Almost Bliss

Notes on Derek Jarman’s Blue

Have you heard of Derek Jarman? I confess I hadn’t. Yet after seeing Almost Bliss, Chelsea Space’s latest exhibition, I feel as though my eyes have been opened.

The exhibition is a dedication to Jarman’s last film, Blue, which he made before his untimely death, afflicted by AIDS and near blindness. There are scripts, postcards, programmes, even an original film reel, displayed poignantly behind glass, as a testament to this true polymath. For Jarman, wasn’t only a filmmaker: he was an artist, writer, poet, gardener – a true Renaissance character embracing every creative dimension, leaving behind him an extraordinary and immortal body of work.

Walking through the exhibition, you feel as though you are diving deeper and deeper into Jarman’s soul. After viewing the film memorabilia, you come across a framed print at the end of the corridor. It is simply a rectangle of deep blue, yet from a distance could almost be a physical block of lapis lazuli. What does it mean this simple blue print? What is Blue about? I ask myself...

The answer comes. In the main exhibition space, each page of Jarman’s intensely personal sketchbook, where he developed ideas for his last film, are lovingly printed and framed. In them we find a new philosophy and the meaning of Blue itself, written down as if a sacred text.

For, in a profuse stream-of-consciousness, Jarmen pursues the meaning of life. Answers to those timeless questions that afflict humankind are found: What is the meaning of life? Why are we here? Where do we go once we die?

And the answer is Blue.

So alright then, what is Blue? Well, put simply, Blue is the soul, the inexpressible, everything that is immaterial yet real, such as love, bliss, peace and happiness. Blue is the boundless, the universal, the abyss, the silent space between the tick and the tock on a clock. Blue has no beginning and no end, it is the forever and eternal.

Jarmen movingly prays to St Rita that his work will be understood. He explores the problems which his monumental project entails, that to define Blue or Bliss, he must set false constraints, such as the way his film will inescapably begin and end. Yet, for anyone who takes the time to read, to listen and to see, thanks to this stunning exhibition Blue will be understood. Jarman is free to speak beyond the grave. We look into the depths of Jarman’s soul and there, while we swim through his words to the sound of an audio of waves breaking on the beach of Dungeness where he lived, we at last emerge.

In the reflection of the glass-framed prints, you see an image of your own reflection. Jarman seems to make the ultimate sacrifice: his life, for our understanding, his blueprint for our freedom and sanity. And that is why Blue is tinged by sadness. Borne out of pain, it could never be Bliss – though it was - almost.

Almost Bliss: notes on Derek Jarman’s Blue runs until 15 March 2014.