

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

# HYPERALLERGIC

*An Artist and an Actor Test the Magic of Film*

By Gabriela Vainsencher (March 23, 2016)



Tacita Dean, "Sean's Cloud" (2016), chalkboard paint on hand-printed silver gelatin photograph mounted on paper, 39 5/16 x 39 5/16 in (all images courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery)

"It's hard to paint around a cloud," said Tacita Dean the other day. She was referring to "Sean's Cloud" (2016), hung high up on the wall at Marian Goodman Gallery in Midtown. Dean made the work by photographing a cloud in California (where the Berlin-based British artist has been living for the past 18 months) and then painting around its image with blue

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chalkboard paint so meticulously that it produced a graphic, out-of-context effect. Painting around a cloud is about as futile as one can get, but for an artist who has chased after eclipses, green rays, and dead science fiction writers, this is nothing new.

Depending on how you count, there are anywhere between one and six bodies of work on display in this sprawling solo show. The main gallery is filled with clouds, shown as lithographs, chalk drawings on antique slate blackboards, painted-over postcards, and the aforementioned painted photographs. In the back is a room full of photographs of Cy Twombly's Italian home, made on the very last available batch of Cibachrome photographic paper. There are also three films, each very different from the others: "Portraits" (2016) shows David Hockney smoking five highly entertaining cigarettes in his studio; "Buon Fresco" (2014) takes an intimate look at Giotto's frescos at the Basilica of Saint Francis of Assisi; and, screening in the third-floor project space, "Event for a Stage" (2015) is a spectacular film made as a result of Dean's first foray into performance.



Tacita Dean, "Portraits" (2016),  
16mm color film, optical sound, 16 min

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Thematically, we could say there are two bodies of work here: one about clouds and the other about artists, namely Twombly, Giotto, Hockney, and Dean herself. But there is a single driving force behind all the work, the same focused, loving, stubborn, and ultimately doomed ambition that propels Dean's entire oeuvre: the impossible task of capturing what cannot be caught, of saving what is already lost. In that regard, making drawings in chalk without fixative is the same as painting around a cloud is the same as following a master's hand centuries after his death. We, the viewers, know we're looking at the traces of something powerful that has passed.



Installation view, Tacita Dean, 'A Concordance of Fifty American Clouds' (2015-16)

Although prolific in many other areas, the core of Dean's work is film, and the most important of the films in this show is "Event for a Stage," which disappointingly comes down a month before everything else. If you're interested in narrative and the places where it breaks down; or in the roles of the artist as author, interpreter, and performer; or in the way theater, art, and film work their magic, you should see this piece.

It opens on a hangar-like hall filling up with spectators. We see them finding their seats around the circular stage area and chattering. They seem unaware of the cameras rolling and of actor Stephen Dillane (*The Hours*, *Game of Thrones*), who is walking along the edge of the stage — marked by nothing more than a chalk circle on the black floor — in a confident, almost angry stride. He appears like a caged animal, or, as his character will later describe himself, "like an actor in his element, like a beast in its lair." Dillane shares the stage with two 16 mm cameras, and as they follow him the audience's heads in the background run together, like film sprocket holes racing alongside the action in the frames.

When I was asked if I wanted to come and play the role of an actor on stage I said no. I said, "Will there be a text?" She said: "I don't know." I said "That's quite a risk. How long would

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I be on stage?” “About forty minutes, I think.” “That’s quite a long time to be on stage alone.” She said “Is it?”

—The Actor, “Event for a Stage”

“Event for a Stage” was commissioned by the 19th Biennale of Sydney (in 2014) and Carriageworks, a large Australian contemporary arts center. Dean is not a performance artist, but she has made performance her topic on more than one occasion, most notably in her films about Merce Cunningham and his dance company. Dean was invited (read: convinced) to create her first live performance work by the biennale’s artistic director, Juliana Engberg, and in turn she recruited Stephen Dillane, whose presence onstage (and off, if you believe the script) shifts from heartbreaking to terrifying with storm-like abruptness.



Tacita Dean, “Event for a Stage” (2015), 16mm color with optical sound, 50 min

What might be harder to discern on first viewing is that we’re not watching a film of a single live performance, but rather a hybrid of four of them, made seamless thanks to masterful performing by Dillane and editing by Dean. The only giveaway that this Franken-film is comprised of the parts of four separate performances is that Dillane’s hair and makeup change in each one. The styles range from the actor’s long, natural, flowing hair and no makeup to white period wigs and drawn-on wrinkles. But the film moves along so smoothly that it takes a while to notice even these striking gaps in continuity.

In 2008, a year before her subject’s death, Dean made a film titled “Merce Cunningham performs STILLNESS (in three movements) to John Cage’s composition 4’33” with Trevor Carlson, New York City, 28 April 2007 (six performances; six films),” which I have written about in the past. The choreography entailed Cunningham sitting as still as possible for the

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duration of his dead lover's most famous work. He performed the piece multiple times for the camera, and the idea was to use the best take for the final work. Dean, however, ended up using all the takes and projecting them simultaneously, because she realized that rather than witnessing the same thing happen three times, she was seeing different phenomena occur one after the other. I think the lesson she learned shooting Cunningham led her to the structure of "Event for a Stage," which was explicitly planned as four performances woven into one film.

There is an invisible thing around this stage, separating me from you: you, being the audience. It is a film of protection; it protects me, and the action on stage, and it also protects you. Above all, it protects the magic of suspended disbelief that is theatre. Without the invisible film that contains everything on the stage there would be no context for my actions, no discourse, no history.

—The Actor, "Event for a Stage"

The script performed by Dillane is comprised of four texts, of which two have (more or less) confirmed authors: a monologue from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Heinrich von Kleist's wonderful essay "On the Marionette Theatre." The other two are more complicated: one is a seemingly autobiographical piece by Dillane about his youth and the decline of his parents; the other, which Dean hands to the actor page by page from her seat in the audience, is a meta, perhaps meta-fictional account of the relationship between the artist and her performer, filled with remembered bits of conversations and musings about the symbolic mechanics of theater and filmmaking. This last one is the trickiest because, while it sounds like Dean's writing, it's spoken from the perspective of Dillane. All Dean was willing to say of this thickened plot was: "Don't be beguiled into thinking just because it's in the script in my hand that I wrote it and just because Stephen recites those words outside the circle that he wrote them."

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Tacita Dean, "Event for a Stage" (2015), 16mm color with optical sound, 50 min

"Have you ever had stage fright?" Dillane reads from a page. He looks up, glaring, and answers: "No." Throughout the film, stage fright and the prospect of "drying up" (on stage and as an artist) are mentioned again and again, like invocations of the evil eye, meant to prevent it from visiting. Dillane's script goes on at length about what a bad idea it is to strand an actor alone on a stage for over 40 minutes, about how Dean's text, the only thing he has to rely on, is "not a great work." But it is a great work, as is the film to which it belongs, and both Dean and Dillane are virtuosic on either side of the camera. As the film progresses and we become aware that it's cut from four different performances, it also becomes clear that every whisper and roar, every turn, every word has been perfectly choreographed and repeated exactly the same way each time, making it possible to slip seamlessly from one to the other, sometimes cutting between performances mid-word.

In "Event for a Stage," an artist is looking back at herself through the prism of a performer. The performer, in turn, reflects on his trajectory (as a son, an actor), while reminding us all along that this is also a film about itself: Dillane constantly interrupts himself to call out the reel changes on the cameras. But the topic that recurs the most is those blurred heads we saw in the beginning: us, the audience, whose faith in the artwork exists in the vertiginous borderland of what Dean terms "the membrane or the connective tissue" between an artist and her public. In fact, "membrane" and "connective tissue" should not have an "or" between them: they are not analogous but opposites. A membrane separates, while connective tissue binds. But in the worlds of theater and film, this separating membrane is exactly what's needed to bind the viewer to the magic of suspended disbelief. In prodding and poking it, Dean reminds us not only of the membrane's existence but also of its great resilience.