

AMANDA WILKINSON

DEREK JARMAN *TAR PAINTINGS*
ART BASEL PARIS 2026&NBSP;

In 1989, assisted by the filmmaker David Lewis, Jarman discovered a new painting technique using tar:

'David arrived at lunch with an enormous block of pitch.

After swimming we built a brick hearth, lit a bonfire, and melted the pitch in an old tin can. For an hour we rushed back and forth to the house for brushes, gloves, barbed wire, crucifixes, prayer books, bullets, a model fighter plane even an old telephone, which we tarred and feathered. The results were instant and extraordinary. The hot tar splashed everywhere and set like shining jet; the half-buried crucifix looked like a Medardo Rosso sculpture.

Working with the tar had all the excitement of building sand-and-water pinnacles and spires on the beach as a child.'

Derek Jarman, *Modern Nature*, Tuesday 25 July 1989

Jarman's enthusiasm for this medium resulted in several paintings made with tar over the next two years. The process itself involved the building of a bonfire on the beach, an appealing aspect to Jarman given his interest in the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus who invoked fire as a metaphor for ever-changing life. In one of the tar paintings Jarman quoted words from the philosopher in the form of a street warning sign, a device used in several of the paintings from this period 'Death is all things we see awake; all we see asleep is sleep'. The sculptural and transformative quality of the tar with objects on the canvas related to Jarman's interest in alchemy, just as he delighted in film's transformative potential, describing the medium's union of light and matter as an 'alchemical conjunction, a portal to other worlds'.

Jarman called his diary *Modern Nature* a form of self-archaeology, an 'archaeology of the soul.' The

notion of memory is also central to the tar paintings from this period, as old clothes or photographs are crystalised in their black surfaces. Although the tar supplies a visceral quality to the works, the objects immersed in the surface appear frozen. Self-reflection is also present in the use of mirrors in some of the paintings, a device he used in many of his films.

The powerful tar-and-feather scene in the film *The Garden* was an inspiration for these paintings, one of which feature feathers from an old pillow alongside the other objects embedded in the surface. The iconography in these works relates directly to the theme of *The Garden* – the depiction of Christ as a persecuted figure analogous to the persecution Jarman and his community felt at the time when the AIDS virus was prevalent and those dying from it were demonised by the gutter press. Christ's cross appears embedded in the tar in several of the paintings and in others the tar suspends a prayer book.

The Tar Paintings in all their multilayered forms provide a monochromatic window into the creative world of Derek Jarman at a key moment in his career. They trace the many themes, ideas and formal strategies that he embarked upon during these years; his love of nature, his interest in medieval literature and alchemy, his use of varied medium and his political drive to defend those suffering from AIDS. The paintings precede another great monochrome, the film *Blue*, 1994, a masterpiece and his final work.

For full details and larger images, please see the end of this document.



Derek Jarman
Andy, 1989
Tar and mixed media on canvas
45,7 x 35,5 x 7 cm
18 x 14 x 2 3/4 in
(WG/DJAR00262)

[View detail](#)



Derek Jarman
Dream of the Rood, 1989
Tar and mixed media on canvas
45.72 x 45.72 x 17.78 cm
18 x 18 x 7 in
(WG/DJAR00265)

[View detail](#)



Derek Jarman
The Common Prayer, 1989
Tar and mixed media on canvas
40.64 x 35.56 cm
16 x 14 in
(WG/DJAR00268)

[View detail](#)



Derek Jarman
Clothes, 1989
 Tar and mixed media on canvas
 46.99 x 46.99 x 7.62 cm
 18 1/2 x 18 1/2 x 3 in
 (WG/DJAR00296)

[View detail](#)



Derek Jarman
Mirror Mirror, 1990
 Tar and mixed media on canvas
 51,1 x 15,24 cm
 20 1/8 x 16 in
 (WG/DJAR00380)

[View detail](#)



Derek Jarman
Untitled (hand mirror), 1991
 Tar and mixed media on canvas
 68,58 x 27,94 cm
 27 x 11 in
 (WG/DJAR00442)

[View detail](#)



Derek Jarman
Fan, 1991
 Tar and mixed media on canvas
 60,96 x 13,3 cm
 24 x 15 1/4 in
 (WG/DJAR00417)

[View detail](#)



Derek Jarman
Untitled, 1991
 Tar and mixed media on canvas
 22,90 x 50,8 in
 9 x 20 in
 (WG/DJAR00443)

[View detail](#)



Derek Jarman
Death is all things we see awake, 1991
 Tar and mixed media on canvas
 50,8 x 38,1 cm
 20 x 15 in
 (WG/DJAR00416)

[View detail](#)



Derek Jarman

Untitled (photo and string bale), 1991

Tar and mixed media on canvas

51,4 x 38,1 x 7,62 cm

20 1/4 x 15 x 3 in

(WG/DJAR00415)

[View detail](#)

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Andy, 1989



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