

English

TACITA DEAN BLIND FOLLY



“For years as an artist, I have allowed the making of my work to be open to interpretation and redirection by chance, and what I describe as contingency: events occurring through practical necessity that become instructive or defining in retrospect. Working like this, just beneath my conscious level, requires an aspect of willful blindness. It is uncomfortable at best and terrifying at its worst and necessitates a private belief system—faith that something will inevitably rise to the surface...”

Tacita Dean

Spanning three decades of work, from sweeping chalk landscapes on blackboards to fleeting celestial phenomena on film, this exhibition presents the timely implications of how Tacita Dean draws. The artist approaches drawing as an indeterminate journey of fate and folly, chance and medium, and as an urgent response to our culturally, technologically, and ecologically unstable moment.

Dean calls her overpainted photographs of trees “portraits.” They include ancient oaks and yews in England, such as in *Beauty*, 2006; jacarandas growing in Los Angeles, as in *Purgatory (3rd Cornice)*, 2021; and Japanese cherry trees kept alive as long as a millennium, braced by crutches and supports, as in *Sakura (Totsube)*, 2024. In these works, she outlined the foliage with paint or colored pencil, isolating the powerful trees from the background with thousands of distinct marks. According to Dean, the act of drawing offers her “proximity to even the tiniest and most inaccessible of branches on these mighty trees.”

Dean’s Blackboards are made with ordinary schoolroom materials: sticks of white chalk and panels covered with blackboard paint. Their massive size contrasts with the artist’s drawn lines, a virtuosic application of dust and carefully made erasures that evoke the topographic depth of and sparkling light on formations in a constant state of change. *The Wreck of Hope*, 2022, is of a melting iceberg, an ancient wonder on the verge of elimination. Like Dean’s unfixed chalk marks, it teeters on erasure. *The Montafon Letter*, 2017, is based on an account of a fatal 17th-century avalanche in the Austrian Alps. As the story goes, a second avalanche buried a priest officiating on the site of the casualties. A third torrent of snow unearthed him. Dean says the tale of survival offers “hope that a last avalanche

The Wreck of Hope

August 2022



will uncover us,” a statement that magnifies her belief in miracles, faith, and chance.

In the Blackboards, Dean often adds handwritten text. It can be hard to read and may fade into the landscape. She sometimes writes the date, the location where she is working, or the name of someone she is thinking about as she draws in the studio. For the artist, these notes help to mark time. They are about her presence in the work’s creation—small, human touches that contrast with the vast and inhospitable terrains.

Through various references, *T&I*, 2006, is about the struggle that comes with the creative process, a theme found throughout Dean’s art. Here, she used a flea market photograph depicting a romantic landscape that reminded her of the coast of West Penwith in Cornwall, England. She combined that image with text related to the tragic, medieval love story of Tristan and Isolde and the language of alchemy, along with fragmented lines from the elegiac poem “The Thermal Stair,” by the Scottish modernist W.S. Graham, about the death of his friend, the painter Peter Lanyon.

Risk-taking is at the forefront of Dean’s work, which she makes by letting her mediums and their limitations dictate the results. In *Delfern Lightning Drawing*, 2023, Dean removed layers of dry ink from a sheet of now-outmoded industrial carbon paper. She said she discovered that erasing thin lines with a sharp stylus pressed through tracing paper produced forms that resemble bolts of lightning emerging from a nocturnal sky. The drawing of the meteorological phenomenon, formed “blind” out of the darkness by chance, is thus as much about the inky material as it is about the revelation of an image.

Tacita Dean: Blind Folly presents many of the artist's earliest drawings and numerous examples on found surfaces, such as vintage postcards, steam locomotive windows, and sepia-toned albumen prints. Dean does not sketch on an empty sheet of paper and often conceives work after she comes across unexpected supports. Her drawings of clouds, for example, are on found school slates. She made these works by spraying liquid chalk on the surface. After it dried, she manipulated the dust with her fingers or a paintbrush, removing and smudging the chalk. As she guided the white powder, mental recollections, not photographs, helped her to identify the moment when the contours of the image emerged. *Telomere 1–4, 2023*, is a set of four prints based on Dean's photographs of a metal sheet used as a ramp at her Paris gallery. It had a complex set of grooves and lines on its enameled surface—a found drawing. Dean transferred her images of the ramp to a gravure plate and augmented the network of lines with hand-drawn marks to produce the final prints.

The American artist Cy Twombly is a source of inspiration for Dean. In their work, both artists exhibit an affinity for history, disappearing things, poetry, and drawing in the dark. In this exhibition are photographs she took in Twombly's studio in Gaeta, Italy. In the hallway, a group of new drawings made with smudged lines on green slates is loosely based on the patterns in photographs of an eclipsed sun that Dean made in Texas and is also inspired by her residency at the Menil Collection's Cy Twombly Gallery in the spring of 2024.

The title of the photogravure *More or Less, 2011*, comes from Twombly's response to a question Dean asked him. After recalling his anxieties around making art as a young artist, he said that his concerned mother would ask why he continued to paint. Dean then asked, "Does painting make you happy now?"

He responded: “More or less.” The print is equally ambiguous. It dances between rigidity and disintegration, calm and discord, and like so many of Dean’s works, these dichotomies celebrate the beauty of unexpected consequences in an unstable world.

Tacita Dean (b. Canterbury, England, 1965) studied at Falmouth School of Art and the Slade School of Fine Art, London. The Hugo Boss Prize winner has worked to preserve photochemical film and was a founding member of savefilm.org. In 2018, her career retrospective was shown concurrently in three venues in London: the National Gallery, the National Portrait Gallery, and the Royal Academy of Art. Dean lives and works in Berlin and Los Angeles.

Michelle White, Senior Curator

This text is adapted from the book *Blind Folly or How Tacita Dean Draws*, available at the Menil Bookstore.

To view a selection of the artist’s 16mm films, visit the [film gallery](#) on the opposite side of the building.

Cover: *Beauty* (detail), 2006. Gouache on gelatin silver print mounted on paper, 141 × 147 in. (358.1 × 373.4 cm). San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Purchase through a gift of Raoul Kennedy in memory of Patricia A. Kennedy. © Tacita Dean. Photo: Tenari Tuatagaloa. Interior: *The Wreck of Hope* (detail), 2022. Chalk on blackboard, 144 1/8 × 288 3/16 in. (366 × 732 cm). Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris/Los Angeles. Image courtesy of the artist, Frith Street Gallery, London, and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris/Los Angeles. © Tacita Dean. Photo: Fredrik Nilsen Studio

Tacita Dean: Blind Folly is curated by Michelle White, Senior Curator, The Menil Collection.

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PUBLIC PROGRAMS

All events take place in the main building unless otherwise noted.

LECTURE: George Baker: Drawing According to Tacita Dean
Copresented with University of Houston Art History Program
Friday, November 1, 7–8 p.m.

MUSIC: DACAMERA Stop, Look, and Listen!
Saturday, November 9, 3–4 p.m.

CURATOR TALK: Michelle White
Sunday, December 8, 3–3:30 p.m.

CONVERSATION AND FILM SCREENING: Saving Cinema
Thursday, January 16, 7–9 p.m.

BOOK LAUNCH: Tacita Dean, *Why Cy*
Sunday, February 9, 11 a.m.–1 p.m.
Cy Twombly Gallery

ARTIST TALK: Tacita Dean in conversation with Thomas Adès and Sarah Rothenberg
Copresented with DACAMERA
Monday, February 10, 7:30–8:30 p.m.

All programs are free and open to everyone.
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Exhibition dates
October 11, 2024–April 19, 2025