Black Cottage

Meital Katz-Minerbo visited the Dublin retrospective exhibition of the work of Derek Jarman, a well-known queer filmmaker, visual artist, AIDS activist, and gardener, who had been marginalized for being openly gay and HIV positive. Following the stirring event, she recalls her first encounter with Jarman's work, five years ago, and her visit to the garden he has tended in his home in Dungeness, in the county of Kent, England.

Essay / Meital Katz-Minerbo June 18, 2020

Five years ago, I received the book *Derek Jarman's Garden*, about the garden of the filmmaker, artist, and gardener Derek Jarman. The small volume begins as a plant reference guide and a manual for building a private garden, and ends in stories and names of Jarman's friends who had died of AIDS. The book contains beautiful photographs of plants and a black cottage with yellow windows, in the middle of nowhere in a remote region of England.

Jarman was a central figure in the bubbling queer art scene of 1980s London. When he discovered he had AIDS, he quit his wild lifestyle and retired to a cottage in Dungeness, in Kent County. Gardening then became a central part of his life in the shadow of approaching death.

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[1]Prospect Cottage, 2016
Photography: Meital Katz-Minerbo

prospect cottage 2016.JPG **[2]**

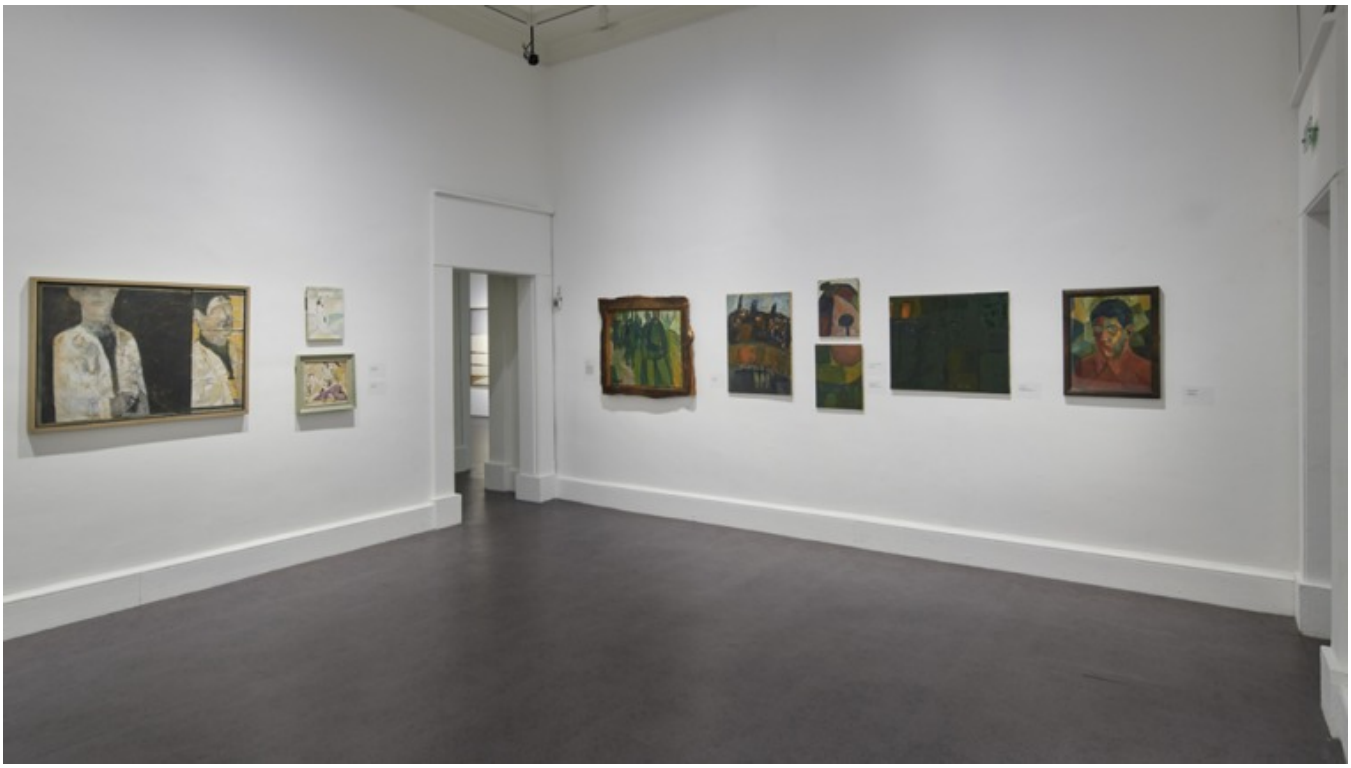


[3]Prospect Cottage, 2016
Photography: Meital Katz-Minerbo

I arrived at Jarman's home and garden in Dungeness on a cold autumn day in 2016, not yet realizing the significance of the visit. It was as if Jarman was calling me to him, to the home where he died and the garden he left behind. I sat over a cup of tea with Keith Collins, Jarman's partner, called HB, or Hinney Beast, in his diaries. Collins took care of him and was his companion for many years, until Jarman's passing. We talked about cacti, about the stinky raccoons nesting in the cottage's foundations, and about Percy Shelly, the English poet, who had once strolled through the village after disembarking from a ship because of severe nausea. It was a perfectly ordinary conversation, but it made me realize I was in a sacred place, the accommodating and inclusive home of a sincere and complex person, who hated lies and tried to be as honest as he could in his artwork. During that visit I understood the close relations between nature and identity, and that people were also plants.

I've been trying ever since to preserve the memory of that visit, which is slipping away from me. I had brought a camera with me but felt uneasy about using it. My contact with Derek Jarman was renewed this year, when I discovered that a retrospective exhibition of his work was being organized in Dublin, Ireland. How surprising! Although Jarman is mostly recognized as a queer filmmaker, his career as a visual artist has been relegated to the margins of the London art scene already in the 1980s, when he was diagnosed with AIDS and became a leading figure in the global struggle for the rights of AIDS patients. In addition, in recent years there had been a legal fight regarding his artworks, which prevented their public display.

Derek Jarman PROTEST! IMMA installation view 6.jpg **[4]**



[5]Derek Jarman, Protest!, installation view, Irish Museum of Modern Art, (IMMA), 2019

Derek Jarman PROTEST! IMMA installation view 8.jpg **[6]**



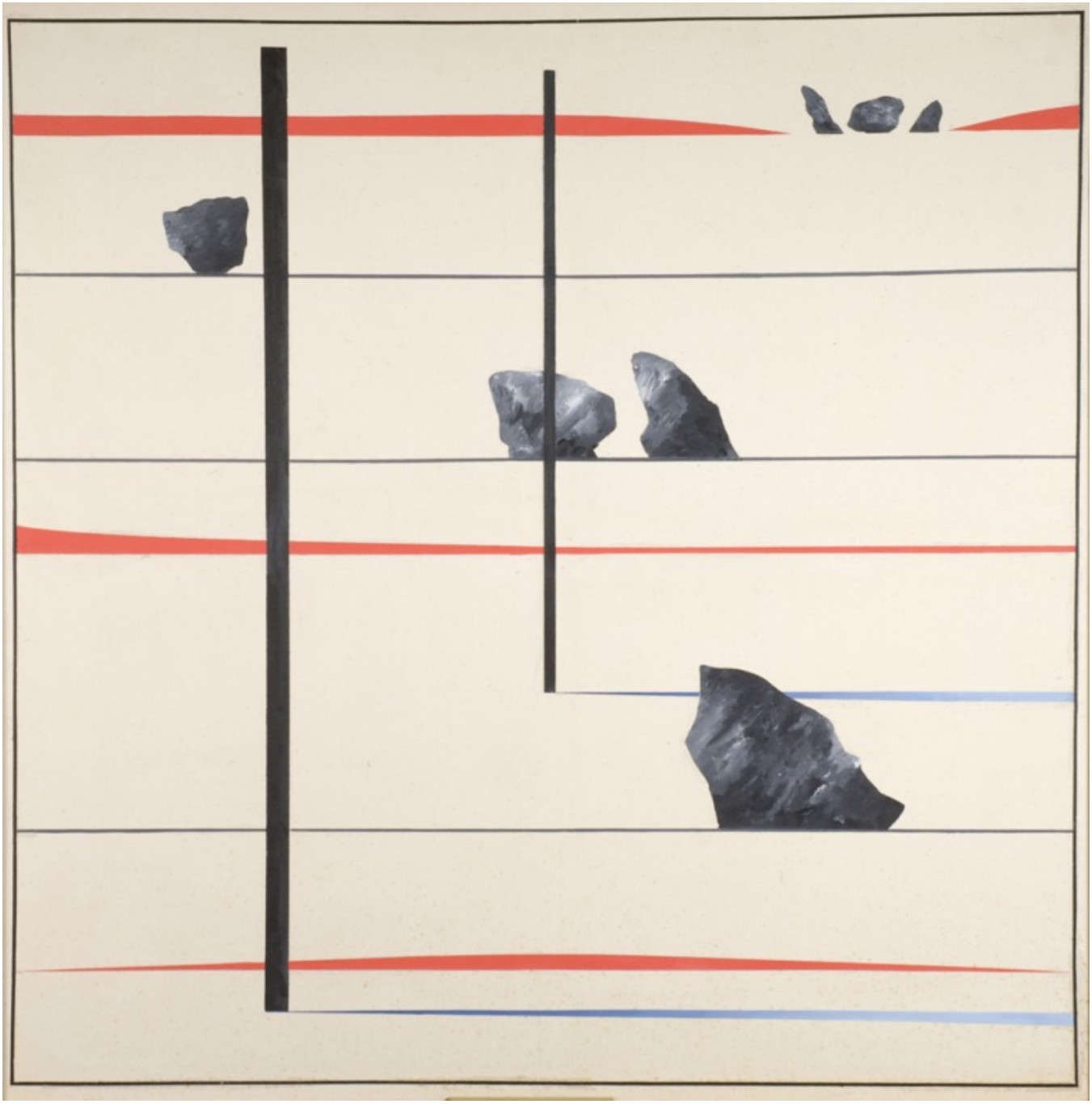
[7]Derek Jarman, Protest!, installation view, Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA), 2019

1967, Landscape with Marble Mountain, acrylic and collage on canvas, 144x206cm, Northampton Musuems and Art Gallery.jpg **[8]**



[9]Derek Jarman, Landscape with Marble Mountain, 1967, Acrylic and collage on canvas, 144X206 cm
Northampton Museums and Art Gallery

1973, Avebury Series No. 4, oil on canvas 120 x 120cm, Northampton Museums and Art Gallery.jpg **[10]**



[11]Derek Jarman, Avebury Series No.4 (1973), Oil on canvas, 120x120 cm
Northampton Museums and Art Gallery

I traveled to the exhibition in Ireland to fully understand the garden through the entirety of Jarman's prolific, mufti-disciplinary work.

"Protest!" was the title of Jarman's recent retrospective exhibition at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, in Dublin. For the first time in 20 years, his work has been presented fully, showing how his witty practices contain a backbone of preoccupation with the relations of body and landscape, what is concealed or revealed, and exposing life with the disease: isolation/seclusion.

The exhibition filled the central gallery in the west wing of the museum.1 Works made between 1959 and 1993 were divided into 11 spaces, or units, marking (almost chronologically) different periods

and styles of Jarman's career, as well as his versatile oeuvre in the fields of painting, sculpture, directing, set design, costumes, and gardening.

In a dark space at the beginning of the exhibition, Jarman's first self-portrait was displayed under dramatic lighting. Still a boy, he has painted it in a Cubist manner, directly resonant of Picasso. Deeper into the gloom, a passage led into another dark space, washed in "International Klein Blue," where the film *BLUE* (1993), was being screened. It was the first time I saw it on a large screen. *BLUE*, Jarman's last work, shows a static blue image, accompanied by a complex soundtrack of stories, sounds, and music. Jarman narrates the film himself, together with his long-time collaborators: Tilda Swinton, Nigel Terry, and John Quentin. He talks about his daily struggle, his life as an AIDS patient, and the blindness that he had developed as a consequence of the aggressive medical treatment. The script takes the viewer on a journey into the depths of the reverberating blue tint. Jarman posits the color blue as a mental state, as nostalgia and a yearning for happy, healthy times.

1959 Self Portrait, Oil on board, 65 x 76 cm, Private Collection, Photo IMMA.jpg **[12]**



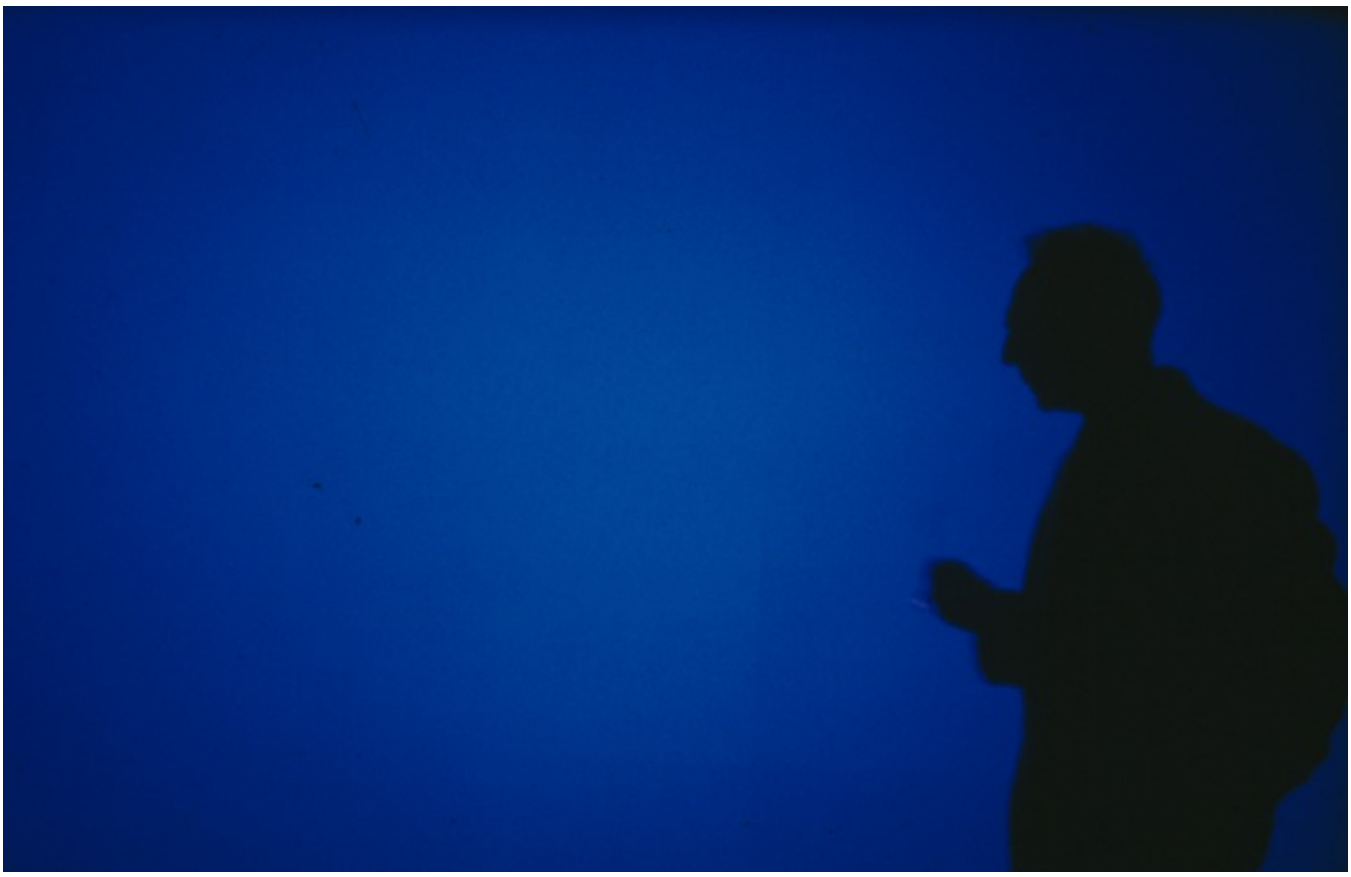
[13]Derek Jarman, Self Portrait, 1959, Oil on board, 65 x 76 cm
Private Collection, photo: IMMA

The exhibition opens with the two opposite bookends of Jarman's work - the first painting and the last film. It was a statement or a curatorial intent that has led me to focus on what was between these two points. The beginning of the exhibition is also its foretold end, then what could I do but

roam through the space where death is the starting point, as in a surgical post-mortem. It remains to discover what this body, still alive under the skin, is hiding. This act of concealment is part of Jarman's artistic practice. The works contain hidden codes in colors and shapes, covering up the internal struggle with homosexuality in his youth. Later on, the codes marked the interchange between the activist, public persona and the private one in the shadow of the illness, who in recent years had only wished to be alone, to the point of complete seclusion. The exhibition has stretched between a painting that resonates traditions of European art, on the surface, and a film documenting a private, personal experience, which invites the viewer to look inside to reveal nothing and everything at the same time. You can sense how Jarman employs an academic style in the early paintings and sculptures to conceal messages about his identity, as does the cinematic language he has developed, eventually revealing his unique voice.

The pervasive sense of death in every corner of the exhibition freed me of the need to decipher the works and allowed me to experience them differently. I felt as if Jarman's work was uncovered for the first time, after lying hidden below the surface. The sense of exposure was crucial because although Jarman was a well-liked artist, he was also controversial because of his preoccupation with queerness and his participation, as an activist, in the struggle of AIDS patients in the 1980s, under the Thatcher government.

42 Blue Picture 001.jpg **[14]**



[15]Derek Jarman against the background of BLUE (1993)
Photography: Liam Daniel. Basilisk Communications

After two hours of blueness and inward-looking concentration, I went on to the next exhibition space. Rooms near the entrance displayed paintings from the early period. *BLUE* made me experience painting in a way I had never done before. The frequency of the blue color created a strong resonance of greens, evident in almost every one of Jarman's paintings.

Most of Jarman's paintings are titled "landscape." Some are dark, resembling soil cross-sections that show its strata. I discovered that throughout the various periods, Jarman had always been interested in gardening. Through the paintings, he organized and designed his garden, which he had nurtured in the last years of his life. Like a prophecy, vertical elements stand erect in flat desert landscapes, and stones replace plants and symbolize a moment of life/death in the scene.

Derek Jarman's cottage has a front and a back garden, in line with English horticultural guidelines. The plants in the front yard are arranged in circles; the low shrubs lead toward the entrance to the house. In addition to the circular flower beds, he created rings of pebbles sorted by color, treating them as living elements, same as the plants. The back garden is more fluid. The herb patch, next to a row of tall bushes, leads to an abstract sculpture garden – a collection of random objects cast on the beach by the sea. Jarman's garden is cyclical – blossoming and colorful in spring, and almost monochromatic in winter, with its shades of green and brown. It symbolized the cycle of life and death. The more Jarman's condition deteriorated, the more his garden thrived.

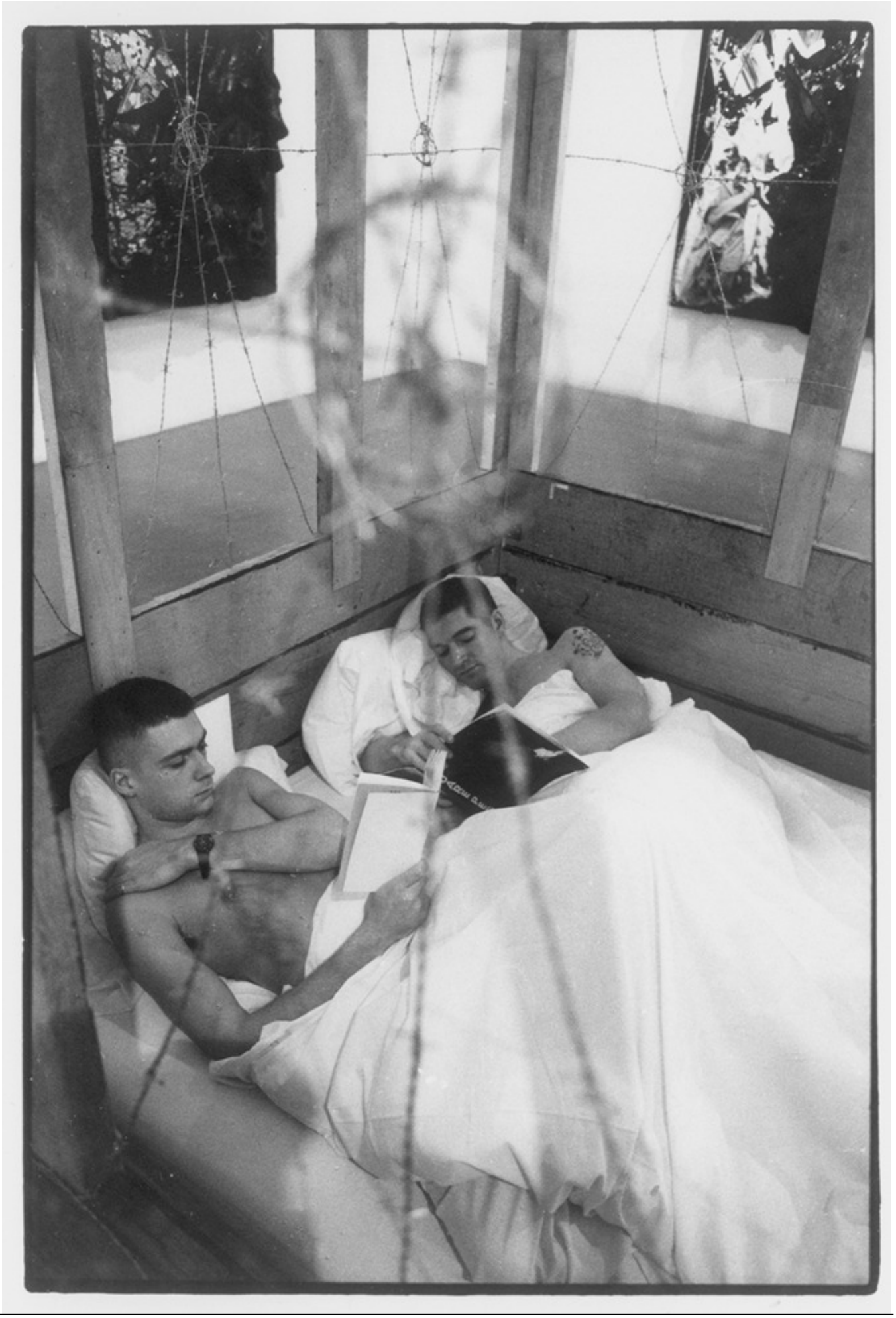
34 Bed (IV), 1988-89 installation photograph from Brutal Beauty at Serpentine Galleries 2008 Photo Sylvain Deleu.jpg **[16]**



[17]Derek Jarman, Bed IV, installation (1988-1989)
Photograph from "Brutal Beauty" at Serpentine gallery, 2008

Photograph by Sylvain Deleu

34 1989 Performance detail showing two men.jpg **[18]**



[19]Derek Jarman, Performance detail showing two men, 1989

I began writing this essay before the coronavirus crisis, when everything had seemed different, and it could not find its way. Today, under the current situation, I reconnected deeply and truly with Jarman. Reading his diaries, I understood why, in the shadow of AIDS, he had chosen to get away from the big city and the London art scene. He purchased the cottage in Dungeness, a remote place, close to nowhere and to the end of the world and time. It is interesting to look at Jarman's journey today, in the face of the threatening virus. Unlike us, Jarman chose to seclude himself under the HIV virus, which had caused him to rethink every aspect of his life, to focus on what mattered to him and on the question of how to create when you know what is in the wings. He distanced himself from people and their politics, to come close to nature, cultivate the plants he loved so much, and protect them from the harsh weather of the Dungeness coast; to rise early after a deadly storm, lay to rest the plants that hadn't survived, and to go on nurturing the ones who had become stronger in its wake.

IMG_7985.JPG **[20]**



[21]Derek Jarman in the garden at his cottage, in Dungeness
Photography: Howard Sooley

The choice to end his life among his flowers and gardening tools has been intentional. In the last, AIDS-afflicted years of his life, Jarman was more productive than in his healthful years. The return to simple, basic life, to soil and flowers, and the decision to continue to make art in a new way, gave birth to most of the films and the masterpiece *BLUE*, his moving diaries, and several powerful exhibitions.

Derek Jarman's retrospective, "Protest [22]!," was on display at the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA) between November 15, 2019, and February 23, 2020. Curator: Seán Kissane

- 1. The Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA) is located in Dublin, in a building that had been used as a rehabilitation hospital for soldiers since its construction in 1684. In 1991, following an adaptation of the structure for the presentation of art, it was declared Ireland's museum of modern art.

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