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Tacita Dean

Trial of the Finger: *Beautiful, Poetic and Meditative Journey*

Marian Goodman Gallery

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by Jody Zellen



In the book *Blind Folly (or How Tacita Dean Draws)*, published in conjunction with the exhibition *Tacita Dean: Blind Folly* at the Menil Collection (October – April 2024), curator Michelle White discusses the role of chance in Tacita Dean's works: specifically in relation to her drawings. In the book Dean states, "*working like this, just beneath my conscious level, requires an aspect of willful blindness.*" While not all of Dean's pieces are drawings per se, the relationship between the eye and the hand is core. Many of her drawings are "blind" — made without actually looking at the paper — as are some of her photographs, specifically images of the eclipse where it is too dangerous to look into the lens. Rather than shy away from not knowing what something will look like, Dean embraces it.

In addition to having a facile hand and a keen eye, Dean is versed in world history, literature and art criticism, and these different disciplines inform her artworks. The title of this exhibition, *Trial of the Finger*, comes from a criticism made by Dr. Samuel Johnson about the 17th century Metaphysical poets. As the press release states, "*He saw them as counting syllables ('trial of the finger') in their poetry on account of their abundant use of conceits rather than relying on a poem's musicality to the ear.*" References to fingers and ears are abundant in the works.

Marian Goodman's Los Angeles gallery is divided into discreet spaces and Dean takes advantage of both small and large rooms to exhibit a wide range of works. In the "Middle Gallery" are a suite of new photographs titled *Between the Years* in which she sequences five Polaroids together in a row. At the beginning and end of each quintet are images of isolated ears. Between them are other fragments of the human body — fingers, feet and hands — as well as images from nature, such as trees or fruit. These body fragments come from Dean's collection of artifacts. Some of the Polaroids are over-painted with gouache while others are double exposures. In Germany, the term *Between the Years* refers to the period between Christmas and New Years which is when Dean created these works. That said, it is hard not to think about the word "ear" nested in the last word of the title, as "ear" is between the "y" and the "s." In addition, Polaroid images are never a sure thing and the uncertainty in the process fits within Dean's methodology of embracing the unknown.

Throughout the years, Dean has also documented artists working in their studios. Among her subjects are the visual artists Mario Merz, Claes Oldenburg, David Hockney, Cy Twombly, and Julie Mehretu. These 16-mm film portraits capture intimate moments. Dean does not interfere or assert her presence, but rather objectively films them engaging in the throws of making. The latest film in this collection is *Sydney Felsen decorates an Envelope* (2025) shot just before Felsen passed away at the age of 99. In the fourteen-minute film, Felsen sits at a desk in his office and methodically decorates and then addresses a paper envelope. He carefully fills in the shape of a star with red, yellow and blue pencils. As Felsen creates, Dean's camera moves from him to the walls and desk, the details of the space give viewers a chance to get know something more about the dapperly dressed subject.

Moving from the rather intimate presentation of *Sydney Felsen decorates an Envelope* to the room-sized installation of *Geography Biography* (2023) offers a contrasting experience. *Geography Biography* consists of two side-by-side, large-scale film projections. Each is a separate collage, although at times they cohere. Dean describes the work as an accidental self-portrait as within each vertically formatted 35mm-film are stills from her postcard collection, outtakes from her super 8 and 16 mm works embedded within masks that allow for overlapping sequences of moving images. The result is a beautiful, poetic and meditative journey whose meaning is open ended. The noisy and visible apparatus that powers *Geography Biography* is placed behind a semi-circular wall and bench that mimics the curved projection surface.

In a nearby smaller room is the single channel projection *Paradise* (2021). This short film was originally created for *The Dante Project*, a London Royal Opera House production. Here, Dean created an abstract film in which bright colors burst in celestial formations in sync to a soundtrack by composer Thomas Adès. The film captures an experiment with pure light and color and was inspired by William Blake's watercolors illustrating Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

Beginning, or ending with a room of drawings takes viewers full circle. Many of these new works are abstractions. Some appear like cloud forms, while others recall the gestures of Abstract Expressionistic paintings and pieces by Cy Twombly that include snippets of scrawled text. Works like *Navalny* and *A Cloud for Marian* (all drawings 2026) were made by spraying white chalk onto found slate. *Linear B* and *Petit* are more ephemeral with light curvilinear and swirling gestures. These smaller works are presented in conjunction with *In Montem (he fell)*, a large tondo that is 96 inches in diameter. Here, Dean draws with white chalk on blackboard to create a mysterious and haunting image that connotes sea and sky simultaneously. While in previous exhibitions the landscape figured more prominently, in these works it is often suggested rather than carefully or realistically depicted. With this impressive and vast array of works, Dean explores a range of materials and media to examine people, places and things. Though often open ended, her captivating works resonate on multiple levels and stay in the viewer's memory long after leaving the gallery.

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