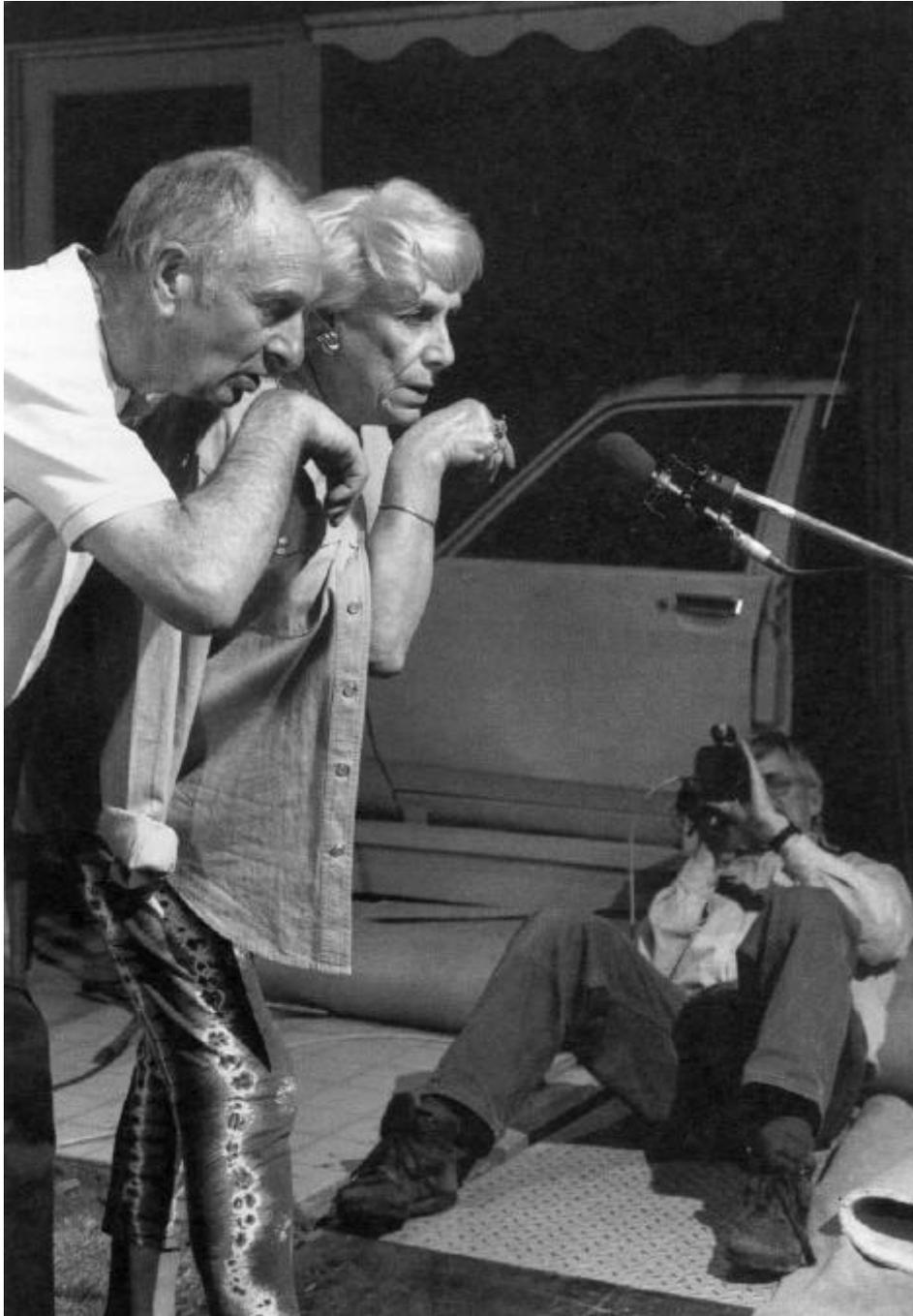


Tacita Dean

Recent films and other works

15 February - 6 May 2001



Foley Artist 1996 (c) Stephen White

Notes for teachers and students

Written by Hannah Hewetson

Introduction

The IDEA of the work, which only the artist could reveal, remains hidden, thus becoming everybody's guessing game and/or responsibility (Ursula Meyer, *Conceptual Art*, 1972)

This is Tacita Dean's first major solo show at a national gallery in this country. It is also Tate Britain's first major exhibition of a single contemporary artist. Dean's work arises from her intense involvement with stories, objects and events from the past, which she often discovers by chance encounters. Both fact and fiction, her narratives seem to tell of places that have failed or been abandoned. Through her work she explores relationships between history/present, and truth/concealment.

Dean works in many kinds of media, primarily film - a familiar tool with which to tell stories. Time, and the artist's manipulation of it, is a theme which is visible throughout his exhibition, particularly playing an important role in the films. Rather than telling a story however, Dean presents to us the results of her investigations into these events. The narrative is lost and it is through our engagement with the work that it may be recreated.

How do we look at this work?

Tacita Dean, as a conceptual artist, is not interested in merely representing a perfect description of the world. Instead she works from ideas, imbuing her sources with structures and meanings that she creates. Her work can be very beautiful and visually seductive, but on closer inspection it forces us to think further, beyond what we see.

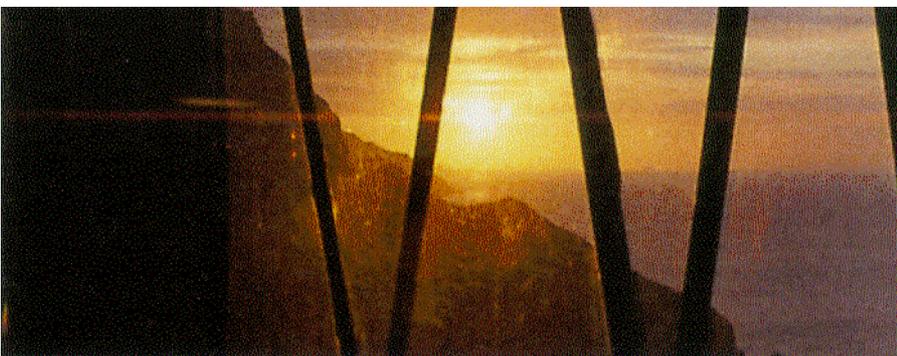
Dean likes to use static camera shots and film stills to express her ideas. When looking at contemporary art today it seems that we as an audience are often too quick to judge. Many artists working today receive more critical scrutiny, especially from the media, than ever before. Maybe we don't feel comfortable with the work and so jump to speedy conclusions. We could say that much contemporary art enforces this quick response, in the way it shocks or sensationalises. But Tacita Dean's non-confrontational approach to her work sets her apart. The atmosphere in this exhibition appears to be one of contemplative investigation. As it has been written about conceptual art, 'Value judgements are destructive to our proper business, which is curiosity and awareness'. (Richard Kostelanetz, taken from *Conceptual Art*, 1972)

Narrative and Medium

Dean's discovery of the story of Donald Crowhurst and his death at sea has had a major impact on her work over a period of four years. Crowhurst competed in the first solo round the world yacht race in 1969. It was his great ambition, which grew out of the rather small town existence that he led. Unfortunately for Crowhurst, he was never to know of the fame or media attention that he received. During the race, he gradually began to drift off course and lose his bearings, and so began to estimate and exaggerate his progress, which he recorded in a logbook. Eventually this concealment of his mistakes psychologically overpowered him, and he threw himself overboard.

Despite this narrative basis, the subject of the film *Disappearance at Sea* (1996) is the mechanism of a lighthouse and its position as a beacon of familiarity in the open expanse of the sea. Dean's close up shot of the rotating light bulb, the very centre of the lighthouse, is contrasted with a distant, sweeping shot of the horizon. We are reminded at once of the experience of being out at sea and the lighthouse as the last sign of human contact from the shore, as we are presented with extremes of proximity and distance. We become aware of an absence of human presence, and the simultaneous beauty and danger of the sea.

Dean's interest in recording time is apparent here. Crowhurst's skipping of time contrasts with the lengthening of time in the film. Dean presents a sequence of moving images that she extends through time, making our sense of time in the film appear almost immeasurable. In *Mosquito (Magnetic)* (1997) we see Dean's attempt to measure the sheer physicality of time, in her unravelling of the magnetic tape.



Disappearance at Sea 1996 (c) Tacita Dean and Ian Fairnington

Now consider *Disappearance at Sea II*, which presents an altogether different experience of being at sea. In the making of this work, Dean investigated an extract from a twelfth century romance called *Tristan and Isolde*. Unlike the story of *Crowhurst*, this is one of healing and rescue. This is revealed to us through the bright shaft of light that bleeds the frame at the end of the film. The serenity of the sea and the strong light, is contrasted by the noise of the projector which occupies the same space as we do as viewers.

Both of these are examples of Dean's intricate use of her medium and the way she integrates this into her ideas. The 16mm film which she uses, now an outdated method of filmmaking, creates the flicker and rough edges, which give a fragile feel. These are very distinct qualities of this type of film and contrast to the slickness of new technologies, where all signs of the human hand are wiped out. The prominent positioning of the projector in each room serves to remind us of the structure of the moving image that we are seeing and the way it is created. The loud noise bleeds into the sound of the film. In *Disappearance at Sea*, the calling of the seagulls clashes with the screeching of the rotating bulb, all of which is underscored by the constant clicking of the projector. The editing process here involves the actual cutting and pasting of the film reel, a more physical level of participation than that of digital editing, where it is done by a computer. This also signifies the level of Dean's involvement with her narratives. In the case of *Disappearance at Sea*, the fragility of the film echoes *Crowhurst's* state whilst at sea. We could also say that this film, through its concentration on fractured light, shone through a lens, is emblematic of the very essence of film.

Think

Consider Dean's integration of materials and meaning. Do you think she chooses the best film qualities for her subject?

How does she manipulate her media?

Can you see evidence of the hand of the artist?

Drawings



The Sea, with a Ship; afterwards an Island (detail) 1999 (c) Stephen White

The series of blackboard drawings *The Sea, with a Ship; afterwards an Island* (1999) immediately appear as familiar objects to us, as a surface upon which information is recorded and displayed. Dean uses them, however, to create an atmospheric and fluid surface. She has worked with blackboards before, an unusual choice of materials by an artist. Teamed with traditional drawing methods, that of mark making and tonal relationships to build volume and forms in space, the results are unique. The images are transient and fragile. This is heightened by the qualities of the materials, especially when we remember that the drawings can be wiped over at any moment and forgotten. White chalk marks are set against the deep negative space of the blackboard, creating dramatic effects.

Here we are presented again not with the whole story, but with fragments of pictorial energy. These fragments are full of imaginative possibilities for our own involvement. Writings down the side of the boards appear as stage directions, 'suggesting a visual narrative bigger than they can contain' (Frances Richard, *Art Forum*, November, 1997). Indeed the drawings are full of cinematic qualities, such as their likeness to negatives or individual frames. They also remind us of the process of editing, and the creation of sequence in film. Indeed they perhaps represent the scripts that are to appear against the backdrop of the films. This sensual and deeply considered handling of materials is a distinctive feature of Tacita Dean's work.

Think

What kind of relationship do the drawings have with the films?

Do they seem to take second position to the films or are they of equal importance?

Now follow on to *Foley Artist* (1996) where the sense of a hidden narrative is very strong.

Foreign and Familiar



Bubble House 1999 (c) Tacita Dean and Kjetil Berge

In this section we shall look at some of the films, considering Dean's use of location and identity.

One film that seems to stand out in this exhibition is *Bubble House* (1999). The location of this film is the island of Cayman Brac in the Caribbean, and the building is an architectural vision of a complete wind and storm proof abode from the 1960s. The businessman behind this venture went bankrupt leaving the house unfinished and deserted. On finding the Bubble House, Dean was struck by the way 'everything felt ordered and wealthy and fake' on the island, whereas the house stood abandoned and forgotten. Dean made the visit to Cayman Brac to find the wrecked trimaran of Donald Crowhurst, that lies strewn on the shore as we see in *Teignmouth Electron* (1999). Upon her discovery of the Bubble House close by, it made the perfect companion to the boat, both standing as battered carcasses of failed human endeavour.

The film *Teignmouth Electron* (2000) marked the end of Dean's investigation into the story of Donald Crowhurst, and in all the work that was made, the narrative is never fully described to us. The boat stands here as the evidence of the Crowhurst tragedy. In a fairly tragic state itself, the boat has become decayed through its prolonged exposure to the elements. The film is shot on a windy day. Dean uses long, slow shots taken from all angles, that appear almost pathological. Through this technique a definite sense of place is created, and we are left to ponder its existence in this tropical location, so far removed from the stormy sea and the fate of its sailor.

Similar to this is Dean's treatment of her subject in *Bubble House*, where we are presented with a relic of an alien looking dysfunctional structure. Again filmed during a storm, perhaps marking its failed purpose, we look at lingering shots of the oval shaped structure.

At first it appears rather odd looking and unfamiliar. When we are shown the inside, however, there is a certain kind of pathos, as this once futuristic structure stands in devastation. Incomprehensible, it compels us by its otherworldliness.

So in both these works, we see how Dean plays with the passage of time and relationships between past and present. Permeating both films is a sense of lost expectation. A sense of location is portrayed by Dean's still camera shots that move around the objects, and also the prominence of the weather.

Think

How is Dean's portrayal of a place different to that of a feature film?

Consider the way these objects carry their own histories and what they bring to the film.

What is it that Dean wants to tell us about these places?

Englishness and the Weather

Sound Mirrors (1999) is clearly from an English location. More pieces of dysfunctional architecture, these sound mirrors were created along the Kent coastline to warn against aerial attack. Built during the 1920s and 30s, they were part of a big experiment in air defence systems. Interest was lost in the mirrors, however, and they were left to graffiti, and still stand to day as we see them in Dean's film. We are presented with a typical grey English day, making the sense of abandonment more acute. The crescendo of different sounds in the film are the noises that the mirrors themselves have reflected.



Sound Mirrors 1999 (c) Matthew Hale

In this film Dean projects the film to cover the whole wall, unlike the other films that we have discussed. The film appears grainy and slightly blurred. How does this affect the way she portrays her subject? Does this change our relationship to the work?

Think

Could we make links here with England as an island? Consider the purpose of these mirrors and the artist's fascination with the sea.

Romanticism: Style and Subject

Let us now turn to the film *Banewl*, 1999. It charts a global event from a very English viewpoint. Dean's location is Cornwall during the solar eclipse of August 1999.

Filmed on the site of a local farm, the film moves through the event from the overcast morning to the appearance of the partially eclipsed sun later on in the day. Dean uses long camera stills, to build up a sense of time passing, and all the waiting and watching that occurred on that day. What is striking here is the ordinariness of what we see. Through this she makes us aware of the subtlety, and subsequent anti-climax of the whole event. Some scenes in the film seem reminiscent of some of Constable's paintings of pastoral countryside.

Think

Make links with the idea of Englishness. What is Dean saying about the English countryside? Does it appear romantic or like a documentary?

The story of Donald Crowhurst has romantic connotations. This image of man alone in the face of nature has recurred throughout art across the centuries and, during the Romantic period, the sea was seen as the last true wilderness, where man can leave no lasting imprint. Dean talks of the sea as a place where, 'there is no human presence or support system on which to hang a tortured psychological state.'

Here we can make links to another British artist, Turner, in particular through the shared subject matter of the sea and in the artists' handling of their subjects. Sean Rainbird, writing in the exhibition catalogue, makes direct visual links to Turner's paintings. Of *Disappearance at Sea II*, he writes: 'Like Turner's paintings of Venice, colour relationships within the image, not the sun's actual strength, give it a piercing intensity, a force of dissolution'.

Turner pioneered a sensory approach to describing a scene, presenting us with visual climaxes of the pure elements of nature. Dean does not describe a story, but instead builds references, to the lighthouse and the horizon, which construct a picture of the sea.

Turner's treatment of the scenes that he chose to paint was also rooted in a human desire to be close to nature. Consider Dean's treatment through her personal involvement with her subjects, and the way she is often led by intuition. Trying to find the Spiral Jetty (1997) took Dean on a pilgrimage-like investigation to Utah to discover Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty, a piece of land art that was thought to have been submerged by the sea a long time ago. Dean hears of its reappearance by chance and, armed with special instructions goes to discover it. For JG Ballard writing in the catalogue, Dean's work is a 'deliberate attempt to explore a mysterious agenda of her own'.

Think

Turner painted nearly 200 years ago. Could Dean, in her romantic approach and slowing down of time, be commenting on our hectic, and overworked lifestyles today? Also consider her rejection of new digital technologies, in her filmmaking.

Conclusion

Tacita Dean is represented in this country by Frith Street Gallery in Soho. The artists that a commercial gallery chooses to show often reflect the opinions or thoughts of the gallery owner. Other artists who have exhibitions at Frith Street, such as Cornelia Parker, share similar themes, also working with objects from the past that contain a sense of fragility.

Disappearance and a sense of loss seem to stand out in the work of Tacita Dean. Playing with ideas of time and truth, she maps the objective world, through a human understanding and experience of it. Notions of lost identity and failure are central to the narratives that she uses. In the way the artist delves into history and in her choice of media, the work could appear to be nostalgic, but her approach seems unsentimental. This exhibition is an illustration of the investigative and enquiring nature that lies within Dean's work.