989, p.69.

Each artist featured in the exhibition has visited Prospect Cottage, retracing Jarman's footsteps across the crunching shingle. They have also immersed themselves in his diverse oeuvre: reading his lyrical journals, watching his ground-breaking films and poring over Howard Sooley's photographs of the garden as it grew. The profound personal connections they have found with his interminable legacy have directly inspired their works for 'Gardening on Borrowed Time'.

In the case of Camilla Bliss, Charlie Boothright and Xaoichi Dong, the garden has planted itself firmly in their imaginations. A noteworthy young sculptor, Bliss has created futuristic, almost floral forms that speak to the idiosyncratic, dystopic and otherworldly qualities of Romney Marsh. Responding to a quote from 'Modern Nature', "I brewed my nuclear tea",

she sees these works as “flowers at the edge of the world”. They echo the uncanny strangeness of witnessing Jarman’s sacred garden blooming beneath the mammoth monstrosity of the power station. For Boothright, an abstract painter, the visceral textures of the unlikely paradise have inspired a series of rugged crimson works on paper forming a large-scale collaged canvas. Intense and immense, her expressive painting speaks to her elemental emotional response to the landscape. Her discovery of Jarman’s 1993 film ‘Blue’, created towards the end of his life as his eyesight declined, prompted the inclusion of her electrifying cobalt drawings. Xaochi Dong meanwhile, a long-time lover of gardens, found quiet reprieve and restoration at Prospect Cottage. He has produced muted and elusive paintings, using volcanic clay as pigment, inspired by a moment of serenity amongst the stone circles – in his own words, “I experienced a gentle wind that felt like a delicate brush caressing the landscape, leaving behind its mark in the most enchanting way”.

Both painter Alfie Rouy and sculptor Nic Sanderson have been entranced by the magic and mystery that permeates Jarman’s coastal refuge. There is an intrinsic connection between Jarman and Rouy, both equally fuelled by a ceaseless desire to create from deep within and an interest in the esoteric. Through automatic drawings and cryptic paintings, Rouy attempts to materialise “the flow of versatile, fluid-like energies, frequencies and vibrations that intertwine the mind with the Earth’s current phase of existence”. Taking the peculiar sculptural forms balanced precariously upon the shingle as his starting point, Rouy’s painting reflects the singular wonder of Jarman’s creative vision. As Jarman’s health declined and in the face of dwindling hope, he became fascinated with paganism; he began to explore the pagan notion that apertures in naturally occurring objects offer a view into the afterlife. Many of his sculptures feature holes, the starting point for Nic Sanderson’s works which foreground the experience of looking through to the other-side, while tackling themes of grief, loss and memory.

For filmmaker and photographer Billy Sassi, Jarman’s experimental Super 8mm films were a natural starting point. Sassi drew specific inspiration from “their colourful nature; sense of immediacy; layering of images; and gesturing figures” when choreographing his film for the exhibition. Layering a projected silent film, featuring a lone figure trying on and posing with an oversized Pulcinella mask, onto photographic images of the same, Sassi explores notions of image veracity, theatricality and the requests images and spectators make of one another. For him, the piece “explores contact with the imaged body, and the invented and real tensions that emerge from presence and stillness”. Like Jarman, Sassi’s process is intuitive, he creates complex sets, props and costumes through hand-made processes that foreground the immediacy of the creator’s hand. Mirroring the surreal qualities of Jarman’s 1991 film ‘The Garden’, Sassi foregoes narrative structure, instead placing the viewer deep within a phantasmagorical land of make-believe.

In an interview broadcast on BBC 2's film programme 'Moving Pictures', aired in the Autumn of 1990, Derek Jarman said "the garden is an anchor...it's about anchoring myself somewhere". Many years after his passing, this reads like a prophecy; the garden he left behind has eternally tethered a part of him to our world. This enchanted and indescribable remnant forms the basis of STUDIO WEST's exhibition, 'Gardening on Borrowed Time'. Featuring predominant new works by six young London-based artists, complimented by a living installation and lyrical quotes from Jarman's evocative writings, the exhibition is a holistic ode to the garden at Prospect Cottage – the sacred bequeathment of an era-defining creative talent.

NOTES TO EDITORS:

ABOUT DEREK JARMAN

Derek Jarman (1942 - 1994) was a British filmmaker, artist, gay-rights activist, writer and gardener, known for his provocative and visually stunning works exploring themes of queer identity, politics, and his personal experiences.

Having studied painting and stage design at The Slade School of Fine Art between 1963 and 1967, he began working in film as the production designer for Ken Russell's 'The Devils' and 'Savage Messiah'. At the same time, he began working on his own films in Super 8 before making his features: 'Sebastiane' (1975); punk classic 'Jubilee' (1977); an unconventional adaptation of Shakespeare's 'The Tempest' (1979); 'Caravaggio' (1986) in which he gave Tilda Swinton her first ever film role; 'The Last of England' (1987) a passionate and poetic response to Thatcherite Britain; 'War Requiem' (1988) which saw Sir Laurence Olivier come out of retirement for his final role; 'The Garden' (1990) created at Prospect Cottage; 'Edward II' (1991); 'Wittgenstein' (1992) and 'Blue' (1993) a meditation on his impending blindness and inevitable death.

Alongside his feature films he worked with key musicians and artists of the day, including The Smiths, Bryan Ferry, The Sex Pistols, punk band Throbbing Gristle, The Pet Shop Boys, Suede and dancer Michael Clark, producing music videos and film installations for live shows. He wrote multiple books of prose and poetry including 'Dancing Ledge' (1984), 'The Last of England' (1987; now republished under the title the author intended for it, 'Kicking the Pricks'), 'Modern Nature' (1991), 'At Your Own Risk' (1992) and 'Chroma' (1994). 'Derek Jarman's Garden' and 'Smiling in Slow Motion' were published posthumously in 1995 and 2000 respectively. As a painter, he hosted multiple exhibitions including at Lisson Gallery in 1969 and the ICA in 1980.

Jarman was also an outspoken campaigner for gay rights; diagnosed HIV positive in December 1986, he was one of the first UK public figures to speak openly about the condition. He was highly critical of the slow response to the Aids crisis and of the 'Section 28' legislation that banned local authorities from 'promoting homosexuality'.

From 1986 up until his death in 1994, he lived between London and Prospect Cottage, Dungeness, Kent with his friend and life-partner Keith Collins. He died of AIDS-related illness in 1994, aged 52.

ABOUT PROSPECT COTTAGE

Prospect Cottage, originally a Victorian fisherman's hut, is located on the coast in Dungeness, Kent. The house was purchased by Derek Jarman in 1987 for £32,000 with an inheritance left by his late father. It was his home until his death in 1994. The cottage exterior is jet black, emblazoned on one side with the lines of John Donne's poem 'The Sun Rising'. The windows and doors are bright yellow and the building is surrounded by a brimming garden that emerges miraculously from the shingle. The interior is humble, including a small kitchen, Jarman's study and painting studio, a modest living room and a later extension, a music room situated at the back of the property. The cottage also contains artwork by many of Jarman's friends and admirers, including Maggi Hambling, John Maybury, Gus Van Sant and Richard Hamilton.

After a period of uncertainty following the death of Derek Jarman's close companion Keith Collins (1966 - 2018), the house and garden were saved for the nation in March 2020, following a £3.5m crowdfunding campaign led by the Art Fund. It now hosts a permanent public programme led by Creative Folkestone and including residencies for artists, academics, writers, film-makers and gardeners, along with small tours by appointment. The cottage and its garden were the subject of an exhibition at the Garden Museum in London in 2020.

ABOUT STUDIO WEST

STUDIO WEST is an art gallery in Notting Hill founded in 2021 by curator Caroline Boseley. Its annual exhibition and events programme features the work of the UK's most exciting emerging and newly established artists. It endeavours to fully support the artists it works with through mentorship, hosting opportunities, network building and knowledge sharing, nurturing their growth and helping them to build sustained professional careers without requiring exclusive representation. For collectors, it offers the opportunity to learn more about London's vibrant emerging art scene and purchase artwork made by incredibly promising talents.

Since inception, STUDIO WEST's values have remained the same. It aims to engage fully and authentically with the local community, create a comfortable and welcoming space for all visitors, encourage investment in contemporary art created by emerging and newly established artists and, most importantly, always prioritise the needs of the artists' it works with.

The gallery opened in November 2021 with a duo show by Victoria Cantons and Xu Yang and has since hosted multiple group exhibitions, including 'The Reality in Whytch You

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Create', 'Fancy a Bite?', 'GROUNDWORK', 'SKIN DEEP' and 'The Angel in the House', and three solo shows with Karolina Albricht, Lydia Makin and Brynley Odu Davies respectively. The gallery runs an annual Open Call Exhibition and Art Prize titled 'NOW Introducing' that invites applications from any artist currently studying on or recently graduated from a London based BA, MA or alternative study programme.

STUDIO WEST is becoming known for thoughtful concept-driven exhibitions, authentic community engagement, and offering comprehensive support to London's emerging artists.

STUDIO WEST

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