



TACITA DEAN

THE COSMIC CLOCK

Interview OLIVER KUPPER
Photography PAT MARTIN

Like a four-leaf clover, the natural world presents itself to British-born, Berlin and Los Angeles-based artist Tacita Dean. Chance encounters weave themselves into her poetic celluloid expressions; works that always seem to teeter quietly on cinema's potential energy for either disaster or blasphemous beauty. *The Green Ray* (2001), filmed on the beaches of Madagascar, explores her quixotic quest to capture an optical illusion where a tiny green ray appears for a brief instant as the sun sets. *JG* (2013), a short 35mm filmic portrait, is inspired by her correspondence with writer JG Ballard, who encouraged Dean to unravel the mystery of Robert Smithson's iconic earthwork, *Spiral Jetty* (1970) at Rozel Point on the edge of Great Salt Lake in Utah. It was discovered that Smithson kept a copy of Ballard's short story, "The Voices of Time" (1960), on his bookshelf, which has an eerily prophetic description of *Spiral Jetty*: "Around him the outlines of the hills and the lake had faded, but the image of the mandala, like a cosmic clock, remained fixed before his eyes, illuminating the broad surface of the stream." We spoke to Tacita Dean ahead of the opening of five solo exhibitions debuting this September at Marian Goodman Gallery in New York, nearly all inspired by her time living in Los Angeles.



OLIVER KUPPER You talk a lot about collecting four-leaf clovers. Would you say that was your introduction to the natural world?

TACITA DEAN I grew up outside Canterbury on the North Downs, which is very rural, in a village called West Brabourne. So, it wasn't my first introduction, because I was a rural kid. I grew up walking around the fields, watching the lambs.

KUPPER I was reading that you had an amazing knack for finding four-leaf clovers, which says a lot about your practice later, and the idea of objective chance.

DEAN I still find them! When I was seven or eight, I went up our lane and I found all these four-leaf clovers together. I was so excited that I wrote to *The Guinness Book Of Records*, and they said that someone in somewhere like Idaho had found thousands of them. But ever since then, I have collected them. I just find them. I have many, many five-leaf clovers too, and sixes, two sevens, and a nine. I don't have an eight-leaf clover—I'm still waiting to find that.

I do let chance into my work quite a lot. It's a very important aspect, especially if you work photochemically. And I have taken it to extremes. For example, now I trust whole projects

to chance because I've begun multiply exposing my films inside the camera without any digital postproduction. I'm totally analog still. And it's not because I'm a Luddite or anti-technology at all—I use digital as a tool: my sound has been digital for years. But because film is such a wonderful medium, I use the internal disciplines of film—the restrictions of film—as a launch pad to think of it in a new way. So, yes, chance is related to that and then 'objective chance,' which is the Surrealist term—from [André] Breton—where you allow your journey to be interrupted by some chance intervention. Chance is involved in the project I'm showing at Marian Goodman Gallery in New York and Paris—and later in London, Cologne and the Getty. I arrived here in LA in 2014 as an artist in residence at the Getty Research Institute. They asked me, "What is your scholarly project?" And I said, "I'm an artist, I don't have a scholarly project." And they said, "You have to have one." So, I decided that my topic would be: 'The importance of objective chance as a tool of research.' I would do a completely random search in the special collections, and the project I'm making comes out of this completely random search.

KUPPER In a sense, your work is about luck, but it's also about the romance of film. When did you start discovering film?

DEAN When I was in art school, film was the primary moving image technology then. So, it might be romantic to you, but for me, it was a totally normal way of making moving images. So I started working with film then, in the '80s. I was in the painting department, but decided to try moving images, and I kept on doing it. And then everything changed. I didn't change, I liked this medium, and I continue to work with it. Just like painters find a way and they continue to work with that. It's just that my medium got threatened from the outside. My whole argument for film, as I use it, is that it makes you do things that you don't deliberately set out to do. The non-deliberate act.

KUPPER I want to talk a little bit about your connection to JG Ballard. How did that relationship start?

DEAN It was a long time ago. Years ago, I filmed this trimaran belonging to an amateur sailor named Donald Crowhurst who disappeared at sea. I found the boat stranded on a beach in the Caribbean and sent Ballard a letter—who was very convivial and accessible.



I got his address from a friend. I wrote to him and said that Crowhurst reminded me of a character that he might have written about. And I sent him a picture. And he wrote back saying that Crowhurst was an intolerable character that didn't interest him at all but that the boat looked like a World War II aircraft they continue to find in the jungles of the Pacific Islands. And then we began this correspondence. He wrote a text for my Tate book and came to the opening. We used to see him a bit socially. I got to know his partner, Claire Walsh, well. And then we discussed Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, because he'd written about that. I was trying to get him to let me make a film about "The Voices of Time," but he wouldn't let me because the BBC was going to do something. He told me to treat the *Spiral Jetty* 'as a mystery my film will resolve." But I knew he had cancer. I knew he was dying. So, I ended up making this film after he died, which is called *JG*. And it's me abiding by what he told me to do, which is to treat it as a mystery that my film will resolve.

KUPPER He had all these formulas, right?

DEAN Yes, he was amazing, such a precursor to the time we are living in now. He was like a prophet.

KUPPER Both of you had a fascination with disaster, which I find really interesting. You with shipwrecks, and him with car crashes.

DEAN But also, what was interesting about him and Smithson—the story, "The Voices of Time." I absolutely believe that it inspired Robert Smithson. He had a copy in his library. So, he obviously read it. But it's so much about the spiral in the landscape. So, I made *JG* because I thought there was an incredible connection between the two men. But where Smithson spiraled down into the earth, Ballard went up into the galaxies. It's such a complex story that I will never completely understand, even to this day.

KUPPER So, did you go out to *Spiral Jetty* and try to find it?

DEAN Yes, a long time ago. I also wrote to him about that. I went out to the *Spiral Jetty* and Ballard was very excited about that. I went in 1997 to look for it, but couldn't find it. When I made *JG* in 2013 the *Spiral Jetty* was still submerged. I have seen it risen though, a couple of times.

KUPPER There is something about the anthropogenic age that Smithson explored, and JG Ballard as well. Do you feel like your work explores that?

DEAN I don't know. But I am interested in the many qualities of time. You know, time in the natural world, historical time, and planetary time. But also the sedimentary, and how the earth formed. I am definitely interested in that—old land, fossils. Smithson was very much into that.

KUPPER I mean, we are living in a slowly disappearing landscape due to our impact.

DEAN You know, Smithson was also into man-made stuff too. But we have to stop that, go in the other direction.

KUPPER I was also reading about Peter Lanyon, the painter, who started to see his landscape anew after he picked up hang gliding, and died in a hang-gliding accident.

DEAN They are all Icaruses, aren't they?

KUPPER And Smithson, who crashed his plane looking at one of his earthwork sites. There is a connection to the danger, and a sort of fascination with the danger.

DEAN Well, artists think they are immortal when they are young. At a certain point, they think they are immortal.

KUPPER Have you ever felt like you have gotten close to the edge. Either a physical edge or a philosophical edge?

THIS PAGE Tacita Dean, *The Green Ray*, 2001 (Film still). 16 mm color film; silent; 2 1/2 minutes. OPPOSITE PAGE Tacita Dean, *The Montafon Letter*, 2017. 9 panels; chalk on blackboard. 144 x 288 in. (365.8 x 731.5 cm) (overall) Photo: Fredrik Nilsen



TACITA DEAN *The Cosmic Clock*



THIS PAGE Tacita Dean, *JG*, 2013 (Film still), 35mm color and black & white anamorphic film with optical sound, 26 1/2 minutes. OPPOSITE PAGE Tacita Dean, *FILM*, 2011, 35mm color and black and white portrait format anamorphic film with hand-tinted sequences, silent, 11 min., continuous loop. Installation view, Tate Modern, London. Photograph Marcus Leith & Andrew Dunkley



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TACITA DEAN The Cosmic Clock

DEAN When we were working on JG, we absolutely got close to the edge. It got dark, and Chris Taylor from Land Arts, who was our guide, was doing a three-point turn, and nearly went into a ravine that we didn't know was there. That was very close. But I'm not a risk taker. I can't take risks in that male way.

KUPPER I want to talk about obsolescence—you have this amazing quote, "For me, obsolescence is a state of normalcy, everything that excites me no longer functions in its own time." How do you deal with that struggle, being so fascinated with obsolescence?

DEAN I'm not fascinated by it. I don't seek out obsolescence. It seeks me out. Everything I like just disappears. It's a strange thing, in the way I find four-leaf clovers. So, I am not in any way fixated on obsolescence, I'm not seeking things out because they are just about to disappear. It's really the other way around. And likewise with people I film. I'm not seeking them out because they are about to disappear. But, of course, it sometimes happens. My aesthetic, my sensibility, is slightly anachronistic, and I think we're talking less about obsolescence, and more about anachronism. I'm attracted to things that aren't really functioning in their own time. But not exclusively—apart from film. But even in schools, they're now taking away blackboards and making them white boards—I'm thinking, what the fuck, please.

KUPPER But you've mentioned that those things felt out of place when they were in their own time, which is interesting. Even people.

DEAN Exactly. But what is really comfortable in its own time? There are whole loads of people that are becoming anachronistic in this digital age. I am increasingly alienated. I don't do social media. There's a whole side of the social media universe that I don't see at all. I just see the destructive side. The lack of veracity. Digital is an incredibly mendacious technology. Film is not mendacious by nature because it's about verisimilitude.

KUPPER I mean, I have never had a personal social media account. I feel anachronistic.

DEAN People like the physical realm. There's a misunderstanding about that—that they don't. They even say that the whole institution of cinema is threatened because of streaming. I don't know really if that is going to happen. There will be a lot of people busy trying to destroy it. But the actual brick and mortar of the cinema, sitting down, the darkness, the shared experience is really profound.

KUPPER I wanted to discuss your work *The Montafon Letter* (2017), which depicts an avalanche. In the age of climate change, do you feel more urgency in your work to document what's going on in the present?

DEAN Well, you know, I'm not a natural choice for an issue on biodiversity. I'm interested in other things too, but I guess it's all part of the greater fabric. *The Montafon Letter* was drawn with chalk and so I thought of an avalanche and found this story of an avalanche—the first avalanche buried a village, the second avalanche buried the priest who came to officiate over the dead, and the third avalanche unburied the priest. It had a miraculous aspect to it. I made this during the time of Brexit, so there was a bit of hope that it could be unburied.

KUPPER How often do you spend time in Los Angeles versus Berlin?

DEAN The reality of it now is that I don't know. It all got thrown off. But the idea was to spend quite a lot of time here. We left in 2019. We didn't want to leave but we had to go back to reclaim our right to stay in Germany because of Brexit.

KUPPER How has the pandemic affected your work?

DEAN Well, I made *Monet Hates Me* (2021). I had agreed that I would make a box of 50 objects—an edition of 100. That means fifty times a hundred of everything. And then, it became quite onerous in the end to worry about finding the time to make these objects. And the pandemic helped; it made that box. My friend and collaborator Martyn Ridgewell and I ended up making most of the objects ourselves. I remember writing, "Dear Father Hitler," one hundred times and forging signatures. It was not what I imagined I would be doing with a year of free time. I called the edition *Monet Hates Me* because I found in the GRI's Special Collections a letter from French painter Claude Monet to Camille Pissarro, and it literally appears to say "hate tacita." So I texted a photo to a friend and wrote "Monet hates me" and it stuck.

KUPPER Can you talk about the three films you are working on now?

DEAN Well, I just came back from the lab in Burbank. There's *Paradise for The Dante Project*, which is the ballet at the Royal Opera House—it was supposed to premiere in May of last year. Now it will premiere in October. And there's also *One Hundred and Fifty Years of Painting* (2021), which was filmed really close to here on January 3rd of last year. It's a conversation between painters Julie Mehretu and Luchita Hurtado, both friends. I knew they shared a birthday and I realized that Julie was going to be 50 and Luchita would have been 100 on November 28th of last year. So, just because of their birthday, I decided to make a film called *One Hundred and Fifty Years of Painting*. Fortunately, I decided to film it in the year of their birthday rather than wait until the actual day, because Luchita died in August. Then there's *Pan Amicus*, which was a work I made

that was a commission for the Getty Center's 20th anniversary. I decided to film the landscape rather than the building and pretend it was Arcadia. And I made a completely fictional soundtrack—the sound of Ancient Greece.

KUPPER Bringing it back to the natural world. Do you feel like your work is about entropy?

DEAN Yes. To some extent, it is. It's not about it, but it touches it. Even human entropy I guess. I cover so much that it's not just about anything. It's an element in the work.

KUPPER And what about your fascination with the sea.

DEAN Yes, I love the sea. And that was what was hard about being in Berlin. I was landlocked. At one point, during the pandemic, we weren't allowed out of a 15-mile radius. So, I didn't see the sea for over a year. When I was in art school in Falmouth, which is in Cornwall and by the sea, I was what was called a pilot gig boat rower. It came about because of the geography of Cornwall. Historically, when a ship was seen on the horizon, all the villages would send out a pilot boat with six rowers in it, and the first boat that reached the ship got the job to pilot that ship into harbor. That started pilot gig racing where all the strongest oarsmen in the villages would race against each other. And later there was a woman's team, but it wasn't moving seat rowing, like in the Cambridge or Oxford boat race but 'proper job' racing where your hands would be bleeding and you would go out in whatever the weather. That is really where I observed the sea. I started drawing the blackboards of the sea after that. Being out on the sea and that close to it was really important.

KUPPER Coming back to Los Angeles, do you appreciate the myths of this city?

DEAN I mean, I love LA. I never imagined I would ever live here. On paper, I don't read as a likely person to be here. I love the sky and the clouds, and the trees. And of course, I love cinema, maybe not the industry, but cinema. Lauren Bacall once said, "The medium is great, it's the industry that's shit."

KUPPER In your work, there is a gap between the sound and the moving image.

DEAN Well, the sound is a fiction. People underestimate that. When you shoot film, it's silent but when you shoot digital, it comes with sound so you have to make an effort to shoot mute or imagine it silent. Whereas when you get your rushes back with film, they're silent and this gives you the freedom to imagine the sound. I love that gap between the silence of film and the fiction of sound.

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