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Tacita Dean Reflects on Time

With a Fixed Camera in Hand, the English Artist Makes Life's Minutiae Meaningful in Her Films

By Helen Young Chang

Twenty-nine minutes is what it takes to watch artist Tacita Dean's film at the Dulwich Picture Gallery in London. If one were tempted to skip out early, Ms. Dean admits she might urge: "No, don't! Stay! It's just about to be good!"



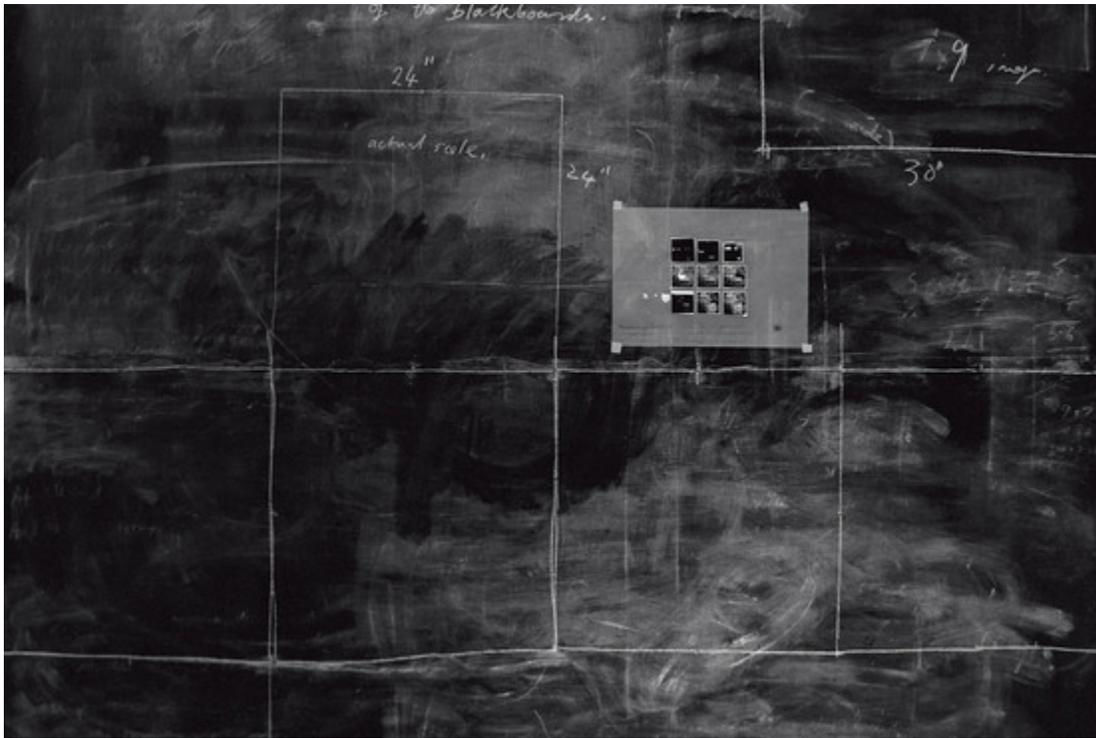
Artist Tacita Dean, known for her romantic 16-millimeter films

The 46-year-old English artist is best known for her romantic, yet highly formal 16-millimeter films, and she takes time with her shots. Some last 10 or even 40 seconds, but there's always a reason. "Maybe it's a butterfly passing across the frame, or if you wait long enough, that bird will take off. There'll be some sort of shift," says Ms. Dean, who was nominated for the Turner Prize in 1998, and whose work is in the permanent collections of the Guggenheim, MoMA and Tate Modern.

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But galleries and museums aren't movie theaters, where the majority of audiences acquiesce to sitting for a time. And time—the commodity Ms. Dean demands from her viewers, as well as the leitmotif, that runs through all her works—is ironically what she herself finds in short supply of right now.

This October, Ms. Dean will unveil new work in the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, the museum's cavernous public space where the popular annual Unilever series commissions are installed and draw millions of visitors. In the most recent exhibit, dissident Chinese artist Ai Weiwei had filled the gallery with 100 million porcelain sunflower seeds. In 2003, Olafur Eliasson, Ms. Dean's former studio neighbor, installed a giant artificial sun that made visitors lie before it as if sunbathing. "It's enormous pressure," Ms. Dean says of the commission, and "inspiration is being completely obstinate right now."



Frith Street Gallery, London and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris

A section from her photo series '16 Blackboards' (1992)

At her studio in Berlin, where she and her partner, artist Matthew Hale, moved in 2000, London and its accompanying crowds feel far away. Located in the warehouse of a former rail station, Ms. Dean's studio shares a parking lot with the Hamburger Bahnhof museum and a bulk Italian foods store. Her office window peers onto a green, overgrown lot. The scene feels strangely timeless yet familiar—as if a snapshot straight out of one of her films.

Ms. Dean originally trained as a painter at London's Slade School of Fine Art, where her tutor suggested she go into film after she began dividing up images into cartoon strips, and today, her films remain closer to painting than to narrative cinema.

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The daughter of a circuit judge and granddaughter of the founder of the Ealing Studios, Ms. Dean remembers a bucolic youth. "I'd always lived in the same house—I was born in this house, a very beautiful house—in Kent. I spent my childhood outside in the garden and the fields around it, and you know, every single tree has a memory, every single plant is sodden with emotional content."



MUMOK

A view of the installation "T&I" (2006)

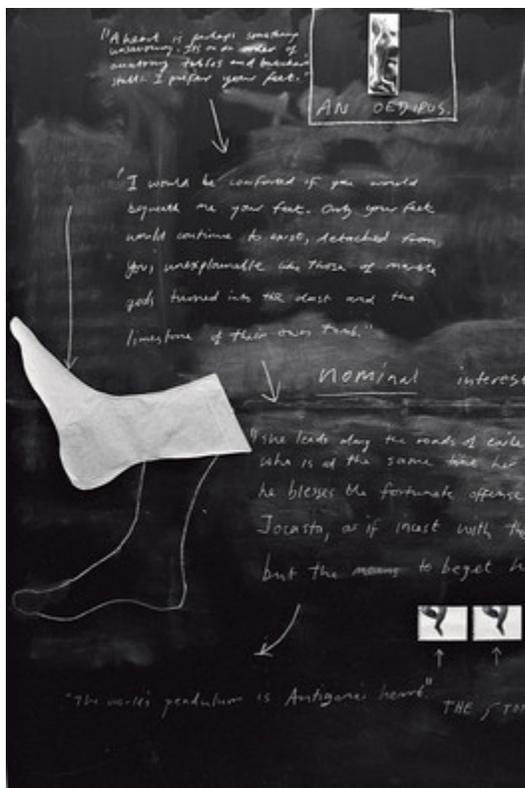
Her film subjects tend toward the outlandish, evanescent and anachronistic (human and architectural): the green ray, supposedly the last ray a setting sun emits and rarely seen, and which, of course, Ms. Dean tries to capture on film; Michael Hamburger, a dying poet as obsessed with rare apple sorts as with words; and Boots, an old family friend (named for his orthopaedic footwear), who recalls escapades with a lover who may have never existed. After filming, Ms. Dean then physically wrestles with her subjects, though in 16-millimeter print form.

In her cutting room, big enough for one, with black cloth tacked over the windows, Ms. Dean logs each image in a cutting book. She edits on a rattling Steenbeck machine from the 1970s. Shots she keeps are spliced together with tape. On why she opts for the laborious 16 millimeter rather than video, she says: "There's something in the emotional language, the emulsion, and the movement and the breathing that makes film a very alive medium, whereas digital projection is inert."

Achim Hochdörfer, curator of MUMOK in Vienna, describes her films as a "series of pictures"; whereas the main mode of looking and perception today tends toward scanning, hers might be described as a studied gaze, if not stare. She imbues her images with significance, sometimes to the point of pain. When her cinematic wagers succeed, they release viewers into a weightless, meditative space. "I think we as a generation have forgotten how to see," Ms. Dean says.

All this is done with fixed cameras. She dismisses zooming. Also the "idle" panning that she declares as "typical" of artist's films. "It doesn't take you anywhere," she says.

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Frith Street Gallery, London and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris

Another section from '16 Blackboards'

Her recent show at MUMOK included paintings, drawings, photographs and gravures, as well as films. The photograph series "16 Blackboards" (1992) is from Ms. Dean's student days, and striking for its similarity to the way she continues to work today, as seen from the photogravure "T&I" (2006). Blackboards are repeatedly drawn on and erased, then photographed.

It's Ms. Dean's films, however, that were the focus of the show. These include portraits of some of the most influential artists of the 20th century, including Cy Twombly, Claes Oldenburg and choreographer Merce Cunningham. The Cunningham piece is the most ambitious of them all, less a portrait of the man than a meditation on light and movement, warmly graded and bathed in golds and pinks. The rest of the films focus on the artmaking process (which, in the cases of Messrs. Oldenburg and Twombly, mostly means doing nothing at all). In "Manhattan Mouse Museum" (2011), Mr. Oldenburg tenderly dusts his menagerie of knickknacks, including miniature palm trees and perfume atomizers, carefully categorized by shelf in his bookcase. Until Ms. Dean, boredom has never looked more fertile, fidgeting more promising.

The film portrait of Mr. Twombly, also now showing in the Dulwich Picture Gallery, isn't any more flattering. He confuses his various pairs of glasses and lunches on sliced turkey at the local diner. Mostly, he sits in a white plastic garden chair behind his half-closed blinds, peering at the comings and goings of his neighbors, and reading his paper. "He sits and

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thinks and is more than he does. He, more than any artist I know, works from his unconscious quite clearly."

Chance and the unconscious have also helped generate Ms. Dean's large body of work—and in spite of rheumatoid arthritis, which she developed in her last year at the Slade and so far has left her with a useless elbow, a metal knee and heavy limp. "It's about allowing myself to take another road if it appears. My ideas, they don't come easily, I wait for them to happen," she says.

Case in point: "The Line of Fate" photos based on portraits of art historian Leo Steinberg. Ms. Dean had asked to photograph Mr. Steinberg, 90, after reading his eponymous essay on Michelangelo's "Last Judgement." Mr. Steinberg agreed, but was in "a terribly bad mood," thought the exercise ridiculous and let her know, Ms. Dean recalls. Not long after, like several other subjects of Ms. Dean's films, he died.

"That happens a lot," Ms. Dean says lightly, yet trying to explain: "I'm attracted to people and they become obsolete. I'm attracted to the sparkly glass in [Berlin's] Palast der Republik and they knocked it down. As soon as I like something, Shoof! It suddenly seems to disappear."

Accidents aside, however, Ms. Dean remains frank about her own work. Deadlines like the looming Turbine Hall commission are essential. "Generating ideas without outside pressure? I barely can," she says. "You need discomfort."