

Tacita Dean
Landscape, Portrait, Still Life

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Genres of Art and the Art of Genres: Tacita Dean's Triple Bill in London

Across near-concurrent exhibitions in three venues, Tacita Dean explored three genres of the visual arts: landscape at the Royal Academy, portraiture at the National Portrait Gallery, and still life at the National Gallery. This unprecedented collaboration between Dean and three leading art institutions celebrated her hybrid practice across genre and media. Working with film, photographs, painting, drawing, writing, curating, and collecting, Dean's art made possible a gamut of conversations with itself, its histories, and its self-representation.

Dean first emerged with the YBAs, moving to London in the same year as the RA's 'Sensation' exhibition opened. She exhibited at the 1995 Venice Biennale alongside the Chapman brothers, Gary Hume, and Sam Taylor-Wood, and was a Turner Prize nominee in 1998 for a film piece about the tragic figure of Donald Crowhurst, a round-the-world yachtsman, whose final duplicitous circumnavigation led to his probable suicide. Some of Dean's early work had involved feminist reinterpretations of cultural figures in both artistic and church traditions, such as her filmic tableaux of Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* in *The Story of Beard*, 1992, or *The Martyrdom of St Agatha (in several parts)*, 1994. In this century this artist and filmmaker has continued to be widely acclaimed, notably by feminists including Jeanette Winterson and Germaine Greer,¹ all of which has led to expectations which are not always fulfilled in these three exhibitions.

This was especially felt at the National Portrait Gallery, in the two streams of a single display consisting of some 50 photographs of the artist Cy Twombly's studio, and a collection of nine films paying homage to leading modern artists and writers. With the exception of the Ethiopian painter, Julie Mehretu (b.1970), the films concentrate their attention on eight well-established white male figureheads: Cy Twombly, Claes Oldenburg, Merce Cunningham, David Hockney, Michael Hamburger, Mario Merz, Sensaku Shigeyama, and Leo Steinberg. Dean is renowned for her long takes and non-determinative directorship and here these are combined with behind-scenes passages showing her subjects going about their business, the soundtrack picking up on mundane interactions and occasional spoken reflections as they move around, studio, pick up objects, or stare into the distance. The portraits created are viewed across more than one screen, and sometimes in the aperture divisions of one film, a technique of masking which Dean favours for the chance synchronicity between parallel scenes shot at different times. However, with nearly three hours of footage in all, the overbearing whirr of overlapping projectors, and above all the emphasis on the patriarchal canon and celebrity, the portraits confirm an indulgent gaze. Even the more sensitive response shown by Dean to the NPG's collection of miniature portraits, in her diminutive projection *His Picture in Little*, 2017, does not disturb the sense of a privileged peer clubhouse shared, in this case, with three actors who have played the role of Hamlet. That element of grace, rather than being 'delivered

¹ See Jeanette Winterson, 'Much Ado About Nothing', *The Guardian*, 29th September 2005; Germaine Greer, in *Tacita Dean: Recent Films and Other Works* (London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 2001), pp.40-41; and Greer, 'Boots', in Marina Warner et al., *Tacita Dean* (London: Phaidon, 2006), pp.103-111.

in the detail',² as Dean hoped for her films, seems missing in the differing ideological emphases implied by the acquisitive gaze of theatre viewers, documentary viewers, and Jacobean portrait painters.

For this viewer, the still life exhibition was less problematic. Grace in abundance can be found in the conversational arrangement of works, old and new, in the National Gallery's two-room space. Symbolic encounters seem to spring from each work and through the relationships between them, as, for example, between the painting by an unknown Italian artist, *The Head of St John the Baptist*, 1511, situated between Thomas Demand's photograph of his paper constructed interiors (*Daily #13*, 2011), and a large painting by Philip Guston (*Hat*, 1976). Formal comparison between them exposed a tantalisingly dynamic interpretative exchange. And in one of the walls featuring Dean's own work, showing representations of dead birds (at eye-level) and her back-projected film, high up the wall of a bird in full song (the delightfully named *Ear on a Worm*, 2017), we come close to Dean's desire for still life as a genre of '(e)scape', subverting the categories within which she is working.³

Dean is on occasion buoyed by biblical reference and its philosophical and theological possibilities. This can be most clearly felt in *Landscape* at the Royal Academy, which presents the largest body of her recent work. The one-hour film *Antigone*, 2018, is its culmination, a typically composite and loosely narrativistic plumbing of landscape as a pilgrim-traversed expanse. It proposes an imagined literary geography between two plays by Sophocles, in which the protagonists' relationship and fate are given fictional 'voice' by the literal landscapes of Bodmin Moor, Yellowstone Park, and the Mississippi riverside, as well as in scripted and unscripted scenes which steer the slow drama. The film's premise has personal resonance for Dean (her sister is called Antigone), and this catapults her subject into mythical and familial associations, which, perhaps inevitably, enables her to steer the film more firmly into a search for truth.⁴ Just as Dean's screenwriter Stewart Stern framed the film with a reference to the Israelites' 40 years in the desert,⁵ so the wilderness becomes the legible and inscribed page for Jesus's self-discovery in Dean's seven-panel photographic work *Quarantania*, 2018. Depicting the full face of the Mount of Temptation, near Jericho, its crevices and the brooding sky are scrawled with chalked words and phrases, such as 'a petramorphic scape', 'where are you JC?', and 'final temptation (parable of our times)'. A sense of divine quest pervades the reading of nature's patterns, writ large here and in her large and small chalk drawings, and in Dean's collections of four-and-more-leaf clovers. And it is in this sense that in all her genres and media Dean seems to be scripting a message, a way of realising and imbuing with significance one's own journey through and in the world.

² Writing in the catalogue for all three exhibitions, *Tacita Dean: Landscape, Portrait, Still Life* (London: Royal Academy Publications, National Portrait Gallery, and National Gallery, 2018), p.166.

³ *Ibid.*, p.9.

⁴ She refers in this sense to history painting as 'top in the traditional hierarchy of genres'. *Ibid.*, p.9.

⁵ Conversation with Stewart Stern', Sundance Screenwriting Lab, 1997, reproduced *ibid.*, pp.110-111. The transcript of Stern's words is read by Peter Mayer at the beginning of *Antigone*.