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Culture

The artist as director: Derek Jarman was too ill to hold a brush, but he died a painter. Edward Lucie-Smith reviews his work and Karen Finley's, both in Manchester

Edward Lucie-Smith | Monday 12 September 1994 23:02 | [comments](#)



Since his death from Aids earlier this year, Derek Jarman has been canonised. He is now an authentic martyr, an accredited representative of what Robert Hughes bitchily dubbed 'the culture of complaint' - Britain's answer to Robert Mapplethorpe. Many ironies surround this fact. One is that Jarman and Mapplethorpe detested one another. In his biography *Mapplethorpe: Assault with a Deadly Camera*, published in America next week, Jack Fritscher tells how the two men ran into one another one night at Heaven, the gay disco. Jarman 'was going down one stairway as Robert Mapplethorpe was climbing up another, and Robert shouted out, 'I have everything I want, Derek. Have you got everything you want?' '

He knew, of course, that the answer had to be 'no'. All his life, Jarman struggled against financial odds, as well as bucking homophobic prejudice, while trying to get ambitious projects off the ground, often seeing them maimed in the process. By that time - it was the mid-1980s - Mapplethorpe had already scaled the heights of



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Today Jarman's chief reputation is as a writer and a film-maker, but he started his career as a painter (he was even regarded, in the early 1960s, as a plausible rival for the young David Hockney), and this, it seems, is how he wanted to be remembered.

The 17 paintings on view were made against considerable odds. Often too weak to physically work on them, Jarman would sit in a large chair in the studio, directing assistants who piled the paint on the canvases. All the while, Jarman would give a running commentary on the process: 'We'll have some yellow. That's it. Now some green. Yes. That's it. More green. That's really good. Now some purple!' Only the finishing touches, crude inscriptions scribed into the paint - DEATH, DIZZY, BITCH - are authentically Jarman's own.

One may well ask, why make a fuss about this? Rubens made use of numerous assistants, often pulling his paintings together only when they were three-quarters finished by other hands. Matisse's late collages were assembled, under his direction, by helpers. The trouble, I think, is the kind of paintings Jarman's are.

Anyone wandering unprepared into the gallery might see them as somewhat crude and heavy-handed versions of the post-war abstract expressionist slosh and splash style. Their distinctly approximate qualities become altogether less surprising once one knows how they were made. In a brief documentary about the series, one of Jarman's assistants remarks that when the painter asked for purple he obediently mixed some up, but never knew if it was the precise shade Jarman would have mixed for himself. Nevertheless, on to the canvas it went.

All of this negates standard abstract expressionist doctrine, which is that paintings made in this way are a direct reflection of the artist's physical responses, and thus reflect the state of his psyche. One remembers Pollock's famous statement (made in 1947) about his method of work: 'When I am in the painting I'm not aware of what I'm doing. It's only after a sort of 'get acquainted' period that I see what I have been about. I have no fears about making changes, destroying the image, etc, because the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through. It is only when I lose contact with the painting that the result is a mess.'



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inscriptions. All of this is very much in step with current avant-garde art fashion. The paintings only really have meaning if you place them in their correct context - that of Jarman's imminent death, that of the Aids crisis and public reaction to it. You have to deconstruct them, using information not available from the works themselves, to find out what they mean. Aesthetic pleasure is not one of the things on offer.

Everything one knows about Jarman, from his films, his writings and interviews, shows that he was a highly self-conscious artist. That, in addition to being gay, is the thing which he and Mapplethorpe had in common. Perhaps this is why they disliked one another. The films succeed because they blow both hot and cold. *Sebastiane* (1979), Jarman's first big success, is doubly erotic because of its Latin dialogue: a highly effective distancing device. Another element in all the films, rooted partly in lack of money but also very much in tune with Jarman's own temperament, is the fact that they often seem like improvised charades, which deliberately call attention to their own incongruities. 'Evil Queen' is the product of another such charade, though transferred into a sphere less well-suited to the method.

As it happens, one can compare Jarman's way of dealing with Aids in art with another show in Manchester - Karen Finley at the Cornerhouse Gallery. Finley is a heterosexual American performance artist, based in New York, who has seen many friends die from Aids. Her show comes under the umbrella of a festival-within-a-festival called 'Queer Up North' - Manchester is probably the only city in Britain with an authentic gay ghetto along the lines of New York's Greenwich Village. What Finley is showing are two very simple environmental pieces, both in the same large, dimly lit, secluded room. One, *Written in Sand*, consists of mounds of fine sand, studded with church candles. The other is called *The Vacant Chair* - a large, throne-like chair, covered in flowers, moss and foliage, faces two plain chairs.

Both are participatory. With the first, the visitor is invited to inscribe the name of someone he or she has lost, then to erase it again. With the second, the visitor sits facing the verdant throne, and imagines the presence of someone who is absent.



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something even bigger than the crisis itself: the universal human emotions of grief and loss. I'm glad the Whitworth had the courage to take the Jarman exhibition, but there is no doubt as to which of the two is the better show.

'Evil Queen', at the Whitworth Gallery, Manchester, until 5 Nov (Details: 061-273 4865) is part of the Boddingtons Festival of Television and the Arts. Karen Finley is at the Manchester Cornerhouse, until 8 Oct; her one-woman show, 'A Certain Level of Denial', is on 16 Sept, 7.30pm, at the Dance House, Manchester (Details: 061-228 2463)

(Photograph omitted)

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