

TACITA DEAN

Trial of the Finger

21 February – 25 April 2026

1120 Seward Street, Los Angeles, CA

Opening Reception: 21 February 2026, 5-7 pm



Tacita Dean, *oh god*, 2025 (Detail). 3 Polaroids. Private Collection.
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Marian Goodman Gallery Los Angeles is pleased to present *Trial of the Finger*, an exhibition of new and recent works by Tacita Dean. Alongside two recent 35mm film installations, *Paradise* (2021) and *Geography Biography* (2023), Dean will show a new 16mm film, *Sidney Felsen decorates an Envelope* (2026), new chalk and slate drawings as well as Polaroid works and works on glass.

The title of the exhibition comes from a criticism made by the English writer Dr. Samuel Johnson about the 17th century Metaphysical poets. He saw them as counting syllables ('trial of the finger') in their poetry on account of their abundant use of conceits rather than relying on a poem's musicality to the ear. There are many visual references in this exhibition to both the finger, and indeed to ears, but the title also refers to how Dean manufactures her drawings, most particularly the new slate drawings in this exhibition. Dean's work has always valued the analog, not only in terms of medium, but also in how we still mediate with the world. We still measure, weigh and describe in relation to the human body: units of twelve derive from an ancient finger counting system and we measure in feet and inches (in many languages the word 'inch' derives from the same word for thumb) and poets rhyme in pentameters.

In the Seward Gallery, Tacita Dean presents a series of recent slate works and a newly completed blackboard tondo, *In Montem (he fell)* (2026). Since 2015, Dean has been drawing on found school slates and recently received some that had been painted green. The paint had oxidised creating a febrile powdery surface, which necessitated a change of approach. When Dean traveled to Eagle Pass in Texas in April 2024 to watch a total eclipse of the sun, she was determined to not document it but just allow herself to experience it. But nonetheless, sitting back in her deckchair, she twisted and turned her camera without looking through the viewfinder. When the negatives were processed, she saw that she had in fact made photographic drawings with the focused light of the eclipsing sun. These looping solar streaks became the starting point for her green slates in 2024 and a new series of prints with Gemini G.E.L. They continue to inform her new slates.

In 'Base Matter and Uncommon Solvent,' a comprehensive book of the artist's drawings published by MACK in 2024, Dean explains how the form of her drawings most often derives from the surfaces or supports she uses. The nature of the presentation of the pieces in this exhibition sets out to exemplify this approach to drawing. The eponymous work *Trial of the Finger 1-4* as well as *Oeufs Miroirs (triptych)* and *SPLAT! (triptych)* are made on 19th century steam locomotive windows that Dean inherited from her father. Wanting to explore how to paint on them, Dean worked with an artisanal glass studio in Germany and began experimenting with painting in enamel and using mirror lacquer in a labored process not unlike her use of masking in 35mm film: both entail a detailed adding of image through process, and both are made working back-to-front. They stand in contrast to her drawings on slate where she can be spontaneous and unbound.

Dean has recently begun working with Polaroids. The camera's high rate of exposure failure created a new surface that enticed her to start trying to paint on them rather than trash them. Equally, the camera's double-exposure potential encouraged her to experiment with her collection of broken Roman fingers, feet and other artefacts in her Berlin studio over the holidays between Christmas and New Year, a period known in Germany as 'between the years.' The blindness of the Polaroid process is entirely in keeping with how Dean works as one is never able to control or predict how a Polaroid image will alchemize.

In the Hudson Gallery, Dean shows her new 16mm film *Sidney Felsen decorates an Envelope*. Sidney Felsen, who died in 2024 aged 99, was an institution in Los Angeles. He co-founded the print workshop and publisher Gemini G.E.L in Los Angeles in 1966 with Stanley Grinstein. Gemini made prints with some of the greatest postwar American artists and Sidney oversaw, photographed and befriended them all. An accountant by profession, Sidney took private pleasure in decorating the envelopes containing the artists' royalty checks, using his huge collection of postage and rubber stamps that filled his room at the center and heart of Gemini's workshops and offices. Having been introduced to Gemini by Julie Mehretu and knowing Sidney's affection for Julie, Dean suggested Sidney decorate the envelope for her. The 14-minute film is poignantly just that: Sidney, who was always very elegantly dressed, decorating an envelope in his office, a place frequented by many, that is bedecked from floor to ceiling with the many photographs he took of the artists he worked with making prints.

In the Main Gallery, Dean presents two 35mm film installations, *Paradise*, (2021), and *Geography Biography*, (2023). In 2021, Dean was invited to design the sets and costumes for a new ballet for London's Royal Opera House called *The Dante Project*. Based on Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the ballet was choreographed by Wayne McGregor with a newly commissioned score in collaboration with the LA Phil, by Thomas Adès. Structured in three acts: 'Inferno,' 'Purgatorio,' and 'Paradiso,' the ballet journeys with Dante and Virgil from the darkness of hell through purgatory to its exuberant third act 'Paradiso', for which Dean made a 35mm anamorphic film. Using her aperture gate masking technique, Dean adopted the color palette of William Blake's own *Divine Comedy* watercolors to make an abstract film based on the unfolding planetary and celestial nature of Dante's text. The first act of *The Dante Project*, 'Inferno,' was premiered in the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, Los Angeles in 2019 but the full finished ballet has yet to return to the U.S. *Paradise* (2021) is therefore being seen in here for the first time. The film was made in collaboration with Thomas Adès who agreed to allow the MIDI version of his score to become the soundtrack. As orchestras were unable to meet during the Covid lockdown, Adès sent Dean a digital simulation of his score to guide her as she cut the film and he later agreed to allow it to become the soundtrack for the artwork.

Alongside *Paradise*, Dean is showing her 35mm film installation, *Geography Biography*. The work exemplifies the artist's poetic and experimental approach to the processes and material properties of photochemical film. Her use of the medium, itself at permanent risk of becoming obsolete, reinforces the transitory and fleeting qualities conveyed by the imagery. Dean has embedded sequences from her super 8 and standard 8 films, as well as her 16mm outtakes, within postcards from her collection, using an experimental aperture gate-masking technique which allows her to combine still images and different gauge films together in one frame of a 35mm negative using stencils and multiple exposures. Describing *Geography Biography* as an 'accidental self-portrait,' the result is a luminous, lyrical and intensely personal filmic collage that reflects the artist's relationship to the world through her cutting room floor. Dean is a powerful advocate for the importance of keeping photochemical film available as a medium for future generations.

Tacita Dean is a British European artist born in 1965 in Canterbury. She lives and works in Berlin and Los Angeles. Dean has been the recipient of numerous prizes including the Sixth Benesse Prize at the 51st Venice Biennale in 2005, the Hugo Boss Prize at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York in 2006 and the Kurt Schwitters Prize in 2009.

Recent solo exhibitions include The Columbus Museum of Art, currently on view; the Menil Collection, Houston and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, in 2024; Bourse de Commerce, Pinault Collection, Paris in 2023; MUDAM, Luxembourg, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles in 2022; Kunstmuseum Basel in 2021; EMMA - Espoo Museum of Modern Art, Espoo in 2020; NY Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen and at the Serralves Museum, Porto in 2019; and at the Kunsthaus Bregenz, The Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, as well as The Royal Academy of Arts, London, in 2018 as part of a trilogy of exhibitions held in conjunction with the city's National Gallery and National Portrait Gallery.

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