

Back bites

LAST ACTION PAINTINGS

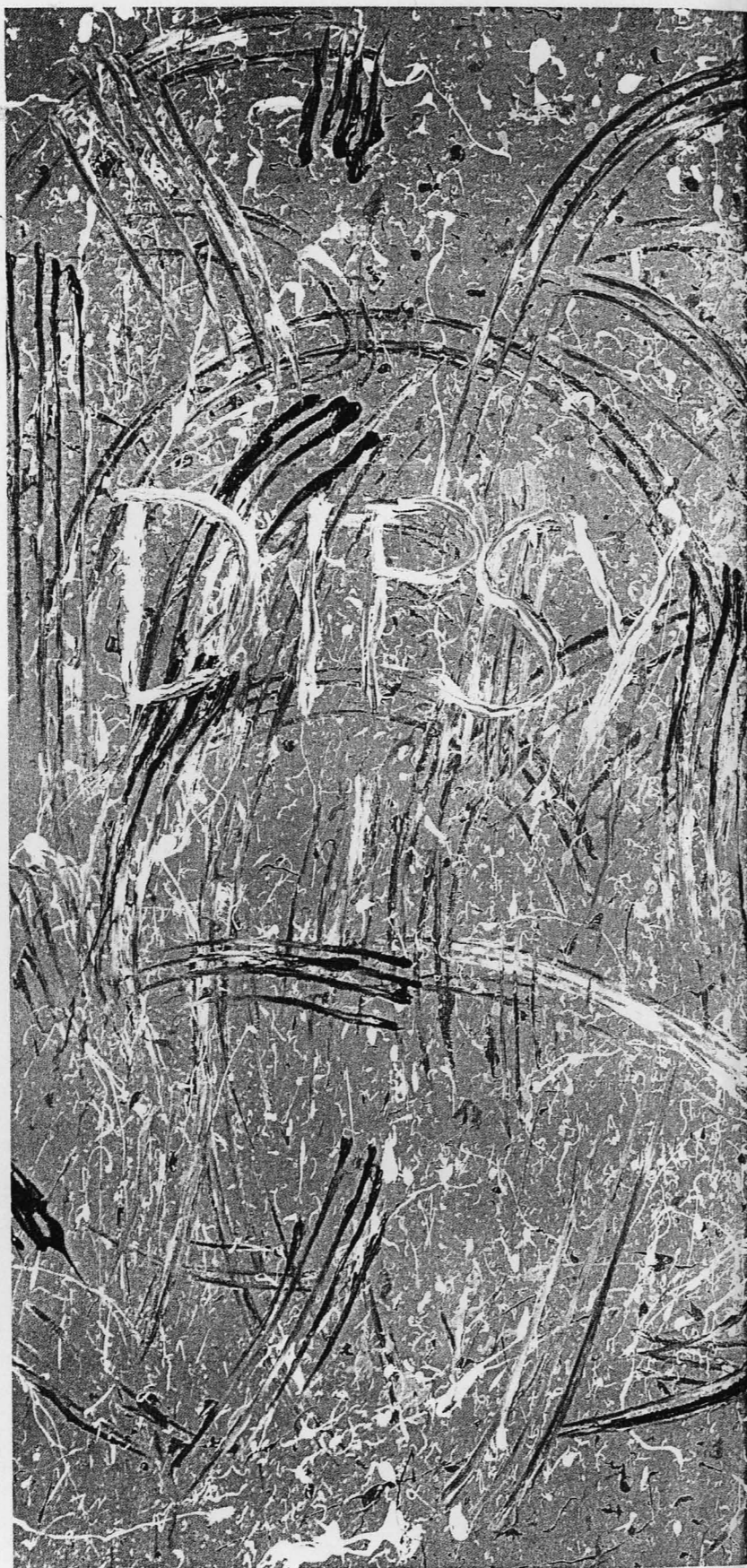
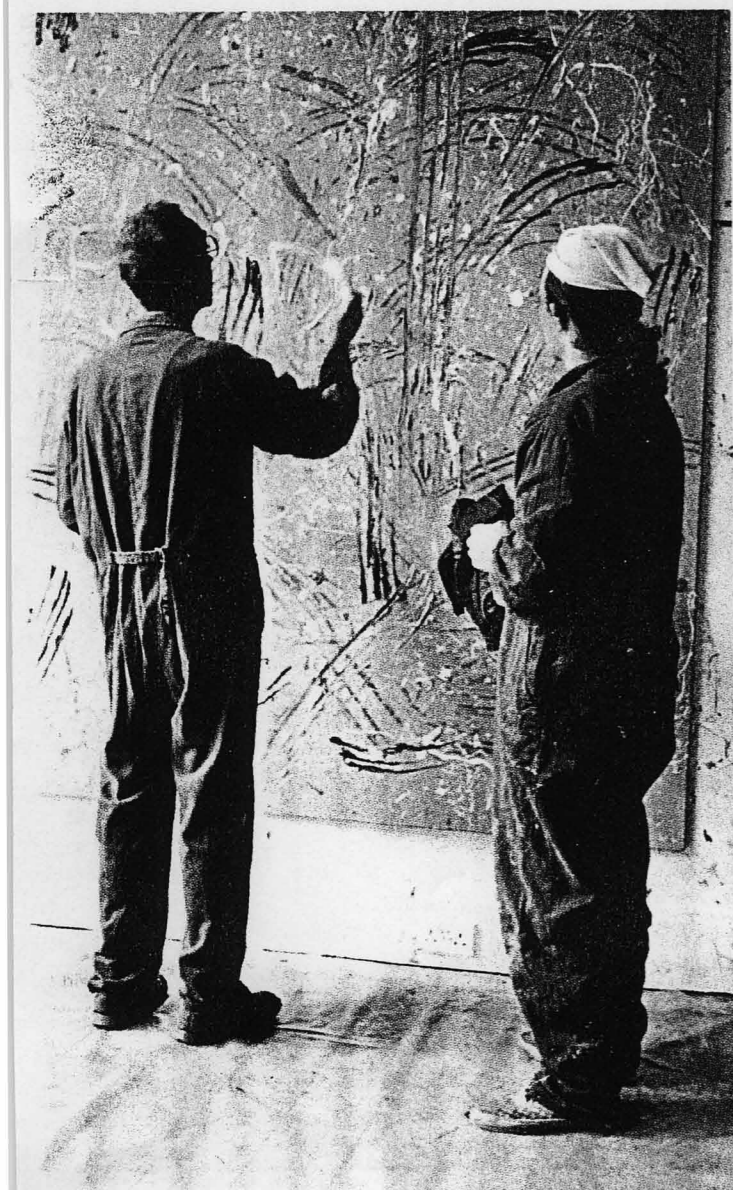
George Barber meets the late Derek Jarman's assistant in the studio

Karl Lydon is a down-to-earth, 31-year-old Northerner; all his life, it seems, he's drifted from job to job, none ever lasting for much more than a year. He used to work with old people, then for Calor Gas ("tip 'n' load" they termed what I did; a big truck would come in and you'd unload it...") then in a sculpture park, taping interviews with the artists-in-residence for the local

council and posterity. Eventually, he headed south, ending up in Kent where he lent a hand to a friend with a bronze-casting business. "It's all pretty heavy and hot work, casting. You can always use help." And it was in Kent that he met Derek Jarman.

"Derek used to need help doing various odd jobs in his cottage garden, by Dungeness nuclear power station," Karl says, "moving stuff, or helping with his driftwood assemblages. We got along."

Last year, as Derek Jarman's health deteriorated, he needed more and more help, and Karl (below, right, with Jarman in the studio), along with another assistant, Piers Clemett, gradually became the artist's hands and eyes, listening to and carrying out Jarman's directions to



claw, rub or throw paint at his canvases. For Karl, it was a unique experience. "I don't claim to be an artist or anything," he says. "It was simply an honour to help Jarman finish his last batch of canvases."

Jarman was, by this time, nearly blind, and the *modus operandi*

sounds like a recipe for inexactitude and confusion. Not so, according to Mark Jordan, the director of *Evil Queen*, Granada Television's documentary account of Jarman's last paintings, who witnessed and filmed the painting-by-proxy process.

"I did often wonder how different



the painting would be if another person did what Karl was doing. But Derek seemed so able to get his ideas across and communicate that I doubt it would have made that much difference. What did intrigue me, though, is the question of how much Jarman could actually see. Towards

the end, he was half-blind and terribly weak. Who knows what the paintings really looked like to the man himself?"

Karl Lydon produced 17 paintings with Jarman, 15 of which have been assembled for a show at the Whitworth Gallery in Manchester.

They are paintings in their own right, not arguments on canvas – they are quite unlike the paintings in *The Queer Show*, Jarman's earlier show at the Manchester City Art Gallery, which made Aids or gay activism their subject. These last paintings bring to mind Jackson Pollock and Abstract Expressionism, and, as the last goodbyes of an undoubtedly talented man, they have a definite totemic power. At best, they capture Jarman's wild exuberance; at worst, they are merely "big paint".

The experience of working with Jarman has not turned Karl's head; he has no intention of enrolling in a fine-art foundation course. It's just a period he'll never forget.

"We used to work in this huge London studio. Tins and tins of oil paint used to arrive, because tubes were simply no good for the highly physical, gestural effect Jarman was aiming at. One of the noises I always remember is the squelch of paint on the plastic sheeting put down underfoot to protect the floor – all day, the plastic would be sticking to one's feet, colour mixing everywhere. And finally, when Derek approved, he would take a kitchen knife and carve the title on it."

Some of which aren't bad: *Bubble and Squeak*, *Dipsy Do Sinister* (pictured left), *Drop Dead*, *Dizzy Bitch*. But what about *Germs* or *Fuck Me Blind* for the hall?

It was this sort of approach that earned Jarman the Mary Whitehouse DFC – she once judged his work "corrupting, pernicious filth". Indeed, deciding what box to put Jarman in is already part of the legend; he amassed a squadron of epithets, including film-maker, artist, writer, opera director, diarist, poet, and queer activist. Yet Karl, modest to the end, attempts to correct at least one popular misconception.

"Everyone always imagines that, in the last year of Jarman's life, he just had a go at any and every art form in a death-defying burst of energy. But in truth, I think he'd always been busy. Actually, when I look back, I think he only picked me to help him paint because I was good in his garden. Maybe anyone else, especially another artist, would have just got in the way. That's why I got the job." ●

'Evil Queen' will be broadcast at 11.45 pm on 18 September. Derek Jarman's last paintings are at the Whitworth Gallery, Oxford Road, Manchester, until 5 November

RICHARD SALMON GALLERY