



Seán Hewitt

NEW COMMISSION

Portal & The Slur of the Heart

In late 2021, Manchester Literature Festival and Manchester Art Gallery co-commissioned poet Seán Hewitt to create new work in response to the Derek Jarman *PROTEST!* exhibition at the Gallery. Seán performed 'Portal' and 'The Slur of the Heart' for the first time at an intimate event at Manchester Art Gallery on 3 April 2022 as part of MLF's Spring 2022 programme. He also discussed art, activism, nature, writing and the profound effect Derek's work has had on him in a moving conversation with host Greg Thorpe.

Manchester Literature Festival and Manchester Art Gallery also commissioned Modify Productions to produce two short films capturing Seán performing his new work inside the Derek Jarman *PROTEST!* exhibition after hours. You can watch the films on the MLF Vimeo channel: <http://vimeo.com/mcrlitfest>

Seán Hewitt was born in Warrington in 1990. His debut poetry collection, *Tongues of Fire*, was awarded the 2021 Laurel Prize and was a Guardian, Spectator and Irish Times Book of the Year. Max Porter describes him as 'an exquisitely calm and insightful lyric poet, reverential in nature and gorgeously wise in the field of human drama' whilst Fiona Benson describes his poems as 'beyond-gorgeous, beyond-glorious, blood-felt, feral, luminous.' His forthcoming memoir, *All Down Darkness Wide*, is a fearless and tender exploration of love, heartbreak, queer identity, masculinity, mental health and coming-of-age. Seán lectures in English literature at Trinity College Dublin.

Derek Jarman *PROTEST!* ran from 2 December 2021 – 10 April 2022 and was a major retrospective of the work of one of the most influential figures in 20th century British culture. The exhibition focused on the diverse strands of Derek's practice as a painter, film maker, writer, set-designer, gardener and political activist.

www.manchesterliteraturefestival.co.uk
www.manchesterartgallery.org

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Portal

for Derek Jarman

I

Landscape with Blue Pool (1967)

A clean, alchemical line marks out the green land – all simplified angles around the curve of the functional, perfect pool I walk towards. Time, I know, ends in that blue portal. I take your hand. Wake up. We might sink in it, through the clean renewing water and come out who knows where? Decorated in a filigree of green and lily-roots, another world beyond the earth's tidal shifts, dressed together as spring. You first, Derek, then me. Loose my hand, mind how you go. Slip, slip down into the water's cool, silken gown, its elemental time. I dip my foot. I puncture the clear retina of the water. I shatter bright light, drop through and see you there, down in the cavernous below of the dream, the after-image of the world above us, swimming in the fluid, floating nothing that is free. Two lost boys, Derek, you and I down here in the dream, somewhere beyond the hours, awake together.

II

Blue (1993)

I was only slipping out of that blue dream of wordlessness when you slipped into it; I was only just learning to see, to name its variousness when the world for you turned a single colour. I could not name, then, the ultramarine, the sapphire, the deep blue of grief. That was far off, then, out beyond the horizon, in no time I could sense. Your end was not then a warning for me. It would be years before I saw past warnings. I did not know the risen vein, tapped; the azure seas around the isle of the dead, the blue lips, the metamorphic blue, the celestial, the royal, the sculpted lapis lazuli. Sometimes there is a price to be paid to enter the dream, a long price, Derek; and another to cross it, another to have a place in its handiwork. Co-worker, comrade, what is the world we build from the blue? Sailor, you who have run your hand through the waters. You who have lived outside of time to tell me. Derek, with what hours, with what men, with what joys and losses. With what will I pay; or, with what have I paid the ferryman?

III

The Clearing (1993)

Through the ruins of politics, the fevered elms, an England wrecked by blight and coinage – you paid him handsomely, Derek. I have paid, but I fear at night that life has not emptied my pockets yet; everything, I suppose, will go to the ferryman's hand, so I follow your returning, and lift out here – on the heath, in the woods, a saxophone like summer in the birdsong played somewhere out of sight, for now. Instead, you walk through the ferns, the young hazels blurred to silver as the camera moves. Say, take off your mask, leather-man, lend me a cigarette. Say come back to the man who runs swift as a bird from the brakes. And the young boy in his schoolshorts says to you, Hello. Is it you? I see myself in schoolshorts there, everything I will pay unspent. I say Hello. Is it you? Come on, mother says, sit down, sit down, stop wandering. Sometimes, in this rolled-back time of the garden, everything merges out of focus, but never the sound, never the music, until you find him, the man who plays it – young again, dead good looking, in beauty's summer – you see blue, bliss in your ghostly eye. If I were the camera, if I followed, Derek (kiss me on my lips, my eyes) in the dreamworld (kiss me outside of time) where history loops, in the garden, before sin, in the beginning from where the sweet sad notes still carry to me after the lights go out – like you do, like yours do, Derek.

Seán Hewitt

Footnote:

'Portal' was inspired by various paintings in Derek Jarman's *Protest!* alongside the films *Blue* (1993) and *The Clearing* (1993). Though each section responds to the script and soundscapes of *Blue* (1993), the three poems are also weaved through with allusions to many works in the exhibition. If you read the trio of poems closely, you may see references and responses to *Landscape with Blue Pool* (1967); *Men asleep are labourers and co-workers in what takes place in the world* (1983); *The tree a wire pergola* (1968); *The Elms Died that Year* (1987); *Dead Man's Eyes* (1987); *Iche grete thee with songe* (1987).'

The Slur of the Heart

after Derek Jarman, *Queer* (1993)

At birth, god willing, a vessel fuses shut –
never opens again: and then, for years,
the sustenance of breath, signals, the electric

beat of the muscle...
It's true, in a way: all paintings are mute;
but still you feel a rhythm – the slur

your own heart makes against silence,
against stasis and submission –
no end, no end, it says, until...

But for now, there is this slur
that underwrites all words, overwrites
death and quiet and hatred; it is a sound

like hope, doubled; the body's
relentless protest in the face
of its own end; annotating

the still, empty air; the silence
that comes afterwards –
the body's heaviness when, finally,

it loses the strength to curse back
against whatever might subsume it:
colour, politics, poverty, the ignorant

fear of whatever might bury it –
whatever, in the end, might try
to earth its beat, its power.

Seán Hewitt