

## **Queering the City: Manchester 1992**

### **Jeffrey Horsley**

'QUEER', an exhibition of paintings by Derek Jarman, was held at Manchester City Art Galleries (now Manchester Art Gallery) from 16 May-28 June 1992. It contained 44 works, seven of which were small, predominantly black 'tar' paintings from 1989-1992, and another nine, highly coloured, heavily impastoed landscape paintings from 1991. These had all been shown in the exhibition, 'At Your Own Risk', at Kelvingrove Art Gallery & Museum, Glasgow, earlier in the year.

A further 28 works, commissioned by Manchester Art Gallery, dominated the exhibition. This was the most significant contract for new paintings that Derek had received since a major show at the ICA, London, in 1984. Nineteen of the new works were large-scale canvases, some of the biggest canvases Derek had ever produced, each measuring 251.5 x 179 cm. The dimensions were likely determined by the architectural constraints of the studio in which they were painted, a large room in Sloane Square, provided by Derek's friend and dealer Richard Salmon. Many of the new paintings bore texts filched from current tabloid headlines (often painted over newspapers pasted to canvas) and some were expressions of Derek's experiences of living with AIDS.

I was introduced to Derek by a mutual friend, Aiden Brady, with whom I'd lived in Manchester in the 1980s. The commissioned works were produced quickly, painted "fast and loose", as Derek records in the catalogue, in the few months before the show. I remember the smell, of linseed oil and turpentine, as we unpacked the crated delivery. The exhibition was presented in a building adjacent to the main gallery, the Athenaeum, built in 1837 and designed by Sir Charles Barry. I had an office just behind the gallery space. It was converted from the gents toilet and was still fitted with the original Pilkington tiles and mirrors, albeit with the urinals conveniently boxed-in by City Council joiners. I worked in a cottage and this made Derek laugh.

As a relatively inexperienced curator, slightly overwhelmed, certainly awe-struck, I was carried along by Derek's energy, ideas and the commitment and affection expressed by the companions and colleagues that surrounded him; Keith, Piers, Digby, Howard, Michael. I advocated for the exhibition and the commission and generally administered the exhibition for the gallery. But as far as the conception and production of the work...that was entirely in Derek's hands.

Titling the show, however, was a group decision. Originally titled 'Shipwrecked' (an oblique diary reference from Derek describing "a cesspit at the heart of Manchester") the title was soon after declared as 'QUEER'. Audacious, blatant, intentionally provocative, we had many serious conversations, which were nevertheless laced with humour due to their absurdity, as to whether DEREK JARMAN QUEER or QUEER DEREK JARMAN was the most appropriate word order for the publicity banners. Once QUEER DEREK JARMAN had won

out, the massive banners were hauled into place on the Athenaeum's façade. Derek proudly noted that this was "a world first for civic gay pride".

But the title was not without contention. I was invited to the office of a prominent councillor who, whilst stating categorically his support for the show, drew my attention to the fact that the opening date was the week following the local elections, which were scheduled for the seventh of May. Only the previous month, the general election had returned the Conservative Party for its fourth consecutive term. I was advised not to use the title 'QUEER' before the election date. The gallery, principally funded by the City Council, conceded and invitations were sent out announcing the preview of 'Derek Jarman: New Work'. More relevant, more resonant, was a conversation with a colleague – an 'out' gay man, though 'out' in a careful, quiet way, who disputed the use of 'queer'. He was hurt that I would condone public use of what he considered such a pejorative, cruel word. I felt awkward and yet our discussion reflected the considerable cultural and political shift from gay to queer. Derek echoes: "The more letters I get from these old-fashioned 'gays', the more I'm glad of the queer."

Manchester embraced queerness and its presence was tangible. The city had long supported a vital commercial gay scene but the Stop Clause 28 march, held on the 20th of February 1988, asserted Manchester's potential as a principal axis for queer politics and culture. FLESH, conceived by Paul Cons and Lucy Scher, debuted in October 1991 at the world-infamous Hacienda and rapidly became the UK's leading queer club night. It's Queer Up North, an international festival of queer performance (headed by Gavin Barlow and Tanya Farman) staged its first season in 1992 and included events featuring Stephen Daldry, Alan Pillay, Martin Sherman and Lois Weaver. The renegade graphics of cultural radicals HOMOCULT appeared as posters, stickers, graffiti and T-shirt prints across the city. Their antagonist manifesto, *Queer With Class: The First Book of Homocult* (containing acid mottoes that reverberated with the texts on Derek's paintings), was also published in 1992. This was the scene into which Derek's exhibition debuted.

Manchester also embraced 'QUEER'. Derek's diary note, that "it really is friendlier here", is heartfelt. 'QUEER' infected the city, with readings and book-signings at The Royal Exchange and Waterstones; film screenings and discussion at Cornerhouse; a one-off event staged at the Hacienda, in which the Pet Shop Boys played to film footage created for them by Derek, has become PSB legend – boot-leg recordings on Mixcloud the evidence. I worked with the Gallery Director, Richard Gray, to raise funds to buy the painting, *Queer*, for the gallery collection; the eight-by-four-foot, vivid red canvas with off-green heart and 'QUEER' scrawled-text is now owned by Manchester, as Manchester once owned 'QUEER'. I doubt that, in 1992, the exhibition could have happened in any other city.

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