exhibition review / JACK WU

Our garden and its waters: A review of *Derek Jarman: Delphinium Days* (2024)

Gus Fisher Gallery, 15 June–14 September 2024

Derek Jarman's voice was forged in protest. A unique and distinctive voice honed protesting against the strictures of life in post-war Britain,[1] it carried the urgency of AIDS activism, the defiance of queer punk, and the raw intimacy of approaching death. As a prominent member of OutRage! who spoke passionately at the 1988 inaugural AIDS and Human Rights conference,[2] Jarman understood the power of voice as both medium and message—a tool for demanding visibility, care, and justice in a world that preferred silence.

Yet voices change as they travel through time and across mediums. For those who encountered Jarman's work in the 1980s and 90s, his voice arrived with the immediacy of cinema screens and gallery walls, charged with the political urgency of its moment. For my generation, raised on the internet and far from the particularities of British queer culture of that era, his voice reached us differently—through YouTube uploads of *Blue* (1993), through fragmented digital archives, through the mediated distance of screens. *Blue*, Jarman's final feature film released four months before his death from AIDS-related complications,[3] became for many of us a first encounter with his work: an unchanging blue screen accompanied by "a densely interwoven soundtrack of voices, sound effects and music" that conveyed both literal and allegorical experiences of living with AIDS.[4]

This is a generational shift in how we encounter Jarman's work. Where once it was necessarily loud, urgent, protesting in the face of indifference and death, now it arrives with different resonances: sometimes whispered through laptop speakers, sometimes discovered in the quiet of late-night browsing, sometimes shared through social media's networks of connection and care.

Delphinium Days, a travelling exhibition on show in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland at the Gus Fisher Gallery across July and September 2024, offered an occasion and space to consider this transformation of voice and its translation into contemporary contexts of care, celebration, and community building. The exhibition's tone was notably different from the confrontational energy that characterised much of Jarman's original work. Rather than anger, there was something closer to reverence; rather than protest, a kind of gentle insistence on the ongoing relevance of his vision was offered.

This shift in tone becomes particularly significant when considered alongside the building that houses the Gus Fisher Gallery itself. Occupying a 1934, Category 1 listed heritage building that was formerly home to Radio 1YA and TVNZ—the southern hemisphere's first purpose-built radio studios[5]—the gallery occupies a space historically dedicated to broadcasting, to the transmission of voices across distances. The building's art deco architecture, with its emphasis on modernity and communication, created, for me, an unexpectedly resonant backdrop for Jarman's work. Here was a space originally designed for the pioneering transmission of voices and images, now hosting an exhibition of an artist whose career was fundamentally concerned with finding new ways to voice the unvoiced—queer experience, AIDS, environmental destruction, spiritual seeking.

An irony then: Jarman, who refused to live and die quietly,[6] whose work was born from the margins and the underground, found a temporary home in a former broadcasting headquarters—an institution of mainstream media transmission, and now the "flagship art gallery" for Waipapa Taumata Rau, the University of Auckland.[7] Yet rather than feeling like a sanitisation of his radical edge, the setting suggested something more complex: the possibility that institutional spaces, like the bodies of water that flow through Jarman's work, might contain currents capable of carrying transformative voices to new audiences.

Just months before encountering *Delphinium Days*, I had completed my thesis titled "Dandelion Minds, Stories that Make a Room," which explored how architectural practice might become more responsive to the collectives it serves.[8] Drawing on thinkers like Louis Kahn and Jarman himself, my research considers how "the room"—both literal and figurative—can act as a site for storytelling, care, and social transformation. This tension between space, memory, and collective encounter felt central to experiencing the exhibition.

The opening night was electric, filled with people from across generations—queers and allies, art-world regulars and those drawn by something less definable. While it wasn't the confrontational energy of an AIDS protest or the underground urgency of 1970s queer punk, there was a different kind of vitality: people lingering over works, making eye contact across the room, engaging in conversations that the exhibition seemed to generate naturally. Throughout the exhibition's run, a programme of performances and talks by queer artists and thinkers unfolded alongside the show, expanding its meaning and keeping it alive as a gathering point for numerous communities finding relevance in Jarman's work.

Jarman never came to Aotearoa New Zealand, but in 2024, his work arrived here—carried across seas; a drift of film, pigment, soil, and memory. His father, Lancelot Elworthy Jarman, was born in Canterbury in 1907, leaving New Zealand in his early twenties to join the Royal Air Force in Britain. It's a slender thread of connection, but in the comments of the exhibition's launch post, others with the surname Jarman tagged one another with quiet, knowing recognition. This suggested to me, not surprise or discovery, but a kind of acknowledgement: a shared name resurfacing in the flow of cultural memory.

Delphinium Days didn't frame this genealogical connection as a major narrative, and wisely so. Instead, it allowed these threads to flicker into view between the blue-painted walls, between screenings and silences, suggesting that legacy operates not through linear inheritance but through resonance—the way a name, a work, a gesture continues to ripple outwards, landing in unexpected places and familiar hands.

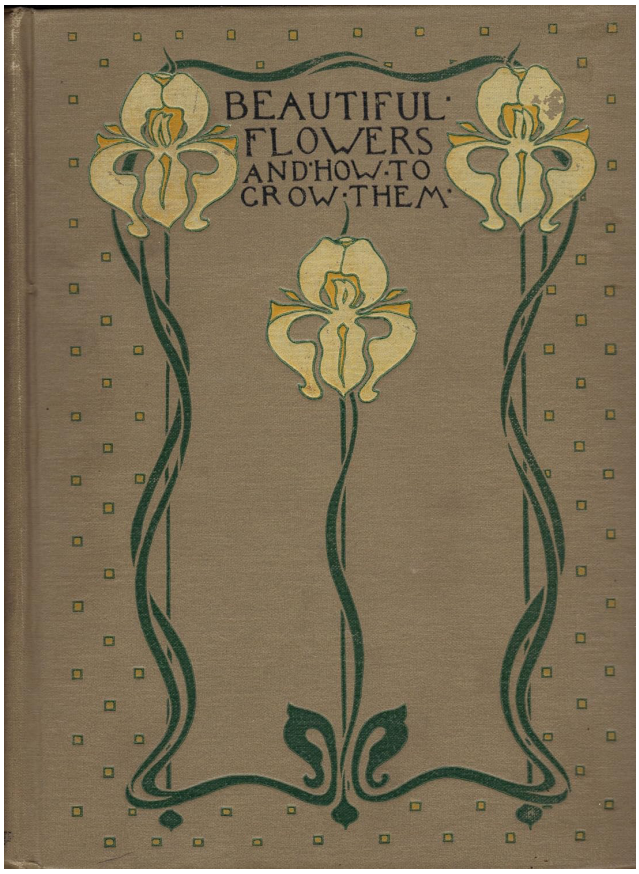


Fig. 1 Cover of Horace J. Wright and Walter P. Wright, *Beautiful Flowers and How to Grow Them* (London: T.C. & E.C Jack, 1909)

Blue wasn't screened in the Auckland show, but its presence was felt everywhere: in the colour of the walls, in the pacing of the rooms, in the way the exhibition invited visitors into a feeling of time slipping, of memory stretching both backwards and forwards. As Tony Rayns puts it, *Blue* is "not only elegiac and diaristic; at times the film is angry, philosophical, and prosaic. It is communal, featuring the voices of friends and collaborators."[9] This multiplicity of voice—individual and collective, private and public—seemed to echo through the exhibition's curatorial approach.

One of the earliest gifts Jarman received was a book called *Beautiful Flowers and How to Grow Them*, given to him by his parents when he was just four years old.[10] It is difficult not to read this as a seed that germinated into the garden at Prospect Cottage, but also into a broader understanding of cultivation as both artistic practice and a form of care. In my own research, I've argued that gardens are not static heterotopias—separate, contained spaces—but thickened enclosures where time, memory, and encounter interweave. Jarman's garden at Prospect Cottage was, as literary critic Jim Ellis writes, "a site of resistance and refuge,"[11] but also a space of continuous learning and ongoing care.

The garden's layout, with its semi-formal geometries and mix of stones, text, and wildflowers, resists easy categorisation. It's neither a symbol of nature nor a rejection of culture, but a third space where meanings intertwine. Like Jarman's films, and *Delphinium Days* itself, the garden doesn't prescribe particular readings but opens itself to being remade with each encounter.

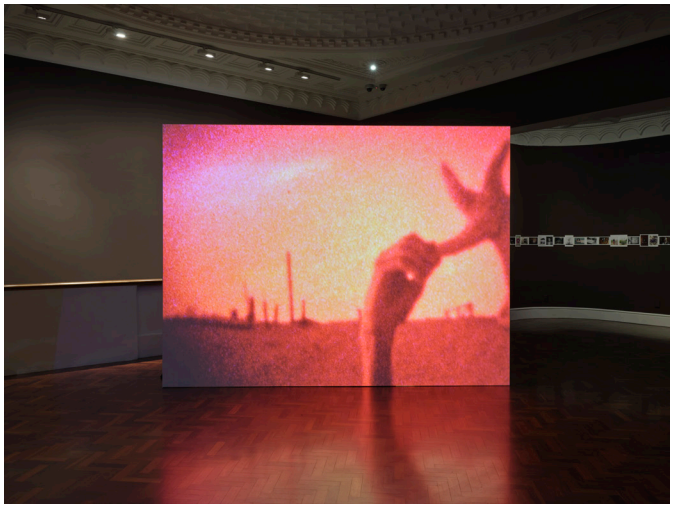
This openness proves radical in a time when pressure to define, categorise, and market are so intense. Jarman's work resists these pressures, inviting us to think about art not as product but as process: not as message but as site for conversation. Conversation, as Jarman understood, is itself a form of care—a way of tending to what we don't fully understand, of holding space for what remains unresolved.

What struck me most about *Delphinium Days* was how it managed to honour Jarman's legacy while allowing his voice to speak differently in this context. The exhibition didn't try to recreate the confrontational energy of his original moment, but instead created space for his vision to resonate in new ways. Where his voice once needed to be loud to be heard over the noise of indifference and hatred, here it could be more contemplative, more layered, more open to the kinds of conversations that happen when people gather not in crisis but in curiosity and reverence.

This is not to suggest that the urgency of Jarman's political vision has become irrelevant. Rather, *Delphinium Days* demonstrated how that urgency might be carried forward through different registers—not always the raised voice of protest, but sometimes the quieter voice of invitation, of care, of making space for others to speak and be heard. A sort of welcoming and inclusion, of those LGBTQI+ or not.

Seeing the exhibition in Auckland was not an experience of nostalgia or mourning, but of possibility. It asked visitors not simply to look back at Jarman's life and work, but to consider how we might carry his vision forward: How do we create spaces where difference is not erased but cultivated? How do we sustain practices of care that are generative rather than merely reactive? What does it mean to make art, gardens, or communities in the face of loss?

These questions remain vital, not just for queer communities but also for anyone concerned with how we live together in the face of precarity, environmental crisis, and the demands of a world that too often treats bodies as expendable. In the former broadcasting building that now houses the Gus Fisher Gallery, surrounded by the blue walls and flowing conversations of *Delphinium Days*, I felt these questions move like water across generations, across oceans, into new hands ready to take up the work of cultivation, care, and ongoing transformation.



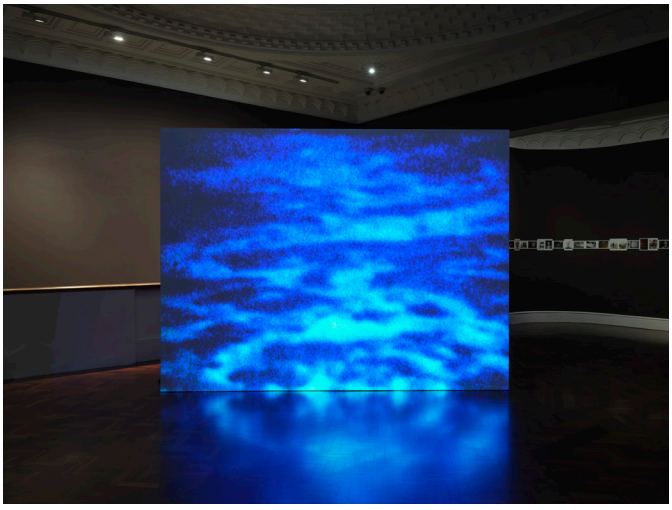


Fig. 2 Derek Jarman, *My Very Beautiful Movie*, 1974 [Courtesy of James Mackay and LUMA Foundation. Photograph by Sam Hartnett]

NOTES

1. James Mackay, "Derek Jarman Super 8," *Guardian*, 7 May 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/film/article/2024/may/07/standing-stones-urban-hellscapes-and-male-nudes-derek-jarmans-glorious-super-8-short-films.

2. Rowena Chiu, "Derek Jarman: When Yellow Wishes to Ingratiate it Becomes Gold at Amanda Wilkinson Galler," *Glass*, 3 August 2021, https://theglassmagazine.com/derek-jarman-when-yellow-wishes-to-ingratiate-it-becomes-gold-at-amanda-wilkinson-gallery/.

3. Simon McCallum, "Blue at 30: Remembering Derek Jarman's Final Film," *British Film Institute*, 15 September 2023, https://www.bfi.org.uk/features/blue-derek-jarman-final-film.

4. Christophe Dupin, Stephen Gordon, Ayesha Khan, and Peter Todd, *Experimental Film: 16+ Source Guides*, British Film Institute National Library, December 2023: 4, https://skyecloud.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/bfi-experimental-film-download_24jan11.pdf.

5. Gus Fisher Gallery, University of Auckland, *Derek Jarman: Delphinium Days* (2024), https://gusfishergallery.auckland.ac.nz/derek-jarman-delphinium-days/.

6. Mackay, "Derek Jarman Super 8."

7. Gus Fisher Gallery, University of Auckland, "About Gus Fisher Gallery," accessed 5 June 2025, https://gusfishergallery.auckland.ac.nz/about/.

8. Jack Wu, "Dandelion Minds, Stories that Make a Room" (MArch(Prof)UrbPlan(Prof) thesis, University of Auckland, 2023).

9. Dupin, Gordon, Khan, and Todd, *Experimental Film*, 4.

10. Jim Ellis, *Derek Jarman's Angelic Conversations* (University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 142.

11. Ellis, *Derek Jarman's Angelic Conversations*, 142.