



Tacita Dean, *Telomere 2*, 2023, Direct- and Photogravure, with colour and screenprint on Somerset White Satin 300g, 140 x 140 cm. Courtesy of the artist and BORCH Editions, Copenhagen



Memory itself

Tacita Dean's *Geography Biography* exhibition — who recently exhibited in Paris with another show opening in Sydney — powerfully engages with the personal and the global, writes Kirrily Hammond.

Occasionally I stop to contemplate my surroundings and consider that my daily journey home is entirely reliant on my existing memory of place—such as the unconscious knowledge of what lies around the corner, or at the end of the street. What if we were to forget that vital sequence of location memories and couldn't find our way home? What if those memories were displaced or lost? What if a lifetime of details, sensations and experiences were scrambled? We are, after all, the product of a lifetime's accumulation of experiences and although we can usually recall certain

points of our life, we are only rarely able to relive at will whole passages with any degree of fidelity. Details of memories are often triggered by an association with something quite unconnected and unexpected. At times our hold on memories seems at best fragile, if not tenuous.

Tacita Dean's film *Geography Biography* 2023, commissioned for her exhibition bearing the same name, is an accumulation of a lifetime of memories and experiences. In this work Dean has created a diptych with two portrait-

format 35 mm films which act as moving collages. The work combines still images from postcards collected from around the world, with excerpts and outtakes of films she has produced, dating back to her student days in the late 1980s. The films are collaged within the still images in small, mostly circular windows in beautiful, serendipitous compositions. The moving images often align in unexpected precision with an assortment of historical postcard landscapes. Seen together, the film presents personal memories within global histories, which Dean calls an 'accidental self-portrait.'¹

(above)
Tacita Dean, *Summer Memory*, 2023, chromatic monoprints on eight blank vintage postcards, 9 x 14 cm, each.

(right)
Tacita Dean, *Summer Memory (detail)*, 2023, chromatic monoprint on blank vintage postcard, 9 x 14 cm

Courtesy of the artist, Gemini G. E. L (Los Angeles), Marian Goodman Gallery (New York/Paris/Los Angeles) and Frith Street Gallery (London).

Photography: Aurélien Mole, Courtesy of the Pinault Collection.



The exhibition catalogue focuses on this one key work and is composed entirely of film stills, with accompanying descriptions of the sources from which the films were made. In the texts Dean recounts details of the postcard images, as well as the technical specifications of the films – usually super 8 or 16mm, the person behind the camera, the time, the place, as well as the subject matter. The whole catalogue reads like an annotated family photo album in which Dean describes family and friends, memories of experiences during trips abroad, and even the ideas behind her first films from when she was still an art student. While these anecdotes provide fascinating background stories to the inspiration of this and other works in her oeuvre, they also offer far more information than could otherwise be gleaned from watching the films. Most of the images and film excerpts are details of larger works and at times they are reduced to abstract marks whose meaning and sources could only be deciphered by the artist. Dean loads the films with dense layers of information, with personal sources and meanings that are all but impenetrable to the exhibition viewer. Yet the films remain compelling. There is an overall warm, nostalgic aesthetic that unifies the disparate elements, and the absence of complete

narratives enables the viewers to connect with the work on their own terms, with their own memories and associations.

The film was shown as part of the exhibition *Tacita Dean, Geography Biography* at the Bourse de Commerce – Pinault Collection, Paris. This grand space, formerly the city's stock exchange, was recently transformed by Japanese architect Tadao Ando to exhibit contemporary art. The building retains its historical framework, including a vast panoramic mural from 1889 that surrounds the central glass dome. The mural depicts the development of modernity in France through trade and commerce with countries around the world. It has a dominating presence in the space which affected Dean; she described it as the 'violence of imperial extraction as triumphant acquisition in all four compass points of the world.'² Her response as an artist from an 'imperialist nation' was to draw on the images from around the world that she has collected over the years and recontextualize them within her own personal narrative.

To exhibit her film, an enclosed circular pavilion was constructed beneath the mural, featuring a central platform on which two 35mm projectors were mounted. The platform slowly rotated,

enabling the films to be projected around the interior walls. Visitors needed to follow the films as they slowly moved around the space, sometimes obscuring the views of other visitors as they relocated to better vantage points of the perpetually moving images. The film and its installation seem to mimic the process of memory itself—fleeting memories are montaged together, and our subjective perspective of them is sometimes obstructed or distracted by present circumstances. It will be interesting to see how the work is exhibited at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney when it is shown there in December, without the all-pervading presence of the panoramic mural overhead.

At the beginning of the catalogue, Tacita Dean dedicates the exhibition to two lost friends—the first, a LA book dealer Dagny Janss Corcoran, who died unexpectedly. The second, actor Julian Sands, who became lost whilst trekking in the mountains outside of Los Angeles, and never returned. Dean would light a candle in her studio each day of his absence in the hope that he would be found. These occurrences were the backdrop to the gestation phase and development process of the series of four large prints titled *Telomere 1-4* that also featured in the exhibition.



(opposite)

Tacita Dean, *Small Sakura Study (Jindai I)*, 2022, colour pencil on matte silver gelatin paper, 296 x 382 cm. Photography: Simon Hanzer

(left)

Tacita Dean, *The Wreck of Hope (detail)*, 2022, chalk on blackboard, 366 x 732 cm. Photography: Fredrik Nilsen Studio

(top)

Tacita Dean, *The Wreck of Hope*, 2022, chalk on blackboard, 366 x 732 cm. Photography: Florent Michel

(above)

Tacita Dean, *The Wreck of Hope (detail)*, 2022, chalk on blackboard, 366 x 732 cm. Photography: Fredrik Nilsen Studio

Courtesy of the artist, Marian Goodman Gallery (New York/Paris/Los Angeles) and Frith Street Gallery (London).

(right)
View of Tacita Dean,
Geography Biography, 2023
Photography: Florent Michel

(below)
Tacita Dean, *Sakura Study (Taki I)*,
2022, colour pencil on chromogenic
print on Fuji Velvet paper mounted
on paper, 40.8 x 58 cm.
Courtesy of the artist, Marian Goodman
Gallery (New York/Paris/Los Angeles)
and Frith Street Gallery (London).
Photography: Simon Hanzer.

(opposite)
The Dante Project,
The Royal Ballet © 2021 ROH.
Photography: Andrej Uspenski

Images courtesy of the
Pinault Collection.



Dean found the word 'telomere,' which are the sections at the end of a chromosome, when she searched 'attrition through accumulation' on the internet. Telomeres get shorter with each cell division and as we age. Her largely abstract, gestural prints, *Telomere 1-4*, consist of many layers of accumulated marks that are visual and physical markers of the passage of time. The prints were developed over the course of more than two years with the Copenhagen print studio Borch Editions. Tacita Dean visited the workshop several times and was in regular communication about the prints' development from her Berlin and Los Angeles studios.

The project began with Dean sending her ideas, which were jotted down in the form of sketches, photographs and found images, all collaged together. They provided Niels Borch Jensen and master printer Tom Jennions with a starting point from which they could suggest ideas about possible printing techniques to use, which would best capture the look and feel of these initial sketches. From there, numerous iterations and proofs were made to test different mark-making, printing methods and colour combinations.

Dean describes *Telomere 1-4* as a 'found mark project,' in which she traced, copied, and accumulated random marks over an extended period. She was perhaps searching for a way to communicate

layers of experience and the natural attrition that can accompany that experience. In the end, the base layer for each print became a photogravure image of a metal ramp found in the artist's gallery in Paris. It had an aged patina of scratches and indentations from years of use, and provided the perfect random marks that Dean was looking for. She then layered these marks with hand-drawn gestural lines and personal iconography, which were reproduced on a second plate utilising photogravure and direct gravure. The final layer of colour motifs and marks was created using screen printing and the glossy ink appears to float on the surface, in contrast to the embedded ink of the gravure layers. The marks accumulate throughout the series of four, so that the overall compositions intensify and become progressively more abstract.

Launching at the Palais Garnier in Paris at the same time as the exhibition, was the ballet *The Dante Project*, for which Tacita Dean was commissioned to create the designs and costumes. The ballet was inspired by Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* (1307-1321) with music by Thomas Adès and choreography by Wayne MacGregor and marked the 700th anniversary of the poet's death. Dean's white on black drawing of an inverted mountain range was the striking backdrop to the performance. She also created a related ten-metre print, made in eight parts, titled *Inferno 2021*, which depicts the mountain range where Dante and





Virgil descend into Hell. Dean's found source material for both works was a series of nineteenth century photographs of a mountainous panorama.

The exhibition at Bourse de Commerce featured another print series of a completely different nature – a set of monotypes on found plain postcards titled *Summer Memory 2023*. These works are celebratory in their brightly coloured abstraction and draw the viewer in to enjoy their spontaneity on an intimate scale.

In contrast, the slow majesty of a huge cherry blossom tree in all its splendour is depicted in *Sakura (Jindai I)*. At nearly 2000 years old, the tree has lived through an almost unimaginable passage of history in Japan. Its age and fragility are evident in its grand scale and the myriad of wooden struts

that support its branches. These struts are a clear attempt to counter the weight of growth, to prevent natural attrition. In Dean's work, everything surrounding the tree is shaded a dusky pink and a closer inspection reveals that the photograph has been hand-coloured with pencil. This painstaking halo of pink subdues the noise of the tree's contemporary context, setting it almost outside of time, whilst highlighting the beauty of the transient period in which the blossoms are in full bloom.

The theme of transience is continued in the seven-metre chalk drawing, *The Wreck of Hope 2022*, which depicts an enormous iceberg. It is easy to get lost in the detail of this work and appreciate the sheer weight of ice that seems to emerge from the black background. It references Caspar David Friedrich's sublime painting

with the same title, also known as *The Sea of Ice*. Dean's iceberg towers over the viewer and yet the inherent vulnerability of a chalk drawing on blackboard is palpable, and clearly analogous to the climate change reality we currently face.

Dean describes why and when she first began to draw with chalk on blackboard (as an art student back in 1991), in the backstory of one of the super 8 films in *Geography Biography*. In this exhibition the evolution of Tacita Dean's practice can be traced through the details, the outtakes and the anecdotes.

Throughout her practice, Tacita Dean has consistently maintained a preference for analogue techniques; for 35 mm films, for photogravure prints, for drawing in chalk. The materiality of these techniques

gives the works a tangible connection to the past, as well as sense of authenticity and a richness that is difficult to attain otherwise. There is a poignant connection between the fragility of a 35 mm film winding through a projector, or a drawing on blackboard, with the fragility of the memories and nature which they depict, and ultimately the fragility of life itself. In gathering the discarded film excerpts, the long-forgotten postcards, and the marks accumulated over years of use, *Geography Biography* becomes a self-reflective exhibition which, as Dean says, 'is the material testament of my own life lived.'³

Tacita Dean, Geography Biography, was at the Bourse de Commerce – Pinault Collection, Paris (24 May-11 September)
The exhibition *Tacita Dean* is at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 8 December-3 March.

(above left)

Tacita Dean at the vernissage at the Bourse de Commerce, Pinault Collection, Paris.
© David Atlan.
Photography: David Atlan

(above)

Installation of *Telomere and Sakura (Jindai I)*.
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Photography: Aurélien Mole

(top right)

The Pavillon de la Rotonde at the Bourse de Commerce.
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Photography: Aurélien Mole

Images courtesy of the Bourse de Commerce - Pinault Collection.

Notes

1. Tacita Dean, *Geography Biography* exhibition catalogue, Bourse de Commerce, Paris and Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 2023.
2. Op. Cit.
3. Op. Cit.

Kirril Hammond is an Australian artist and curator based in Copenhagen.

