

# The Guardian



**Interview**

## Tacita Dean: the acclaimed British artist poised to make history

*Tim Adams*

**The artist and filmmaker is staging a trio of shows at London galleries this year. She talks about her struggle to continue using 16mm film, her father's influence and living with arthritis**

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**I**t is tempting to think of Tacita Dean as a witchy presence in the world, a diviner of hidden forces. Her chosen medium is an antique one: spooled film. Waiting is a big part of her method, and watching; there is also an alertness to chance and coincidence. She is a lifelong collector of four-leaf clovers; a sometime chaser of solar eclipses. One artistic quest saw her pursuing the three known sightings of the severed breasts of St Agatha among Italian relics. In another, she rose in a hot air balloon in the Alps before dawn to try to capture a plastic bag full of alchemists' ether. She has long been drawn both to lighthouses and to shipwrecks. The prospectus for her three solo shows about to open in London - in an unprecedented collaboration between the National Gallery, the Royal Academy and the National Portrait Gallery - involves ancient and modern obsessions divided in the traditional way: still life, portrait and landscape. She will bring her own quiet magic to each.

I meet her one lunchtime in the midst of one of those three pressing deadlines, in a closed gallery at the National, surrounded by still lifes, some chosen from the collection, some shipped in, some her own. She sits beside a long trestle table of plans and tools and notes, trying not to feel the pressure of the 101 decisions she has still to make, while a gallery assistant paints a final section of wall and one of her regular team works on the sound for one of her films.

Dean has suffered from rheumatoid arthritis for the past 25 years, which causes her to walk with some difficulty. She can't extend her arm for a handshake. She chooses to sit and talk to me in a wheelchair in this makeshift studio, but only, she adamantly insists, because it is the only comfy chair around (true: I sit at her feet on a camping stool). "Don't for God's sake imply I am wheelchair bound!" she says. As a lover of serendipity, she warms to my discovery that we were born 10 days apart in November 1965, before noting drily that means we are both, however much we might like to kid ourselves, much "closer to the end than the beginning".

We talk first about some of the work she had chosen, what she calls "still life within a landscape", the rootedness of rocks and trees, not least because it connects this show to her Royal Academy retrospective in May, where among other wonders she is including her collections of clover and round stones. Stone collecting is a habit she shares with some other artists she's gathered here: Paul Nash, Henry Moore. Her own fossicking was handed down from her father, a circuit judge and frustrated writer; the 17th-century house in which she grew up on the North Downs in Kent was "full of pocketed flints - it's quite a British thing, isn't it?"



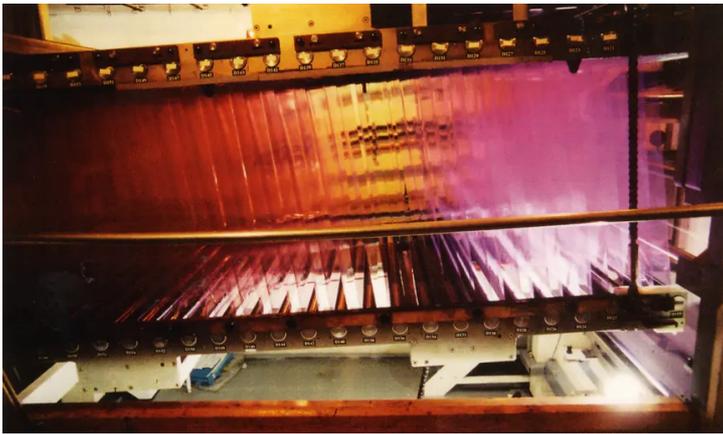
Dean's film for the Turbine Hall in Tate Modern. Photograph: Sarah Lee/The Guardian

Dean feels the thought of that Britishness a little more keenly now she lives abroad. She moved to Berlin with her husband and fellow artist, Matthew Hale, nearly 15 years ago, to get the studio space they could never afford in London. For most of the last four years they have been in Los Angeles with Rufus, their 13-year-old son, where Dean has been at work in Hollywood creating new copy negatives of her work for an archive in perhaps the last corner of the world that knows how to care for film. She misses British landscape most. "I chose to leave; but I definitely feel a connection to the land still, to the ground," she says.

That connection is one of the many affecting things about Dean's work. As a landscape artist she is a natural heir to Constable and Turner, a beholder of big skies and seas, with an uncanny ability to make you watch time passing, to see into the heart of things. For the occasion of the solar eclipse in Britain in 1999, for example, in her film *Banewl*, she trained her lens on an idyllic Cornish pastoral. Over the course of an hour the coming and going of the strange crepuscular light and sound worked its way into her film, as her camera watched the cattle and birds gently spooked by the once-in-a-lifetime little death of the sun.

Some of her formative projects led her into outlandish narratives and quests. *Girl Stowaway* (1994) began in an old bookshop when she found a Victorian photograph that took on a life of its own. Miss Jean Jeinnie (I kid you not), the tomboyish stowaway in question, went off on an unplanned posthumous voyage when the book in which her photograph was printed was somehow lost from an airport security scanner and turned up in Ireland. Dean later found out that Jean Jeinnie's boat was scuttled off Salcombe, an event she reimagined on film, and the plot darkened further from there. Something comparable happened when she began to explore the story of the delusional round-the-world yachtsman Donald Crowhurst (James Marsh's recent feature film, *The Mercy*, starring Colin Firth, was partly inspired by Dean's work). Her camera eventually found the upturned hull of Crowhurst's abandoned trimaran, the Teignmouth Electron, still just about resisting the waves in the Caymans. "All the things I am attracted to are just about to disappear," she has said.

The medium she has chosen to capture these farewells has always been a big part of the message. Her very earliest work was chalk on blackboard, haunted seascapes and ghost ships, which remains a signature of all her shows. After that it was 16mm and 35mm film, itself now a mostly lost art form. When the last film-processing studio closed in London she launched a one-woman campaign in the *Guardian* to try to save it. She felt bereft, like a painter suddenly denied oils. She made a haunting valedictory film, *Kodak*, about the final knockings of the company's factory in Chalon-sur-Saône, in France.



From *Kodak*, Dean's film about the French Kodak factory.  
Photograph: Courtesy the artist, Frith Street Gallery, London & Marian Goodman Gallery

"Any artist who works in paint or chalk or film or whatever knows that sometimes the medium itself will give you something entirely unexpected, and something far better than what you intended," she says now. "And at that point you follow the medium." That, for her, is art. "Digital media do not have that resistance and I think that is a big problem," she says. "Nothing can really happen in digital that is not intended." When Dean was invited to fill the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern in 2011, she projected a film montage 13 metres high on the wall, a lovingly spliced poem of hand-tinted images in which the very final sequence was Dean's own enormous eye, opening and staring at her audience, before disappearing.

She cites the late German writer WG Sebald as an important influence on her method, in particular the way his writing made the life of the past so present, as if in a dream. "I really liked his description of his work," she says. "He said when he worked he was like a dog crossing a field, following its nose." She picks points A and B in the National Gallery air, and traces a slow meandering line between them with her finger.

Her conversation naturally follows that kind of trajectory too. Dean is mildly amused when she talks about herself, reserving any ego for her work. As a young woman, her parents wanted her to take up a place at Oxford, but she insisted on studying art, first at Falmouth, then at the

Slade in London. She was occasionally grouped as a younger artist with her contemporaries, the party-loving YBAs, Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin. In retrospect, given the rigour and unshowiness of her approach, the association seems quite comical. She was up for the Turner prize in 1998, but lost out to Chris Ofili.

How often does her winding-road approach, where the journey is everything, just lead to a dead end? I wonder.

“Well, always,” she says, quickly. “And that is the terrifying part, really.”

She recalls a story she took to heart from a celebrated screenwriter, Stuart Stern, who wrote the film *Rebel Without a Cause*. She met Stern, then in his 90s, at the Sundance film festival, and he was still fretting about writer’s block. The story he told, she says, went like this: “There is a ballet dancer and a wizard in the desert and the ballet dancer goes up to the wizard and demands ‘Whither?’ And the wizard points to the distance and says ‘Thither’. The ballet dancer heads off in that direction and after a few minutes she goes ‘Splat!’ into an invisible wall. And she comes back to the wizard and repeats the question, and the same thing happens. After the third and fourth time that she hits the wall, the ballet dancer is bruised and angry and shouts at the wizard, ‘Where’s whither?’ ‘Well, it is about 15 miles beyond ‘Splat!’” the wizard says.”



Tacita Dean working on *The Montafon Letter*, Los Angeles, 2017.  
 Photograph: Fredrik Nilsen/© Courtesy the artist; Glenstone Museum, Potomac, Maryland; Frith Street Gallery, London and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York and Paris

The story, Dean insists, illustrates the agonies she has gone through to create her new film, *Antigone*, nearly an hour long, which will be a star turn in her Royal Academy show. She has felt fated to address the Greek myth itself for a typical reason: *Antigone* is her elder sister’s name; it was the first interesting word she held in her head.

“We all had a bit of a tough time with our names,” she says, with a laugh. Her brother is called Ptolemy (he is on TV these days, as an architectural historian; you can’t help but think other career options, hod carrier, say, might have been more of a challenge with that silent P). But even so, her sister probably came off worst. “*Antigone* is an incredibly burdensome name to give to a daughter,” Dean says. “I remember being so shocked when I read the tragedy at school. Her ending [torment and hanging] was so awful.” Dean once asked her father why he had chosen the name. He told her he chose it because *Antigone* was the first feminist, an answer that Dean didn’t expect, she recalls in her notes to her film, “as it came from the mouth of a man who had penned me a letter while I was at art school calling feminism the ‘anorexia nervosa of the west’.”

Dean suggests she already knew she had to do something with the Antigone story way back in 1987, when she was 22 and had wangled a winter artist's residency at Delphi in Greece. She had the oracle's temple mostly to herself, felt a proximity to the gods and a settling of her fate. After that, she says, the Antigone myth "kind of always hung over me". She had an idea for a film that told the story that filled the gap between the first two plays of Sophocles's original tragic cycle, in which Antigone leads her blinded father (and brother), Oedipus, through the wilderness of exile. "I was incapable of writing a single word of dialogue though," she says. "I was encountering that invisible wall every other minute and turning back." This went on for decades.

Then the gods appeared to step in. For one thing, she met the writer Anne Carson, who had just completed a new translation of *Antigone* and, it turned out, had also sketched out something along the lines that Dean imagined. For her film she wanted Carson to come to Thebes in Greece to read her work. When that didn't work, Dean discovered a Thebes, Illinois (population 436), and suggested filming there.

There is little in Thebes, Illinois, apart from "trailer park and desolation". Little apart from a historic roadside courthouse in which Abraham Lincoln first practised law. *Antigone* is concerned with judgment of the ages, so a lot of the filming happened there. And then Dean realised there was, a few months into Donald Trump's presidency, an eclipse of the sun due in Wyoming. "The myth is all about blindness, of course," she says, so her filming also took her there (and in fact the blundering 45th president did risk looking at the eclipse directly, though without harm). In this way, as if led by a guiding force, Dean's *Antigone* came together.

How does she think of those chains of creative connection and chance? "I always use the phrase 'being in a state of grace'," she says. "Sometimes when you are working hard and open to things you start to see patterns. I am not thinking of grace in a religious way, just in your head."

You could say some of that creativity was always in Tacita Dean's genes. Basil Dean, her grandfather, was a pioneer and director and producer of earliest talking pictures, films starring George Formby and Gracie Fields. He established what became Ealing studios, and then, during the war, founded and ran the Entertainments National Service Association (Ensa), producing shows and films for the troops.

Dean didn't know grandfather Basil well as she was growing up. He died when she was 11 and anyway was quite a wayward figure in the family's life: three times married. "He was among the first people ever to think about colour film and about sound," she says. "But he was also an old-fashioned cad and a bounder. I would have been so fascinated to talk to him..."

His most insistent legacy for her was in his formative influence on her father, Joseph. "He was really shaped by his father. Not in a positive way at all. And I suppose I in turn am still being shaped by my father," she says.

In a moving small obituary for the *Guardian* when her father died aged 88 in 2010, she chose to emphasise how he never got over being abandoned by Basil when he was four. "Joe never recovered from the wretchedness of his childhood and it remained a presence throughout his life," she wrote. "He studied classics at Merton College, Oxford, and became an anti-tank gunner with the 51st Highland Division and fought in Alamein, Sicily and Normandy, where he was wounded in a mortar attack a day after he landed. In that instant, he wrote later, he looked down at his bleeding chest and noticed he was wearing his jumper back to front."

Joe retired early from the law, in order to pursue the career he always wanted for himself as a writer, but, Dean explained, he became instead obsessed by trying to save the market town of Ashford from being ruined by the arrival of the Channel tunnel. Finally, “in his late 70s, he embarked upon psychotherapy to unblock his writing, but Parkinson’s disease prevented him from finishing this process and his autobiography, ‘Prisoner on the Bench’, was barely begun.”

If you were psychoanalysing the roots of Dean’s own determined creativity, you might be tempted to believe that above all she has tried to resist her father’s frustration. Her work examines might-have-beens but also dramatises her refusal to accept them. She gets the job done.

I suggest to her at one point that her films always seem to be metaphors of her own life, without documenting it directly. She laughs, a little incredulously. “You don’t think it’s all riddled with autobiography? All artists are led back to it. It’s not conscious, but it happens.”

In the last 10 or 15 years she has turned her attention away from ruins and shipwrecks and gnarly trees to examine their human equivalents: artists in late life. A series of nine of these filmed portraits will feature at the National Gallery. Were they all also voyages around her father?

“They started from different places,” she says, while admitting that the first, made in 2002 of the Italian artist and political radical Mario Merz, began entirely “because I thought he had a really strong resemblance to my father”.

Others followed: the venerable choreographer Merce Cunningham “dancing” to John Cage’s silent composition 4’ 33” in his 90s; Sebald’s translator, Michael Hamburger, the poet, among the rare apple trees in his Suffolk orchard. And the latest, David Hockney, a newfound friend in Los Angeles, lighting a cigarette.



From Dean's film of Merce Cunningham. Photograph: Tacita Dean/Frith Street Gallery, London and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris

There is something quite thrillingly determined in the way that Dean captures these portraits. The novelist Jeffrey Eugenides, godfather to her son, suggests her friends routinely call her “formidable” and the longer you talk to her the more you are convinced of the appropriateness of that epithet. You also wonder how much of that strength comes from her blatant refusal to be defined in any way by the progression of her arthritis, though given her travel schedule and the intricacy of some of her post-production film work, it clearly affects her. “How well are you?” I ask, as politely as I can.

“You mean,” she says with a laugh, “How’s me arth-er-itis?”

“I guess,” I say.

She winces a bit. “You know the other thing about *Antigone*,” she says, “one of those subterranean things, it is that Oedipus itself means ‘swollen foot’. He was lame. It is odd, but way back when I was at Falmouth and I started to work with my sister’s name, I used to do these drawings of Oedipus’s swollen feet. My sister had this godfather, Bootsy, who’d had polio and I was interested in him too; and then Byron and his club foot.” She did a series of drawings; a professor remarked that her drawings resembled film strips and suggested that she turn them into animations; that was the start.

She wonders now if her body was having a premonition of what was to come. She first noticed a limp when she was at the Slade. To begin with she thought it was the result of an uncomfortable pair of shoes that she had bought for the opening of her first show at the New Contemporaries in Manchester, but then she got the diagnosis. Since then the two things, her work and the illness, have progressed in tandem.

“I don’t know what I would be like if I didn’t have arthritis,” she says. “Obviously, I make slow work. I can’t take a step which is not painful. Sitting here talking to you is all right. But my ankles are now just bone on bone. I have no idea what life would be like if I wasn’t, you know, lame. The fact is,” she says, “you can’t but help work with the stuff that you are made of. *Antigone* is all about that. [The illness] is part of the genesis of what I do, but it is not the explanation. Which is important. Which is very important.”

She’d far rather talk about where she is up to with *Antigone* than her swollen ankles. She invented a new technique for it, which involves an adapted camera aperture she made with 3D printing; the aperture masks half of each frame of the film. For part of it, one half of each frame was filmed in Cornwall, the other in Wyoming at the eclipse.

“I can’t tell you how risky it was to take to film from Cornwall in February, not knowing what was on it, and put it back in a can and take it to Wyoming in August,” she says. “It could have gone catastrophically wrong. But the effect is really beautiful and surprising I think.”

She loves the idea that the direction of the film is somewhat in the lap of the gods. But does she always know deep down when she is on to something?

“Well, I just try to pursue blindness at all costs,” she says. Speaking of which, our lunch hour or so over, she turns her mind again to the pressing business of opening three exhibitions, each one bearing her name, in three of the nation’s most prestigious institutions, all at once.

“No pressure,” I say. She just smiles.

Tacita Dean: *Still Life* is at the National Gallery, London, and *Portrait* at the National Portrait Gallery, both from 15 March to 28 May. *Landscape* is at the Royal Academy, London, from 19 May to 12 August

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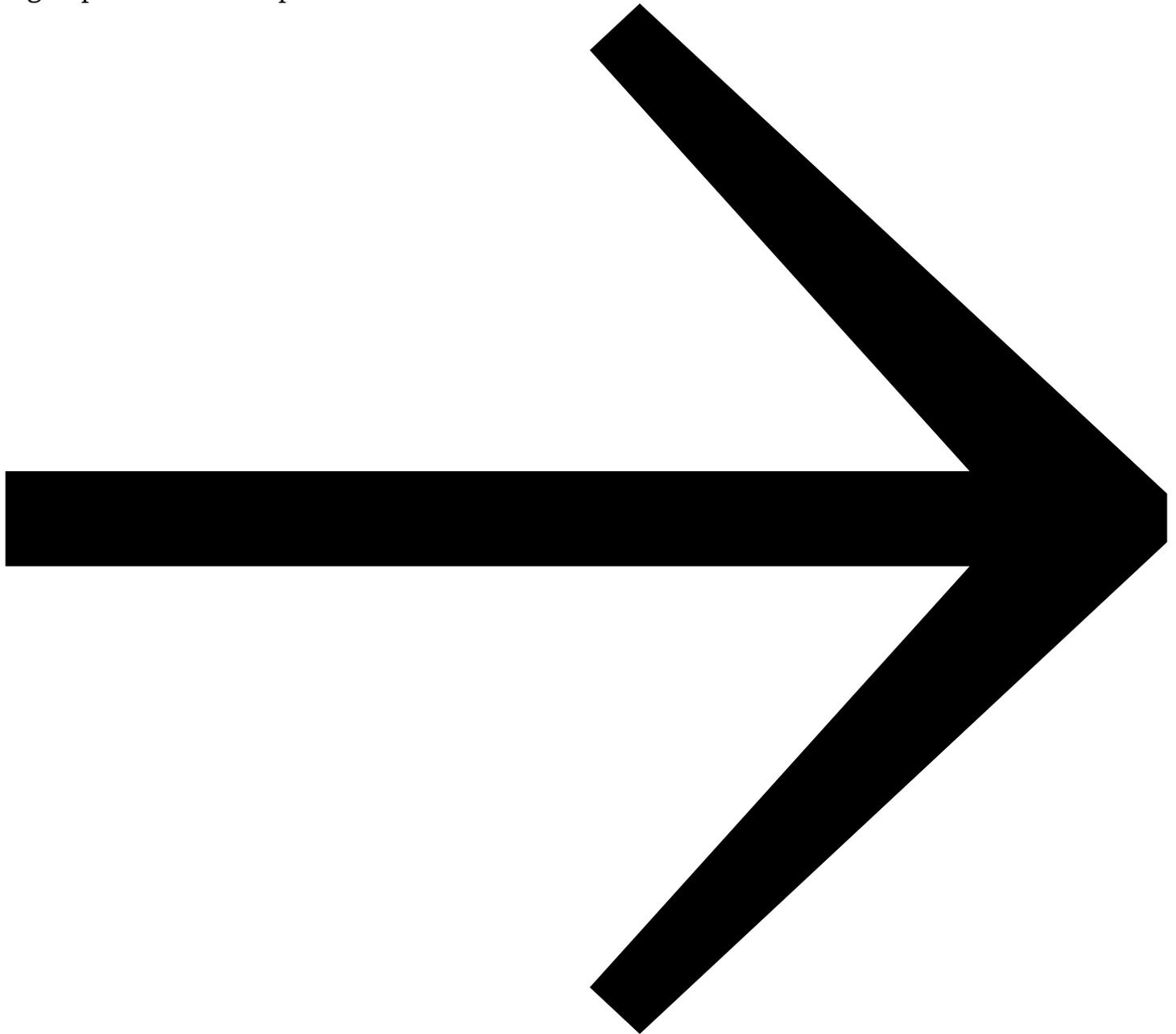
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