



Slowing **Time**

Natalie King talks with Tacita Dean

Tacita Dean is renowned for her 16mm films, drawings, photographs and audio recordings that explore time, chance and contingency. Born in 1965 in Canterbury, England, Dean moved to Berlin in 2000 where she continues to live today. Her film installation of Merce Cunningham was first presented at Dia: Beacon, New York in 2008. Natalie King interviewed her during her solo exhibition at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA) in Melbourne this year. Concurrently, she exhibited 14 films in Still Life at Fondazione Nicola Trussardi, Milan.



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NATALIE KING: *Yesterday, July 22, was the longest solar eclipse this century, visible in India though shrouded by clouds. It made me think about your film Diamond Ring (2002). Can you tell me about your interest in natural phenomena?*

TACITA DEAN: I think everyone has a passive interest in natural phenomena, but for me it became more active with the 1999 eclipse in Britain when I filmed Banewl on a dairy farm. I’m obviously interested in light and therefore the sun. An American friend came over for the eclipse and we were trying to look for the diamond ring and camera obscura effects. When it was overcast, we decided to go and see the next eclipse in Madagascar.

I was reading all about *The Green Ray*, visible in a little village in Morombe – it’s the last ray of the dying sun to refract and bend beneath the horizon, slower than the red or the yellow ray. Ever since I can remember, I’ve been trying to watch the sun set to see a green ray. In the end, that’s where I made the film *The Green Ray*. We were supposed to travel for three weeks around Madagascar but in fact we spent every night waiting to see the green ray.

Your practice has a lot to do with waiting, watching and observing. You studied painting and went to Slade School and yet now you work predominantly in film and photography.

For both undergraduate and post-graduate I was in the painting department at art school, but painting departments were pretty dysfunctional in those days. In my undergraduate I was making animation films. My focus was pictorial and I was drawing large storyboards. It was a very organic movement into film. I applied for film at the Royal College for animation but I didn’t get in. Then, I applied to do media at Chelsea and I didn’t get in. I applied to do painting at the Slade and I got in but I had to promise never to make a film. I think I was always deviant in that department because I just couldn’t make a singular painted image. I’ve never been able to do that.

Has sequencing always been important to you?

Yes, sequencing and serialisation. Even to this day I’m not very good at making a single image. It’s always one of a series or one of a set. My good friend from Glasgow was in the media department, which was in a geographically different part of the university. I spent a lot of time in her milieu. I got quite close to the media department and I wonder how much that has to do with how I ended up making a film at the Slade. Chance or contingency made it possible.

At the Slade, they moved into the old painting galleries at the Courtauld Institute with hessian walls and overhead lighting. I hated it so much that I isolated myself by working in the ticket office. For some reason, painting has always been my label – trained as a painter – but it’s not really true. I think my films are closer to painting than they are to cinema in the sense that they are about depictions more than they are about a vehicle for a narrative. In the Kodak factory, or with the nuns, I get myself into situations or persuade people to let me in by saying it’s a painting more than a film. Film frightens people because there is so much observation.

Your film Kodak (2006) has a lot of painterly qualities – it seems so viscous – especially the vivid pinks.

There’s nothing didactic imposed so it’s not a learning tool like a documentary. For me, there is a stronger relationship to landscape painting and representational painting than there is to anything that is pushing the narrative along. The narrative in *Kodak* is just the manufacture of film.

I am interested in the role of elderly men in many of your works like Merce Cunningham, Mario Merz and Michael Hamburger.

I must have some sort of father complex. Older men, for me, are more interesting. Mario Merz came about more literally because he had a strong resemblance to my father and I wanted to capture it. He was in San Gimignano with his wife Marisa and I was there too. One afternoon in the garden I had my camera and he chose how he wanted to be depicted.

With Michael Hamburger it was a commission for an exhibition about the author W.G. Sebald. His niece is my gallerist in London, so I had this connection to Sebald through Michael Hamburger through her. She told me that Michael Hamburger [Sebald’s friend and translator] collected apples. I go into all these projects solely blind. With Merce Cunningham it was slightly different because I didn’t know him. It’s about silence. I asked Merce to do a performance to John Cage’s 4’33”. It’s not like I have a kind of path and I know where I’m going. I don’t actually want to know, so it’s very important that I work just under the sort of conscious level.

I thought it was interesting that you chose to portray a choreographer in such a still way. Someone whose life is about movement and yet one becomes aware of imperceptible movements.

The beautiful thing is I didn’t know what Merce was going to do when I filmed him. I asked whether it was possible for him to do a performance, and I was told he was going to hold his pose, but I didn’t know how he was going to hold his pose. He called it a choreography; he called it *stillness* and I gave it the subtitle *In three movements*.

You have been based in Berlin since 2000, which is the city of ghosts, full of memorials and haunted by its past. In Die Regimentstochter (2005) you take up the Nazi history of Berlin with a suite of opera programs.

I found those programs in a flea market and I sat on them for a long time because I didn’t want to make a work about the Nazis. In the end, I actually did a show in St Ives called *Berlin Works*. In part I made it about Berlin in order to contextualise the opera programs, in order to show them for the first time. Of course they are also about what’s missing – the removal of the swastika.

The erasure of history and the past through these little apertures.

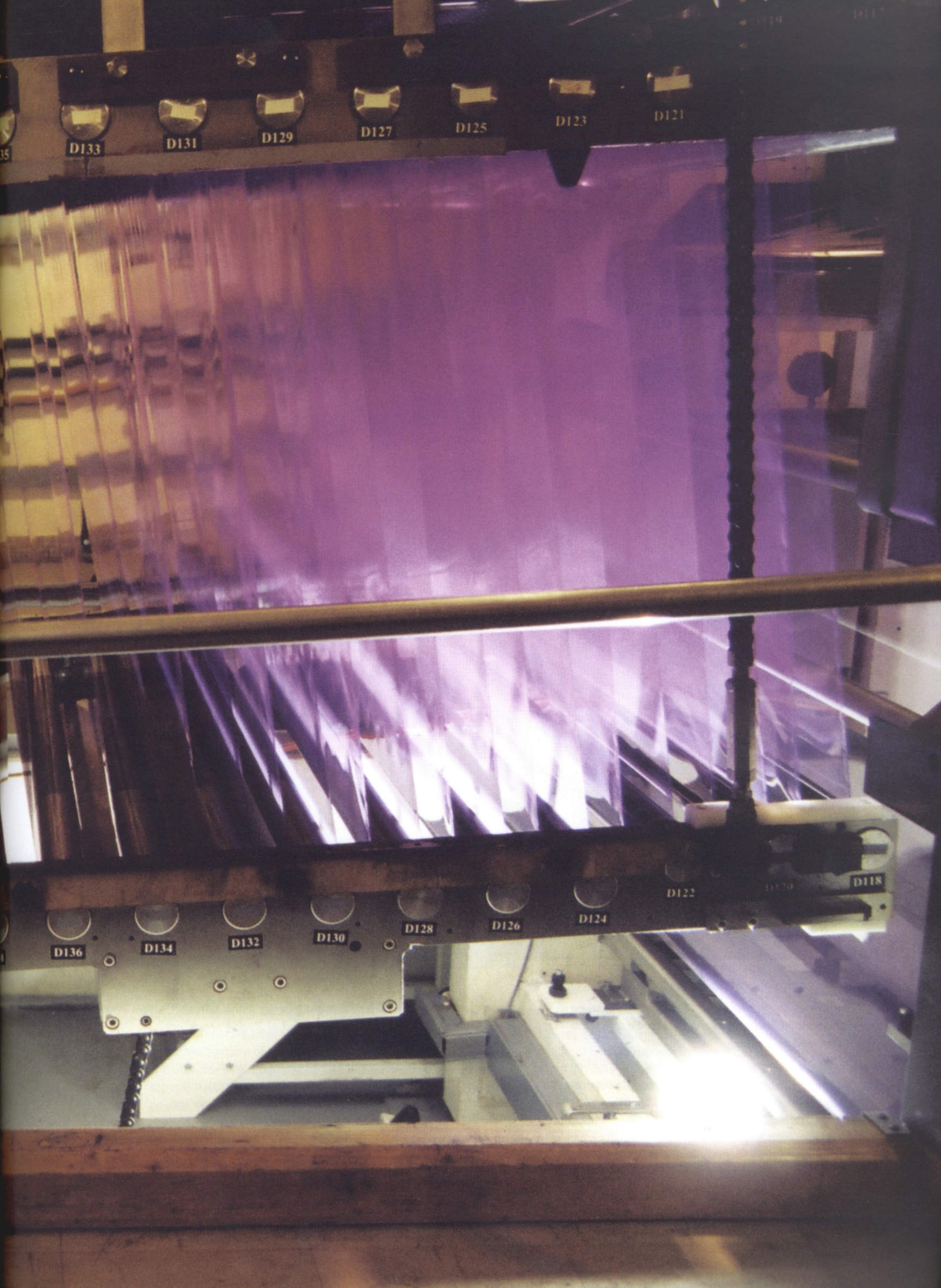
My first moment when I saw them, I realised they were found collages with great content, but they do work pictorially with the heads peeking through. It’s still illegal to show the swastika.

PREVIOUS PAGE
Merce Cunningham
performs
Stillness..., 2008
Location and
installation
photographs:
Michael
Vahrenwald
6 x 16mm colour
films, optical sound,
ca. 5 minutes each
Location and
installation
photographs
by Michael
Vahrenwald

FACING PAGE
Jochen Littkemann
*Abraham’s Oak,
Bottle Tree, King
Karri, Orange,
Painted Kotzsch
Trees & Found
Obsolescence*, 2009
White paint on
albumen print
46 x 40.5 x 4cm









At ACCA you placed the opera programs alongside Palast (2004), an abandoned building of the former East, which is like another form of erasure.

They were letting it fall apart and this is what I mean about working just under the conscious level. I filmed it just because I loved the way the cathedral opposite and the sun was reflected in the building.

I got a sense of the passage of time, yet it's unclear where you're positioned. You seem to be at a distance to the building.

I was filming from the pavement, looking up. The angles created a different perspective making it quite difficult to cut together, but the sound is the pavement and it's on the ground. That's why there is a split between the sound.

Can you discuss the idea of lament in your work, whether it's a lament for rare apples, or the end of Kodak stock, or condemned buildings?

I think it has that quality but I don't think my work is nostalgic. With *Kodak* I knew that it was condemned, but I didn't know at that point that they were going to close the whole factory. Neither did anyone who worked in it. They'd stopped making cinema film.

How did you get access at that exact point?

I was incredibly lucky. I just tried to get standard 16mm black and white film for my camera and they told me that they'd stopped manufacturing it. All film in Europe was manufactured in France. I had this idea that I would film the

PREVIOUS PAGE
AND ABOVE
Kodak, 2006
16 mm colour and b/w
film, optical sound,
44 minutes
Installation
photograph: Tom Bisig



factory that made film with obsolete black and white stock, but not knowing that actually they'd already closed down the manufacture of film. I had to book an interview with the director of Kodak and he said: 'It's finished. Kodak has stopped making film here. We just make it for x-rays. It's empty.' And I said: 'That's what interests me. Will you let me come down?' And it was partly because the French have a real love of art and this is how being an artist, not a filmmaker was very important.

They showed me these huge science blocks that were all empty. It was really sad because it's such profound knowledge. Film is a beautiful, incredible, magical thing; the exposure of light onto film. They showed me the film-packaging place and there were labels on the floor, there were sprockets, there

There is a sense of nature encroaching on him. He was trying to stave off this chaos. He had a back garden that he used to call the wilderness, whilst trying to grow apples despite this sort of entropy.

was everything all over the place. I had to try and scramble everybody and everything together in two weeks. Even in those intervening two weeks they said 'Look, we're going to tidy up the Kodak factory.' And I said, 'No, no, please wait. Wait.' My camera crew and I were absolutely fascinated by how this stuff that we'd worked with professionally all our lives was made. Likewise, these scientists had never seen it go into a camera. It was a sort of profound moment, both sides meeting each other. They told me that it was going to be very difficult to get into the emulsion section, which is the pink bit, because it's always pitch black.

That's one of the most exquisite parts, the fuchsia pink.

It's a great gift in a way. What it does show you is how spectacularly beautiful film is, and how dull paper is. It was a profound moment when the brown paper went through and then suddenly this incredible pink film came back. It was a matter of hours, minutes, days really. I could've missed that moment.

Once again, you positioned yourself at a distance, just quietly watching. I am interested in your vantage point. Even watching Michael Hamburger, you're looking at him through doorways or through the rustling of trees. You're set apart. What are your thoughts?

There's a truth in that, but the practical truth is that he was painfully self-conscious. In the end, I used the bits where he was unaware. There is a sense of nature encroaching on him. He was trying to stave off this chaos. He had a back garden that he used to call the wilderness, whilst trying to grow apples despite this sort of entropy.

I found this film very moving, especially when he became so animated talking about different varieties of apples. He seemed alone and bereft yet he had all these apples.

He wouldn't talk about himself and when he did it was strange, detached. When he started to talk about apples it was his way of talking about his biography.

Can you tell me about your interest in the author W.G. Sebald?

There's something about Sebald's writing that attracted me for years. I can't quite work it out. There's longing or something in there, that's his art. I've been a fan of his for a very, very long time. There are parallels. He collected photographs and he was interested in the document rather than documentary, and the fiction involved in the document. That's very much what my films are. They are documents but they are full of artifice. Fiction can make the truth better, or appear more truthful, sometimes. There are no short cuts with film so the labour is very intrinsic and this includes the sound. They are all filmed silent. You collect sound but it's very much a chaotic process of creation. I think there's a correlation with Sebald in the sense that his work is so densely researched. I just think he's a beautiful writer.

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