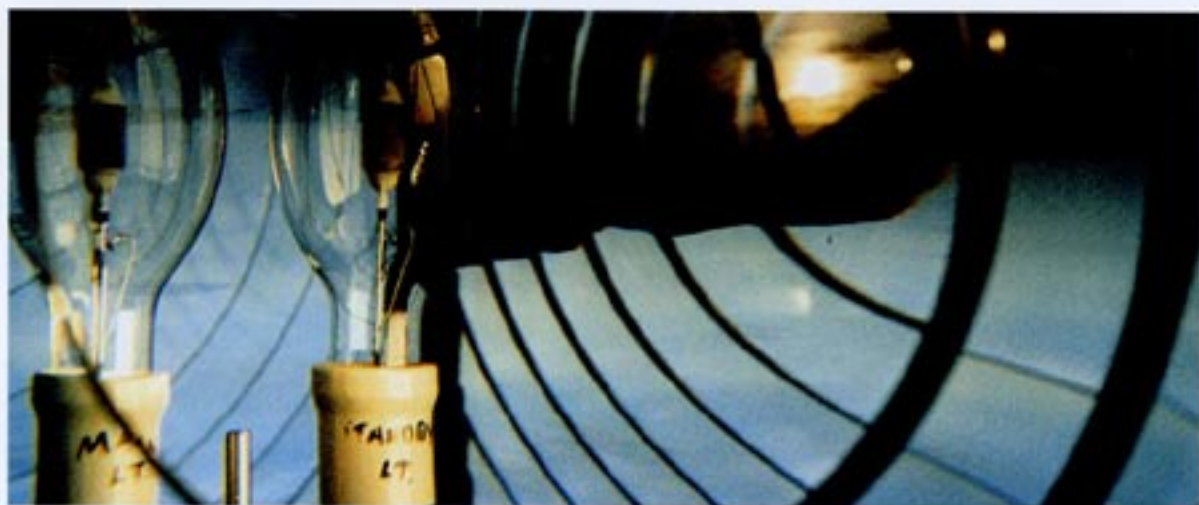


DIRECTIONS

Tacita Dean

July 26 – October 23, 2001



Disappearance at Sea, 1996, 16mm anamorphic color film with optical sound, 14 minutes. Courtesy the artist, Frith Street Gallery, London, and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris.

Tacita Dean (b. Canterbury, England, 1965) works in a variety of media, including drawing, photography, and sound; it is, however, her film installations that have garnered the most attention. Like a number of other artists over the last decade, Dean has extended the possibilities of film beyond the movie theater, utilizing 16mm film loop projectors in museums and galleries to create what is essentially a new kind of cinematic experience. Although she uses relatively high production standards, including professional cinematographers, Dean nevertheless rejects dialogue and conventional Hollywood editing techniques, relying instead on extreme long takes that undermine action and dwell on the unadulterated appearance of the world. This concentrated vision, often directed toward the ocean or landscape, is informed by both the history of painting and that of cinema—by the sublime encounters with nature in the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich or John Constable, and by the *tableaux vivants* that undercut motion and slow time in the films of Carl-Theodor Dreyer or Michelangelo Antonioni. For Dean, objects and landscapes act as metaphors for dimly remembered tales, the long, lingering shots allowing the spectator to exhume from the everyday environment a psychological world that rings with a poignant, melancholic echo of the past.

Behind most of Dean's work is a profound interest in recovering the past by journeying through the present. Her expeditions are like archeological excavations that reveal a string of poetic coincidences between past and present. The final work can only appear after these linkages between different times, and between Dean's personal life and her subjects' lives, have been unearthed. For example, in

her 1999 film installation *Sound Mirrors*, Dean began by thinking about her experiences in Dungeness: her memories as a child of picking up a strange rock that she later realized was probably radioactive debris from the nearby power station, and watching the planes taking off for France from Lydd (an airport that always reminds her of Chris Marker's 1964 *La Jetée*, a film about memory and death). *Sound Mirrors* absorbs these meditations on the past by focusing on the large concave structures built out of concrete between 1928 and 1930 that were originally intended as an acoustic warning system for invading planes taking off from France. Similarly, in her 1995 film *A Bag of Air*, Dean attempts to actualize a childhood desire to catch clouds. In her sound piece *Trying to Find the Spiral Jetty*, 1997, she records (and partially re-creates) her attempt to find the original site of the renowned, but now-submerged, land art piece by Robert Smithson, an artist who, like Dean, was interested in the past's relationship to the present.

These themes of time, memory, and remembrance are also at the core of the two film installations presented in this *Directions* exhibition.

Disappearance at Sea, 1996

Dean has been captivated by water since her youth, and a number of her works deal either directly or indirectly with the sea's majestic yet threatening power. Dean became particularly fascinated with the story of the disappearance of Donald Crowhurst during the around-the-world Golden Globe Race. Unprepared for the contest, Crowhurst set sail in a trimaran, the *Teignmouth Electron*, in August of 1968. During the race, Crowhurst radioed back his coordinates, which indicated that he was in the lead.



Figs. 1 and 2. 2001: A Space Odyssey, directed by Stanley Kubrick, 1968. Courtesy The Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive, New York.

However, as the race neared its conclusion, Crowhurst's communications ceased. His boat was found a few hundred miles off the coast of England—and he had disappeared. Authorities eventually determined that Crowhurst had run into difficulties shortly after leaving England; when he realized he could never finish the race, rather than give up he launched into a bizarre attempt to deceive the world. He floated around in the southern Atlantic, faking his coordinates and allowing the world to believe he was not only still racing but also would be the winner. His logbook shows that he was slowly losing his sense of direction and was, in fact, becoming deranged. He began logging incoherent ramblings on Einstein's theory of relativity and discourses on God and the universe. It appears that he finally jumped overboard with his chronometer.

Searching for a way of making a work out of Crowhurst's story, Dean came upon the lighthouse at Berwick-upon-Tweed:

Berwick lighthouse sits at the end of the quay. The quay stretches out far beyond the town and far

beyond the harbour into the water. . . . The lighthouse is the last human outpost between land and ocean and built around human scale. Nonetheless, its presence hints at the other worldliness of the sea: a different sense of space that will never be domesticated by humankind, and which is more akin to Crowhurst's final and distorted sense of things. At night, you watch in the blackness for the rotations of the lighthouse and you decipher time in the gaps between the flashes. Without this cipher, there is no time. Crowhurst's "time-madness," where he believed he was floating through prehistory, utterly alone in an unforgiving seascape so far removed from human contact, is only just possible to imagine standing in the last human place where the ocean starts and the land ends in a solitary beacon of safety. Looming in the window of the lighthouse, where normally the light would be, you can just make out the anguished face of Donald Crowhurst.¹

Using a loop projector within the gallery space and 16mm film shot in the wide-screen Cinemascope format, *Disappearance at Sea* (cover) presents the viewer with an anthropomorphized Berwick lighthouse, as if the tower has become Crowhurst himself. The film is structured by alternating shots of the revolving lamp unit and the ocean, as if the lightbulb is an eye peering out to sea, both the eye of Crowhurst and, because it is from our point of view, our eye as well. As the sun sets, and the sea grows dimmer, the security of knowing one's position begins to dissolve into the blackness of the sea

at night, and the rational gives way to the supernatural.

Dean's works are often interrelated. Out of *Disappearance at Sea* came not only photographs of Berwick lighthouse, but also *Disappearance at Sea II*, a 1997 film in which the camera takes the position of the rotating lamp, putting us in the position of the lighthouse, our gaze continually sweeping the horizon. The artist also produced a series of blackboard drawings depicting ghostly sequences of experiences at sea (fig. 5).

Fernsehturm, 2001

In Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (figs. 1 and 2), 1968, there is a sequence in which one of the astronauts jogs and shadowboxes his way around the giant spaceship *Discovery*. Around and around he goes, getting nowhere, while outside, the spacecraft zooms toward Jupiter. Simultaneous states of stasis and motion are also at the heart of Dean's recent film *Fernsehturm* (Television Tower). Shot in a revolving restaurant on top of the television tower at Alexanderplatz in Berlin, *Fernsehturm* (figs. 3 and 4) recalls not only Kubrick's film but also the countless "modernist" projects that promised to lead us into utopia. Built in 1969 in what was then East Berlin, the 1,200-foot tower can be seen from most anywhere in the city. Dean recalls going up it in 1986 and visiting the "café above the clouds" with its smell of "cloying cakes." In those days, before reunification, the restaurant was popular and visitors were allowed to stay for only one rotational, panoramic sweep of Berlin. Although now the restaurant rotates faster and visitors may stay as long as they like, the restaurant still remains, according to Dean, "our best image of the future, and yet it is firmly locked in the past: in a period of division and

dissatisfaction on Earth that led to the belief that Space was an attainable and better place."

Like *Disappearance at Sea*, Dean's *Fernsehturm* was shot in the Cinemascope format that echoes the panoramic view from the restaurant; and like the lighthouse film, it records the metamorphosis of the restaurant as it moves from daylight, through the sunset, and into the night. Although the camera remains stationary throughout the film, the rotation of the restaurant makes it appear that we are in constant motion yet going nowhere. The film is also structured like *Disappearance at Sea*, the camera alternating between one specific part of the restaurant and shots of other areas. However, unlike in the earlier film, Dean chooses not to focus on the landscape but instead concentrates on the patrons and the more general sounds of the restaurant, including the music of a keyboard player (who at one point appropriately launches into a rendition of "The Blue Danube," used in the 2001 soundtrack). Dean nevertheless captures the dreamy gazes of the diners as they peer out the windows at the city far below. Indeed, the majesty of the panorama seems to create a hushed environment, and as the twilight of the magic hour descends over the view and the light inside changes to artificial illumination, the patrons appear more and more like shadows from the past.

Like most good science fiction, *Fernsehturm* is as much about the past as the future. Although from the inside the restaurant appears to be a spaceship hovering over Berlin, it remains attached to the ground by the tower, attached to Berlin's past, and to the failed utopian projects of both East and West. It is also linked to Alfred Döblin's 1929 novel *Berlin-Alexanderplatz* and the 1981



Figs. 3 and 4. *Ferisehturm*, 2001, 16mm anamorphic color film with optical sound, 44 minutes. Courtesy the artist, Frith Street Gallery, London, and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris.

television version by Rainer Werner Fassbinder; to Fritz Lang's 1925 film *Metropolis*; to the visionary architecture of Bruno Taut and Hans Poelzig; and to landscapes framed by windows in the paintings of Johan Christian Dahl and Friedrich Wasmann.

The space-age grandeur of the revolving restaurant, with its view of both East and West Berlin, must have been even more vertiginous during the Cold War. Above and beyond humankind's self-imposed restrictions, the patrons, like Kubrick's astronauts, could hypnotically peer out at the future just as it was appearing over the horizon. At the end of the film, when the harsh fluorescent lights are switched on in the restaurant and the landscape disappears, replaced by

dark-mirrored images of the onlookers themselves, the spell is suddenly broken, the outside space of limitless possibilities replaced by the very limited social space. And yet, just before sunset tomorrow, the restaurant will fill once again with patrons and continue its endless revolving journey to nowhere.

Kerry Brougher
Chief Curator

1. Dean writes about each of her works in *Tacita Dean*, exhibition catalog, ed. Mela Dávila and Roland Groenenboom (Barcelona: Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona and Actar, 2000).

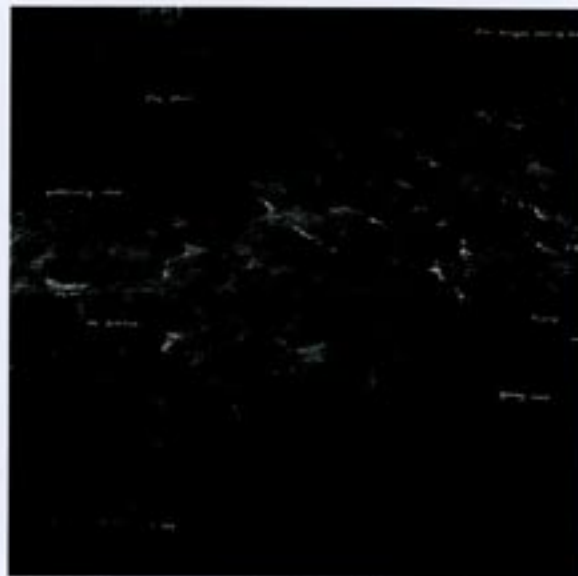


Fig. 5. *Sea Inventory Drawings (Opening Swell)*, 1998, chalk on blackboard. Courtesy the artist, Frith Street Gallery, London, and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris.

BIOGRAPHY

Born in Canterbury, England, 1965. Graduated Falmouth School of Art, Cornwall, 1988. Greek Government scholarship, Supreme School of Fine Art, Athens, 1989–90. Postgraduate degree, The Slade School of Fine Art, London, 1992. DAAD Scholarship, Berlin, 2000–2001. Lives and works in London and Berlin.

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2001 Tate Britain, London; Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, Barcelona; "Floh," Frith Street Gallery, London.
- 2000 Art Gallery of York University, Toronto; Marian Goodman Gallery, New York; Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Basel.
- 1999 "Millennium Sculpture Project," The Millennium Dome, London; Sadler's Wells Theatre, London.
- 1998 Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, and tour.
- 1997 The Drawing Room, The Drawing Center, New York; Witte de With, Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam.
- 1996 "Foley Artist," Art Now, Tate Gallery, London.
- 1995 "Clear Sky, Upper Air," Frith Street Gallery, London; Galerie "La Box," Ecole Nationale des Beaux-Arts, Bourges.
- 1994 "The Martyrdom of St. Agatha and Other Stories," Galerija Skuc, Ljubljana, and Umjetnostna Galerija, Maribor, Slovenia.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2000 "Vision and Reality," Louisiana Museum for Moderne Kunst, Denmark.
- 1999 "Fourth Wall," Royal National Theatre, London; "Tacita Dean, Lee Ranaldo, Robert Smithson," Dia Center for the Arts, New York.
- 1998 "The NatWest Art Prize 1998," Lothbury Gallery, London; "The Turner Prize 1998," Tate Gallery, London.
- 1996 "Berwick Ramparts Project," Berwick-upon-Tweed, Northumberland.
- 1995 "British Art Show 4," National Touring Exhibitions organized by the Hayward Gallery, London.
- 1994 "Mise en Scène," Institute of Contemporary Arts, London.
- 1993 "Barclays Young Artist Award," Serpentine Gallery, London.
- 1992 "BT New Contemporaries," Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, and tour.

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In addition to catalogs from the above exhibitions, Tacita Dean's work is discussed in:

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Dean, Tacita. "Tacita Dean—Insert with Blackboard Drawings." *Parkett* 50–51 (1997): 249–60.

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Gopnik, Blake. "It's Alive! Stirring Up English Landscape Art." *Washington Post*, 1 April 2001, G1.

Schwabsky, Barry. "The Art of Tacita Dean: Cine Qua Non." *Artforum* 37, no. 7 (March 1999): 98–102.

Searle, Adrian. "Age and Beauty." *The Guardian*, 20 February 2001.

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