# Derek Jarman’s black paintings reveal anger and resilience amid AIDS crisis



In recent years, the legacy of the late artist and filmmaker Derek Jarman has gained increasing recognition, particularly through the preservation of his beloved home, Prospect Cottage in Kent. This extraordinary garden, juxtaposed with the looming presence of the Dungeness nuclear power station, has become a beacon of solace and serenity, attracting countless visitors. However, focusing solely on this tranquil aspect of Jarman's life risks overlooking the darker, more provocative elements of his artistic œuvre, which often grappled with themes of anger, existential despair, and political critique.

One notable resurgence in Jarman's complex body of work is the revelation of his treatment for an unfinished film titled *The Assassination of Pier Paolo Pasolini in the Garden of Earthly Delights*. Written in 1984, as Jarman faced mounting challenges in getting his film *Caravaggio* made, this treatment reflects the shared experiences of two iconic queer figures whose narratives were rooted in defiance against political and sexual repression. Tony Peake, Jarman’s biographer, emphasises their connection by stating, “I think Derek related to Pasolini because he carved his own path and made films in a very singular, distinctive way.” Pasolini, a controversial figure himself, met a tragic end in 1975 under circumstances that have since been clouded by new theories linking his murder to far-right extremists. This chilling account resonates with Jarman's own struggles, making his creative explorations all the more poignant.

In the wake of Jarman's death from AIDS-related complications in 1994, conversations around his work turned towards the socio-political climate of his time. Jarman's diagnosis in 1986 coincided with a virulent backlash against the LGBTQ+ community, exacerbated by a fearmongering campaign launched by the British government. This environment of hostility culminated in the enactment of Section 28, legislation aimed at suppressing any promotion of homosexuality. As Peake remarks, “All those things together felt particularly difficult and hostile,” a sentiment deeply embedded in Jarman's work, particularly in his 1987 film *The Last of England*, which painted a grim picture of a dystopian Britain.

One of the most significant aspects of Jarman's artistic legacy is his compelling series of *Black Paintings*, which are set to be exhibited in chronological order at Amanda Wilkinson Gallery. These works, characterised by their thick layers of black paint and embedded found objects, encapsulate a tumultuous period in Jarman's life. Not only do they reflect his rage and angst, but they also encapsulate an immersive introspection. Some pieces, like *Dead Souls Whisper*, juxtapose the visceral with the abstract, combining elements such as a pebble and barbed wire, while others like *Dear God* invoke a raw plea for divine intervention against a backdrop of relentless suffering.

The timing of the *Black Paintings* exhibition is striking, coinciding with the display of the UK AIDS Memorial Quilt at the Tate Modern. This poignant juxtaposition invites reflection on the deep scars left by the AIDS crisis, a tragedy that dramatically shaped Jarman's life and work. His paintings stand as powerful testimonies to the lost voices of a generation while also critiquing modern assaults on LGBTQ+ rights.

Jarman’s determination to channel his challenges into art was notable. As Peake reflects, “He kept flying through the flak,” portraying a resilience that was characteristic of his personality. Through his bold and unapologetic expression, Jarman crafted a narrative around his identity and experiences that resonated with many—his charisma and warmth often overshadowed the pain lurking beneath the surface.

Despite his unconventional approach to art and life, Jarman was a prominent public figure whose influence extended far beyond the canvas. His journals, *Modern Nature*, which candidly discussed his life as a gay man amid the stigma of the AIDS crisis, sparked considerable debate and backlash while affirming his indomitable spirit. Recalling a moment from an interview on BBC Radio 1, Jarman expressed a sense of contentment with his life, stating, “I did get what I wanted… Or most of it, anyway.” This candid affirmation captures the essence of Jarman’s life: a vehemently creative response to adversity, leaving behind an artistic legacy as complex and vibrant as the man himself.

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* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2025/jun/03/sometimes-he-cast-spells-over-them-the-raging-beauty-of-derek-jarmans-black-paintings), [[5]](https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2008/mar/02/art)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2025/jun/03/sometimes-he-cast-spells-over-them-the-raging-beauty-of-derek-jarmans-black-paintings), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2021/dec/06/derek-jarman-protest-review-manchester-art-gallery-film-paintings), [[6]](https://www.bigissuenorth.com/centre-stage/2020/05/in-the-frame-derek-jarman/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://ocula.com/magazine/features/derek-jarman-the-right-colour-for-the-video-age/), [[4]](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/oct/24/dark-monarch-exhibition-tate-review), [[7]](https://www.thestateofthearts.co.uk/features/derek-jarman-protest-exhibition-review/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2025/jun/03/sometimes-he-cast-spells-over-them-the-raging-beauty-of-derek-jarmans-black-paintings), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2021/dec/06/derek-jarman-protest-review-manchester-art-gallery-film-paintings), [[6]](https://www.bigissuenorth.com/centre-stage/2020/05/in-the-frame-derek-jarman/)
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* Paragraph 7 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2025/jun/03/sometimes-he-cast-spells-over-them-the-raging-beauty-of-derek-jarmans-black-paintings), [[5]](https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2008/mar/02/art)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2025/jun/03/sometimes-he-cast-spells-over-them-the-raging-beauty-of-derek-jarmans-black-paintings> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2021/dec/06/derek-jarman-protest-review-manchester-art-gallery-film-paintings> - This article reviews the 'Derek Jarman: Protest!' exhibition at Manchester Art Gallery, highlighting Jarman's 'Black Paintings' series. These works, created in the 1980s, are described as 'seething, bitter, large-scale abstractions' that 'shout and repulse, without a moment of respite.' The review notes that Jarman's paintings serve as 'reliquaries of a life lived,' reflecting his personal struggles and the socio-political climate of the time.
3. <https://ocula.com/magazine/features/derek-jarman-the-right-colour-for-the-video-age/> - This feature explores Derek Jarman's connection to New Zealand through his father, Lancelot Elworthy Jarman, and examines his 'Black Paintings' series. The article discusses how Jarman's use of black paint, incorporating objects like shattered glass and religious icons, reflects his personal experiences, including his father's death and his HIV diagnosis. It also delves into the ambivalent father-son relationship depicted in these works.
4. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/oct/24/dark-monarch-exhibition-tate-review> - This review of 'The Dark Monarch: Magic and Modernity in British Art' exhibition at Tate St Ives discusses the Neo-Romantic painters of the mid-20th century, including Derek Jarman. It highlights Jarman's 1975 film 'Sulphur,' noting his fascination with John Dee's rituals involving the black mirror, which influenced his artistic approach and thematic exploration of magic and modernity.
5. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2008/mar/02/art> - This article reflects on Derek Jarman's artistic legacy, focusing on his 'Black Paintings' created during a period when he faced challenges in film funding. The paintings are described as a form of self-expression, capturing Jarman's personal experiences and emotions. The piece also touches upon his other works, including his beach garden at Dungeness and his late book on the colour blue.
6. <https://www.bigissuenorth.com/centre-stage/2020/05/in-the-frame-derek-jarman/> - This article examines Derek Jarman's 'Black Paintings,' created in the 1980s, highlighting works like 'I.N.R.I.' and 'Margaret Thatcher’s Lunch.' It discusses the political and protest nature of these pieces, reflecting Jarman's response to the socio-political climate of the time, including the AIDS crisis and the Thatcher government's policies. The article also notes Jarman's use of found objects and materials in his art.
7. <https://www.thestateofthearts.co.uk/features/derek-jarman-protest-exhibition-review/> - This review of the 'Derek Jarman: Protest!' exhibition at Manchester Art Gallery discusses Jarman's 'Black Paintings' series. The paintings are described as 'otherworldly, simultaneously gritty and sweepingly romantic,' employing chiaroscuro techniques and depicting figures in Pietà configurations alongside sexual imagery. The review interprets these works as metaphors communicating the extreme anguish and persecution Jarman felt living as a gay man in hostile Thatcherite Britain.