

# OBSERVER

## *The Blind Folly of Tacita Dean*

*At the Columbus Museum of Art, the artist expands the definition of drawing, turning fragile materials and found objects into monumental meditations on time and loss.*

By Dian Parker February 23, 2026



Tacita Dean, *The Montafon Letter*, 2017. Chalk on blackboard, 144 × 288 in. Glenstone Museum, Potomac, Maryland. Image courtesy of the artist, Frith Street Gallery, London, and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris/Los Angeles. © Tacita Dean. Photo: Fredrik Nilsen

Serendipitous connections happen to each of us all the time. Whether we are conscious and receptive to them is another matter. The British artist Tacita Dean builds her work from these blind circumstances and chance encounters. Surrealist André Breton called them *hasard objectif*, objective chance, “based on a state of expectancy... a flaneur awaiting a disruption of the surface of life.” Dean is no good with a blank piece of paper, but give her a letter, old train windows or a W. G. Sebald novel, and she is off and running, creating work that is exactly original. In 2024, while she was in residence at the Menil Collection in Houston, she spent a night alone in the Cy Twombly Gallery. Later, wandering through a junk shop, she found a file of vintage postcards labeled Disasters. The second card she pulled out showed a house destroyed by a cyclone, the word Cyclone written in script that looked like her own handwriting. The first two letters were painted in white, bolder than the rest.

The postcard became part of her exhibition at the Menil, “Blind Folly,” which has now traveled to the Columbus Museum of Art in Columbus, Ohio. It took me three hours to see the entire show, not only because it is extensive but also because her work is so unusual that it takes time to grasp what she is

doing. Take the monumental blackboard drawing *The Montafon Letter*. It spans an entire wall at the museum, more than 12 feet high and 24 feet across. The work is drawn entirely in white chalk, depicting a massive mountain in the Austrian Alps. It is based on a letter recounting an avalanche in 1689 that killed 300 people. When the priest arrived to minister to the dead, another avalanche buried him and then a third uncovered him. Dean felt the story offered hope. Crevices, cliffs and tumbling snow, white spray against a black ground, all rendered with the simple chalk of a child. The towering peaks scallop the sky, shaped with sweeping downward strokes as if caught in the throes of a treacherous avalanche—a work of thundering motion. The “drawing” is fragile, as Dean uses no fixative. During shipping and installation, the chalk can be erased in places. She returns, climbing ladders and riding forklifts, to touch it up.

The power of Dean’s work lies not only in its execution but in its innovation. She is drawn to what is old, to what passes away over time. By painting vintage postcards and framing them, she ennobles the image while preserving it. *Found Postcard Compliment* (2019) comes from her collection of postcards gathered at flea markets over the years. The images are sometimes partially obscured by her monoprinted marks. Others are index cards and photographs painted or collaged, with titles such as *The great god Pan is dead* (2021) and *Guston Head* (2007).



Tacita Dean, *Sakura (Totsube)*, 2024. Colored pencil on hand-printed color photograph mounted on paper. Photo: Dian Parker for Observer

One gallery features three monumental tree paintings, which she calls drawings. Each ancient tree comes from a photograph she took, from whose negative she made a giant print. In *Sakura (Totsube)*, she drew with colored pencil around every leaf and branch on a hand-printed gelatin silver photograph

nearly 10 feet high and 5 feet wide. The limbs of the 600-year-old cherry tree in Fukushima are reverently supported by sturdy wooden braces, a testament to its fragility and to the care required in our warming climate. The three trees are honored by Dean's sustained attention. In the exhibition, there are no labels on the walls. Each gallery provides an information sheet listing title, year and medium, allowing the artwork to be experienced in the unencumbered space it needs.

Dean reveals processes in the work: chalk marks, paint strokes and scratches on slate or sheet metal. A series of 12 drawings uses the aperture of her photochemical camera, moving it in sweeping lines across the negative. Made during a total solar eclipse, she drew with the camera without seeing or knowing what the result would be. She described making *The Eclipse Drawings* with "lassitude." *Blind Folly*. Another series consists of nine drawings on found tarnished steam train windows, *The Sublunaries* and *Locomotive Drawings*. Dean discovered the windows in her family home after her father's death. As the handout explained, they "are made by firing enamel drawings on found steam train windows...connecting the advent of speed and locomotive engine with the invention of film..." The rounded corners of the windows "break up the landscape like the frames on a filmstrip. One series charts eight phases of the moon..."



Tacita Dean, *The Sublunaries: First Quarter*, 2024. Enamel and mirror lacquer on found tarnished steam train window, 12 1/8 x 17 3/16 x 3/16 in. Courtesy of the artist; Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris/Los Angeles; and Frith Street Gallery, London. © Tacita Dean. Photo: Studio Tacita Dean/Simon Hanzer

Speaking with senior curator [Michelle White](#) of the Menil, where "Blind Folly" was first conceived and exhibited, she echoed my response to the show: Dean's process is visible. "It's a labor of making through time," White said. "You get this awe-inspiring representation of a mountain or a cloud, but you're held

at the same time in a captivating way by the act of making by a human being with a small piece of chalk in her hand. And what that does in terms of producing meaning in her work... what it means to make a drawing in a way that demands presence. Demands this very humanist kind of belief system in what we're capable of making with an analog language."

The exhibition is a drawing show, but "a drawing show in the most expansive sense of thinking through what constitutes drawing and its fundamentals. Tacita's work does that. Monumentally does that. She maintains the sort of intimacy of the little mark, but she does it to new levels." There are three films in Dean's exhibition. One is a 20-minute 16 mm color film, *Claes Oldenburg draws Blueberry Pie* (2023). In it, Oldenburg makes one drawing after another, then titles and signs each before tearing it from a notebook. It is mesmerizing. White said, "I think the film is a love letter to drawing. It's a love letter to the simple beauty of making a mark and drawing a picture, the ease and aptitude of the rapidity of what he was doing. Oldenburg draws from a white piece of paper, and his mind does extraordinary things. Tacita starts in a very different way. She's responsive to the world around her. She's looking for things that she can use as a starting point, very kind of surrealist in a way."

White wrote the catalogue, "Blind Folly or How Tacita Dean Draws," which I cannot recommend highly enough. It is small, unlike most heavy exhibition catalogues; you can slip it into your back pocket. Because White spent so much time with the artist, she understands in depth what Dean is doing. It is filled with anecdotes and images, as well as references and quotes from the sources Dean drew on for the show, and is worth reading cover to cover.

"Tacita Dean: Blind Folly" is at the Columbus Museum of Art through March 8, 2026.



Tacita Dean, *Four Asses and Bottom*, 2012, Gouache on albumen photographs. foto: Dian Parker for Observer