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Frieze

The Actor and the Hummingbird

A series of 'magical transformations': Tacita Dean's new work launches across three institutions in London

By Ben Eastham (February 20, 2018)



Tacita Dean describes the process of making a film as a series of 'magical transformations'. When we met in a room above London's Frith Street Gallery, a few months before she opened overlapping exhibitions at the Royal Academy of Arts, the National Gallery and the National Portrait Gallery, the artist returned several times to the word 'magic': when marvelling at the encounter of light and photosensitive emulsion, at the curious way that narrative emerges from coincidence, at the moment in the editing process when everything aligns and something new emerges.

In a less accomplished filmmaker, it would be tempting to dismiss this repeated invocation of magic as superstitious or evasive. But Dean speaks illuminatingly about her ideas and techniques, and comes to life when given the chance to speak about anamorphic lenses, the optical reduction of film gauges or the contents of her cluttered cutting table. It is only when arriving at those elusive events that animate a work of art – which are responsible for what you might call its 'click' or 'spark' – that she draws a blanket over the process, citing 'magic'. In doing so, she follows Sylvia Plath's advice in 'Admonition' (1953) – 'If you dissect a bird / To diagram the tongue / You'll cut the chord / Articulating song' – that not everything can be explained in ordinary language.



Tacita Dean, *Event for a Stage*, 2015, 16mm colour film still, optical sound, 50 mins. Courtesy: the artist, Frith Street Gallery, London, and Marian Goodman, London/New York/Paris

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Dean has, in the 25 years since she emerged as one of the most significant British artists of her generation, produced a body of work that is to blueprint commercial filmmaking what the romantic lyric is to the airport novel. Films including *Disappearance at Sea* (1996), *Banewl* (1999) and *Amadeus (swell consopio)* (2008) are elegiac meditations on the sublime in nature, while exquisite portraits of artists including Merce Cunningham, David Hockney, Julie Mehretu and Cy Twombly have re-imagined the possibilities of biographical filmmaking. More recently, Dean has addressed the relationship between theatre and film – notably in *Event for a Stage* (2015), a collaboration with the actor Stephen Dillane, which began as a series of live performances – opening up a new front in her challenge to conventional hierarchies of narrative, medium and genre.

So, it's appropriate that an unprecedented trilogy of exhibitions at three of London's major institutions should take their titles from non-narrative genres traditionally associated with painting: 'Still Life', 'Portrait' and 'Landscape'. Dean describes the format as a 'useful device' inasmuch as it marks out the boundaries that her oeuvre complicates. Two examples: a portrait of Cunningham – *Merce Cunningham performs STILLNESS ... (six performances, six films)* (2008), in which the dancer holds his pose for the duration of each of the three movements of John Cage's *4' 33"* (1952) – plays with the idea of time and movement in relation to film portraiture; and *Portraits* (2016), a study of Hockney in his studio that, dominated by brightly coloured textures (California orange collar, electric blue jumper, silvered hair, cigarette smoke), more closely resembles a still life. This pushing against the framework of category isn't mere contrarianism; Dean embraces constraints as catalysts to creative thought.



Tacita Dean, *The Green Ray*, 2001, 16mm colour film still, silent, 2.5 mins. Courtesy: the artist, Frith Street Gallery, London, and Marian Goodman, London/New York/Paris

In fact, she notes: 'The whole point about film is that it is full of constraints. it forces you to make things in a different way.' The specific properties of film define its complicated relationship with the world it represents. In *The Green Ray* (2001) – a two-minute film which encapsulates Dean's career-long negotiation with her medium – the sun sinks silently from an ochre sky into the sea and, as its top edge dips below the horizon, burns for the briefest imaginable interval a fluorescent green. This fleeting optical phenomenon cannot be isolated on a single frame of the film nor, according to Dean, does the ominous flash show up on a digital video recording of the same sunset. But it is there nonetheless, caught somewhere between the flickering frames and manifesting only in the eye or, more precisely, the mind of the viewer.

Dean further tested the limits of the medium in her 2011 commission for Tate Modern's cavernous Turbine Hall. *FILM* was a formal experiment which doubled as a portrait in both

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senses of the word: an impressionistic patchwork interleaving colour-filtered shots of the museum's interior spaces with images from nature, it was filmed and then projected using anamorphic lenses rotated through 90 degrees. The effect was to repurpose the 'stretched' effect of CinemaScope (familiar from the sweeping land-scapes of Westerns) for the portrait format. Projected onto a 13-metre-high white monolith, this spectacular paean to 35 mm film proposed that the medium's limitations – specifically the materiality that renders it impractical compared to digital processes, and which manifests in the texture of the image – are its inimitable strengths.



Tacita Dean, *Event for a Stage*, 2015, 16mm colour film still, optical sound, 50 mins. Courtesy: the artist, Frith Street Gallery, London, and Marian Goodman, London/New York/Paris

This point was dramatized by the artist's invention of a device that is both a literal obstruction and liberating tool. Partly inspired by the rudimentary special effects of early cinema, Dean designed a series of 3D-printed stencils which, slipped into the camera and over the aperture, partially obstruct the light's journey through the lens and onto the film's layered emulsion. When the camera rolls, only the uncovered portion of the emulsion is exposed, making it possible – by painstakingly rewinding the reel and inserting a different stencil – to expose with the next shot a different section of the same film. The process is like masking off sections of a canvas in order to paint them independently, or undertaking a solo game of *Exquisite Corpse* in which you have only a rough idea of what you previously sketched onto the concealed panels. The individual frame is transformed by this compilation of separate exposures into a collage of different images that, because this is film, are also different moments in time.

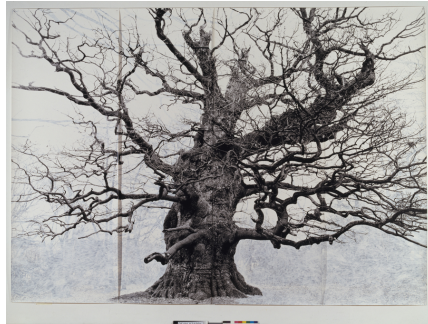
For her latest work, Dean used the same 'aperture gate masking system' to assemble, in a single image, an assortment of locations, people and circumstances. For *His Picture in Little* (2017), a 35 mm anamorphic film optically reduced to a 16 mm spherical format and displayed amongst the National Portrait Gallery's miniatures, Dean recorded three actors in different parts of the world – Dillane, David Warner and Ben Whishaw – on the same reels. Each plays his own part without being able to see what the other actors are doing, their occasional and accidental synchrony epitomizing the crucial 'beauty of the unintended thing' that Dean seeks out and hopes to communicate in all of her work.

This unintended beauty consists at least partly in the patterns that we perceive in random events and that we are liable to interpret as meaningful. When a rainbow breaks through the sky at the end of *Michael Hamburger* (2007), it reads, at first, like a clumsy pathetic fallacy. But then you remember that Dean was unlikely to have written a rainbow into any script, nor could it have been added in postproduction. Unlike digital video, which is less expensive to shoot and

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much easier to manipulate, the medium of film to which Dean is devoted legislates against both possibilities. In the first case, because making a documentary on film with a crew involves too many people to sit around waiting for rainbows to happen; in the second because (as illustrated by Éric Rohmer's cack-handed attempt at simulating the green ray in the 1986 film that inspired Dean) its later addition would not have been credible. The rainbow's inclusion in the film is, rather, a collaboration with chance and a recognition of the role of the unforeseen in art.

If the rainbow is, in the legal sense of an uncontrollable natural hazard, an act of God, then the impulse to ascribe meaning to it – as a coda to the life of an ageing poet and Holocaust survivor – is essentially human. Dean transforms the material supplied to her by a capricious external world into an ordered cinematic reality, seeking a truth located somewhere between uncontrollable fact and authored fiction. 'It all comes out', she says, 'of the fact that the only way you can do anything with film comes out of stencilling and light.'



Tacita Dean, *Providence*, 2017, 35mm anamorphic colour film still, reduced to 16mm spherical format, silent, 5.5 mins, continuous loop. Courtesy: the artist, Frith Street Gallery, London, and Marian Goodman, London/New York/Paris

If light is the material with which Dean works, then time is the means by which she organizes it, the constraint that holds her films together. It is marked out or manifested in *Disappearance at Sea* (1996) by the rotation of a lighthouse lantern, by the competitive fizzing of two fermenting pears suspended in neighbouring jars in *Prisoner Pair* (2008), in *Darmstädter Werkblock* (2007) by the hessian walls that were to be removed from a permanent Joseph Beuys installation. The bewilderingly intricate edit of *Event for a Stage* cuts together four separate performances by Dillane – in the course of which he delivers, with various degrees of unwillingness, scripts handed to him by Dean – in a complex, uncomfortable and unresolved reflection on the relationship between linear and nonlinear time, truth and artifice.

This manipulation and recombination of light and time finds its most ambitious expression in the new hour-long film *Antigone* (2018), screened as a vast CinemaScope diptych at the Royal Academy of Arts. The idea for the work dates back to the late 1990s, when Dean imagined a film scripted around the undramatized interval separating the end of Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* (c.429 BCE) from the events described in its sequel *Oedipus at Colonus* (c.401 BCE). She asked her friend, the great Canadian poet and classicist Anne Carson, whether she would be willing to write a speculative account of what might have happened during that gap and, in the kind of spooky coincidence that seems to convince Dean she is on the right track, it turned out that Carson already had.

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The story of how Antigone was made lays bare what Dean describes as the ‘terrifying riskiness’ of her reluctance to premeditate. She relies firstly on the physical world functioning as it is supposed to; in the case of Antigone by producing an eclipse unobstructed by rainclouds in the desert. (In theological terms, this is general providence.) and then the process must respond to unforeseeable interventions such as Carson’s alike thinking or the miraculous fact that there exists in Illinois a near-abandoned Thebes, complete with historic courthouse available for filming. (This is special providence.) Add to these variables that each fragile reel of film had to be exposed, reloaded, rewound and re-exposed several times under different aperture gates – as well as survive transportation between locations separated by thousands of miles – and it’s easy to understand how the experience might have been, in Dean’s own words, ‘highly laboured, a real mindfuck and utterly magical’.

The phenomena that Dean values as magical are, by definition, unpredictable – once identified and made repeatable, magic becomes method – and so are endangered by any society that sacrifices openness to risk on the altar of efficiency. Her films seem to resist a culture that values predictability and productivity above all, in which the process by which ideas are realized is reduced to a necessary evil to be economized or – illuminating euphemism – ‘rationalized’. Magic might, then, describe a creative process which is not, in these terms, quantifiable, which cannot be forced, dissected or reverse-engineered.

It was in trying to explain the ‘magic’ of her aperture-masking technique that Dean made an idle boast to Warner that she was forced to back up. The new apparatus, Dean told the actor when trying to convince him to take part in her new work, could make possible such fantastic scenes as a dialogue between an actor and a hummingbird. She could not have anticipated that Warner would have ‘a whole obsession with hummingbirds’. So, they struck a bargain: she would shoot the actor performing to an imagined bird – ‘which is very moving, but then I had to go and film a hummingbird’ – so that they could be united in dialogue on the same reel of film. She found one in the Huntington Botanical Gardens in Pasadena. The duet, on show at the national Portrait Gallery, is called Providence.

This year, Tacita Dean will have three exhibitions in London, UK: ‘Portrait’ at the National Portrait Gallery and ‘Still Life’ at the National Gallery (featuring a new film diptych, Ideas for Sculpture in a Setting) will run from 15 March until 28 May. ‘Landscape’ will be on show at the Royal Academy of Arts from 19 May until 12 August.

Main image: Tacita Dean, Providence, 2017, 35mm anamorphic colour film still, reduced to 16mm spherical format, silent, 5.5 mins, continuous loop. Courtesy: the artist, Frith Street Gallery, London, and Marian Goodman, London/New York/Paris

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