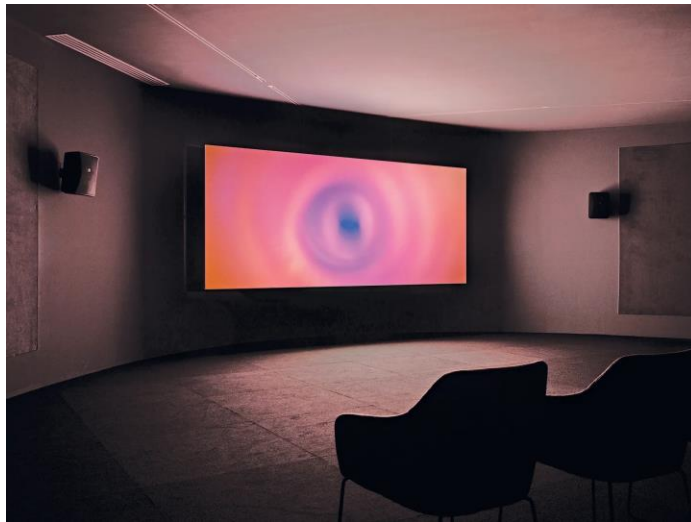


ARTFORUM

Tacita Dean

Marian Goodman Gallery | Los Angeles

By Andrea Gyorody (June 1, 2026)



Tacita Dean, *Paradise*, 2021, 35 mm, color, sound, 24 minutes 30 seconds. Installation view. Photo: Hamish McIntosh.

Tacita Dean is one of contemporary art's greatest elegists, enshrining ways of picturing and experiencing the world that are already obsolescent and at risk of disappearing entirely. For more than thirty years she has been mourning the slow death of analog film, pushing its technical limits while rallying others to advocate for its survival. Now that film's visual quality is foreign to the digital eye, her work carries a medium-specific nostalgia that gives virtually all of her footage a sense of pastness and distance. Everything becomes a memento mori, simultaneously memorialized and immortalized.

Dean's latest film, *Sidney Felsen decorates an Envelope*, 2025, recently on view in her solo exhibition "Trial of the Finger," is a fourteen-minute portrait of the legendary cofounder of Gemini G.E.L. in Los Angeles, shot on 16-mm color film. True to its title, the work shows Felsen, who died in 2024 a few months shy of his hundredth birthday, lavishing care upon a manila envelope addressed to Julie Mehretu. Seated at his office desk, surrounded by flat files and an impressive collection of colored pencils, he carefully applies an oversize stamp to the envelope and then shades in the stamp's central star motif, using a ruler to keep the edges crisp. He periodically engages an electric pencil sharpener mounted above his desk, its whistling grind exaggerated to jarring effect in the film, making it sound like the blast of a train horn.

Throughout the exhibition, a sense of nostalgia and longing was commingled with the achingly beautiful. The show loosely knit together several bodies of work from the previous year: chalkboard drawings of clouds and serpentine swirls, spectral Polaroids, and vintage steam-train windows painted with cartoonish tomatoes and eggs. Also on view were two other recent films: *Paradise*, 2021, an abstract vortex of light and color commissioned for a British Royal Ballet production inspired by *The Divine Comedy*, set to a score by Thomas Adès; and *Geography Biography*, 2023, a portrait-format diptych that collages snippets from Dean's life, work, and travels.

Geography Biography leans into a memorial sensibility through a retrospective and highly personal look at Dean's practice. In each frame, the film combines static shots of travel postcards with more dynamic outtakes from past projects—sunlight glinting off the ocean, footage of Mehretu painting atop a scissor lift. The film's strange format consists of two columns projected several feet apart, requiring the eye to flit between them, never fully able to grasp both at once. We are constantly tempted and delighted by new images flickering on the periphery of our vision.

Although Dean shot everything in *Geography Biography* herself, the film is invested in the logic of the found object—images discovered, collected, and repurposed, with past lives that are rarely fully disclosed but are palpable nonetheless. That feeling of secret histories unearthed permeates Dean's oeuvre, from the Polaroids of the disembodied fingers of ancient Roman statues and other artifacts in her Berlin studio to the steam-train windows she inherited from her father, which she transforms into comic-book-like cels with her meticulous painted additions. The windows—which date to the nineteenth century—also look quite a bit like celluloid strips. The artist's appropriation frames the experience of watching the landscape zoom by as a proto-cinematic one.

Dean's chalkboard drawings extend her meditation on material obsolescence. Though she has been adamant that her earliest chalkboards weren't inspired by Cy Twombly, her latest—featuring elegant snaking lines drawn directly with her fingers—are explicitly in conversation with and in tribute to the late artist. She began making cloud drawings in 2014 while in residence at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles, surprised by the striking clouds she saw in a city better known for its clear blue skies. Though Dean sometimes still uses unfixed chalk, embracing its fragility and fugitivity, she made these latest drawings with chalk spray, which contains an adhesive that gives it staying power. The clouds have a density and a velocity that make them seem more like exploding stars than fleeting, cottony phenomena. Stark against the void of the chalkboard, these bursts of light are put to elegiac purpose: One on a small school chalkboard was dedicated to Marian Goodman, while another bore the name of Russian dissident Alexei Navalny and the date of his untimely death.