

VOGUE

Artist-Filmmaker Tacita Dean Turns Her Lens on Los Angeles

by Erik Morse (June 28, 2022)



Tacita Dean, *Pan Amicus*, 2021. 16mm color film, optical sound; 31 min., continuous loop. Installation view, Marian Goodman Gallery, 2021. Courtesy of the artist, Frith Street Gallery, London and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York / Paris. Photo: Alex Yudzon

The subjects of the British-born, Berlin-based multimedia artist Tacita Dean's films have always had a distinctly Continental focus, from the former East Berlin television tower featured in *Fernsehturm* (2001) to the artists Joseph Beuys and Mario Merz. Yet in some of her more recent works, Dean has turned to documenting the sceneries, myths, and hidden treasures of Los Angeles. Among them are the landscape film *Pan Amicus* (2021) and *Monet Hates Me* (2021), a so-called exhibition in a box, both of which are currently on view at the Getty Center, where Dean served as artist in residence between 2014 and 2015. Although these were not Dean's first projects to focus on American mythology and landscape (her 2013 film *JG*, concerning a fictitious correspondence between the Land artist Robert Smithson and novelist J.G. Ballard, originated in the sound piece *Trying to Find the Spiral Jetty* from 1998; while her ambitious, dual synchronous film *Antigone* was released in 2018), they do document her earliest steps toward embracing a city, and its surrounding filmmaking industry, which she humorously refers to as "the beast." The experiences piqued her curiosity about L.A.'s unique sense of atmosphere, and she has since opened a studio in the West Jefferson area, dividing her time between there and Berlin.

At first glance, *Pan Amicus* and *Monet Hates Me* could not be more dissimilar. The former, a 16mm film loop of the Getty Center's lush grounds (noticeably absent, the distinctive, Richard Meier-designed campus), is a georgic-inspired fantasia with images of a blood-red moon, roaming deer, fruit trees, and antiquarian statuary left to mold in the weeds, as if the film were itself some recently unearthed home movie from Greek antiquity. Her sensuous, Arcadian vision is a knowing wink to Hollywood's long-established use of trompe l'oeil scenography, as well as to J. Paul Getty's primeval fantasy of a Mediterranean Los Angeles.

By contrast, *Monet Hates Me* is a boxed wunderkammer of 50 objects sourced from deep inside the Getty Research Institute's Special Collections, a nonspecialist miscellany of donated archives stretching from the 15th century to the present. The objects were painstakingly reproduced by hand and organized into 100 boxes in Dean's Berlin studio, each one containing photos, prints, collages, letters, engravings, drawings, and other ephemera from sources as varied as Auguste Rodin, John Ruskin, and late-medieval alchemy folios. An accompanying artist's book includes Dean's own musings on the historical, and personal, provenances of the objects, which were chosen according to her long-standing method of "objective chance," a term first popularized by the Surrealist André Breton to describe a practice of researched intuition or coincidence informing aesthetic decisions. Like Breton's work, *Monet Hates Me* focuses on the narrative pleasures of serendipity, esotericism, and anachronism, from which Dean weaves together a fantastical tapestry of figures and objects.

As with *Pan Amicus*, *Monet Hates Me* epitomizes Dean's intrigue with those images on the periphery. In both works, her intimate fantasies of time and place have mingled with the fantasies of others to transform the institutions and categories of history into a new, imaginary archive. In her own words, they are part of her ongoing fascination with creating "a box for the things you can't box."

Vogue recently spoke to the artist from her Berlin studio about her impression of Los Angeles, her career-long obsession with obsolescence, and how she views the current state of the movie industry.

Vogue: Pan Amicus and Monet Hates Me appear like two sides of a related fantasy of Los Angeles—one of its pastoral landscape and the other of its interiors.

Tacita Dean: I think that's why I like L.A. so much. But I can't personally put the two projects together, although they have this connective thread, which is the Getty, and my experience there. It's so interesting that you think about them as this interior and exterior. The whole point of *Pan Amicus* is that it's a landscape portrait of Los Angeles, and the Getty particularly, but beguiling you into thinking you are somewhere else, which is the nature of L.A. in a way. It's what's so attractive about it, and also sort of disorientating about it: that it is its own fiction. *Monet Hates Me* comes out of the sheer enormity of [the Getty's] collection, and the oddity of it. I was just trying to make some pathway through it, and allowing myself to go in any direction, and where any idea or any situation took me. So, is that a fantasy of L.A., I wonder? Maybe that is a fantasy of a fantasy of interior life in L.A. I don't know.

How do you believe living in Los Angeles affected the way you see your work?

It has had a huge effect on me. I made the film *JG* before I moved to L.A. That was all about the American landscape. And that evolved into my major project, which is *Antigone*. It was a huge project shot on 35mm Cinemascope. It became an American film because of contingencies and practicalities; the roots and the ideas of the film are ancient Greek. So, yes, it's had a radical effect on me. And I still live there. I've also done a lot of work related to L.A. skies.

Being a European and a lover of clouds, I suppose that might be a particularly English thing, but I was amazed by the clouds in L.A. So I've always had these various facets. I've made films, but I also make drawings, do printmaking, write—it's never simple with me. I kind of wish it were. *Monet Hates Me* was the project that I had to come up with in order to work at the Getty. They wouldn't accept that an artist doesn't need a reason. I'm just an artist. And that aspect of it was kind of burdensome and dysfunctional—the scholar side of it. Trying to fit their artists into this category, it scares off artists sometimes. I played the game and came up with this idea of objective chance, a sort of random journey. I think it's the best way to deal with that kind of archive—to trip over things.

In *Pan Amicus*, you took pains to make sure the museum building itself was erased from the landscape.

When I first drove up to the Getty, I thought, "My God! It's like the afterlife." It reminded me of Michael Powell's film *A Matter of Life and Death* [1946]. I still feel like that when I'm at the Getty. It's like you're just slightly above the clouds. There's just something about the air or atmosphere of it. So, I decided that I really wanted to play on the J. Paul Getty fantasy of this ancient land, and pretend that it's shot in ancient Greece. But the soundtrack to the Getty is the 405 [expressway]. So, I decided to make a fictional soundscape. And the funny thing is...I get asked, "Where is this filmed?" So, it does fool some people. I like sort of confusing them. But I think I confused the people at the Getty. I would cut out everything where there was a reference to the building. I didn't want it to be of the modern world.



Tacita Dean, *Monet Hates Me*, 2021 (Detail). In production, Studio Tacita Dean, Berlin.
Courtesy of the artist, Frith Street Gallery, London and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York / Paris.
Courtesy Tacita Dean. Photo: Paul Knight.

I am also fascinated by the history of the exhibition in a box, like wunderkammern, Victorian curio cabinets, Marcel Duchamp's *Boite-en-valise* (1935–1941), or even the boxing of spools of film stock. What is your interest in boxing as a form of exhibition?

I was extremely conscious of the history of exhibitions in a box. The project is called "An Exhibition in a Box"—that's the subtitle. I'm forever categorizing things and also miscategorizing things. And dealing with the uncategorizable, which I think is a huge part of any sort of archive. The thing you can't categorize. The thing that doesn't quite fit in. So much of what I do has no category. So I made a box for the things you can't box.

How did the pandemic affect its development?

[*Monet Hates Me*] was something that was forever being postponed because it was so epic. Then the pandemic happened. I live in Charlottenburg [in Berlin], but when the first lockdown happened, I just moved into my studio in Westend...and I went into complete isolation. I was just here on my own, so I started to talk to my friend and collaborator Martyn Ridgewell. Martyn was my pandemic companion, even though he was in Cornwall. We started to make a lot of things together. It was really labor-intensive, cutting up bits of paper to scale. I was getting more and more into working with people who were still doing things, the people who were working alone. Finding the guy who still makes postage stamps or finding the person who still prints visiting cards, et cetera. So that became my project.

Did you have any constraints or personal rules for the process of disgorging the boxes?

The one rule is that I wanted everything to be from a different medium, even if it came down to different papers. So, it became: How many different things carry an image? That's how I ended up doing a single record cover, or a strip of film, or a stamp, or a postcard. You can start to think of how many different ways [there are] to carry an image, and you start to become more imaginative. That was one of my constraints.



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It's interesting to consider *Pan Amicus* and some of your other previous films, like *Disappearance at Sea* (1996), *Fernsehturm* (2001), or *Palast* (2004), as being not only examples of landscape but also scenography or even B-roll footage—the moment before a character enters the scene or the film's plot begins. It seems like the narrative is just out of frame, or is about to happen at any moment. Do you often think about your films as capturing gaps or “in-betweens” or “about-to-happens”?

I don't think I can give you a single answer, but it's very, very true. Even with my drawings, from the very beginning, they were about what was happening stage left or out of shot. What was happening that you couldn't see. Even with the writing that I do, from very early on, I would call them “Asides.”

That's always been where I've resided. When I did [the discussion series] “Reframing the Future of Film” with Christopher Nolan, we were in London and [film editor] Walter Murch asked, “Why is it if you shoot an empty room on film, it looks like someone's going to arrive, [and] if you do it with digital, it looks like someone's left?” It's something to do with the anticipatory nature of the medium. I thought it was a very beautiful thing to say. My films are often called boring, but some people have written about how that's a virtue. For me, I always try to create an atmosphere or the memory of an atmosphere that has to do with something like longing. It's an emotional language, that's all I can say. It's so much to do with the places in between and the peripheries of things.

You said once, “Everything that excites me no longer functions in its own time.”

It's something that haunts me. I just designed a ballet, *The Dante Project* [2021], which premiered last October at the Royal Opera House in London. The “souls” in “Inferno” were sprayed with Molotow white chalk and the penitents in “Purgatorio” with colored chalk, and now even the spray chalk has been discontinued. I'm dogged by obsolescence, I think. It's a funny thing. Sitting in the Getty, I didn't know what I was doing. I was just following this path or that path. I think that's why I love film so much. Everything happens in a dark room, and you can't see what you're doing. I don't want to see where I'm going. That's the problem with Hollywood, and scripts and cinema—it's entirely based on knowing where you are going. Scripts and treatments and endless discussions trying to get money. We can be blind as artists, but you can't be blind anymore in cinema.

You mentioned your interest in those objects and stories that could not be archived. Were there any interesting ephemera that you did not include in *Monet Hates Me* but wished you had?

There is a picture of Renoir's arthritic hands in the box. It was a negative of a positive that was already made into a negative photograph. So, it was like a white chalk drawing on black. No one could find out what it was, and then later I found out it was a picture of Renoir by Picasso. And I read [this exchange] where someone asked Renoir: “Well, you've got such terrible, arthritic hands. How do you paint when you can't hold a brush?” And Renoir said, “I paint with my prick.” That's the story that got away. “Tacita Dean: *Pan Amicus* and *Monet Hates Me*” is on view through August 28 at the Getty Center.