

GRETCHEN BENDER DEREK JARMAN
LIVING WITH PAIN* *THE LAST OF ENGLAND
Upper Gallery Lower Gallery

2 June – 16 July 2017
Opening: Thursday 1 June, 6 - 9 pm

We are delighted to bring together for the first time works by two artists, Gretchen Bender (1951-2004) and Derek Jarman (1942-1994), whose unique contributions to the art of the late twentieth century, though widely recognized, have yet to be fully appreciated. In juxtaposing a very particular selection of works by both artists we hope to revisit a crucial moment in the mid-1980s in order to explore its continuing resonance more than 30 years later.

Both artists were engaged with contemporary gender politics at a time when both had many friends who were dying from AIDS. Both raised questions about the transmission of images in various media, especially those relating to war and the politics of the day, at a moment when such images were proliferating as never before. The use of found footage is also fundamental to both practices. Whereas Bender has been affiliated with the influential Pictures Generation in the US, she subverts their simple appropriation strategies. Rather than investing in and contributing to the image bank, her work divested the imagery in circulation of its power and currency. Jarman spoke from his position as a key figure in a new generation of experimental filmmakers in the UK. Text played an essential role in Bender's work and she used it both as a highly visual and decidedly poetic means to engage the viewer. Jarman's writing has become legendary and is exemplified in *The Last of England* through the incorporation into this the wildly innovative film of poetry written during its making in 1986/87.

In the multi-screen TV *Text and Image*, 1986, Bender transmits live TV footage, but with extraneous slogans pasted across the screen, as both an engagement with and a critique of the power of television at the time. Of the first of these screens, *People with AIDS*, Bender remarked, "what I did was make everyone on television have AIDS. I used the phrase 'People with AIDS' rather than 'AIDS Victims', which was the way the network media was referring to people with AIDS at the time". Jarman was diagnosed with AIDS in 1986, the year he embarked on the making of *The Last of England* as well as the series of 'black paintings' also in this exhibition. His depiction of gay sex is overtly present within the collaged imagery of the film, most poignantly taking place on top of a strung-out Union Jack. This had a powerful resonance in the same year that Clause 28 was enacted by the Thatcher government. Jarman wrote four voice-overs for the film, delivered in a BBC monotone by Nigel Terry. Jarman writes in his memoir *Kicking the Pricks*: "I've written four 'voice overs': my reaction to the view from the window of a culture riddled with deathwatch beetle."

Both Bender and Jarman used a variety of mediums to articulate their ideas and were unapologetically experimental in their use of materials. Bender's series *People in Pain* uses crumpled vinyl panels backlit by light blue neon tubes to present a series of movie titles mostly from the period 87/88. (Jarman's *The Last of England* was released in 1988). Resembling burnt celluloid film or black rubbish bags they have the same anarchic punch as Jarman's 'black paintings' of the same year. Of similarly modest scale, these canvases have embedded in the dark mire of their tortured surfaces choice selections from the detritus of everyday living – crushed coke can, a discarded geometry compass, a smashed light bulb – pulled together into brooding compositions sometimes overlaid with gnomish texts, sometimes not.

Bender's work *Untitled (Landscape, Computer Graphics, Death Squad)*, 1987, presents a violent photographic image of dead bodies next to computer-generated abstractions. In Bender's words "The work is about how we allow ourselves to see and, simultaneously, not to see the sociopolitical landscape we've created for ourselves. We know we fund the death squads in El Salvador, but we never have to see the dead bodies, or we see the aestheticized versions of them through photographs. I want us to feel how disturbing it is that we flatten our politics of death through visual representation." Jarman also places images of war and destruction at the centre of his film, but the found imagery is taken from his own family home movies. Cut in between a post-apocalyptic landscape, reflected also in

the brutal handling of the materials in his paintings, the contrasting imagery grounds the film in a real world. Rather than exoticizing the imagery of war, he drags it violently into a residually domestic setting. The use of found imagery by both artists is at once a reflection on the contemporary politics of the 1980s and a timeless commentary on images of war and destruction.

Curated by Cay-Sophie Rabinowitz and Amanda Wilkinson.

Wilkinson Gallery would like to thank the Gretchen Bender Estate for their help and support with this exhibition.