



Title

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About the author(s)

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Cover image: **Fig. 1** *Sakura (Totsube)*, by Tacita Dean. 2024. Coloured pencil on Forma matte silver gelatin photograph mounted on paper, 2.9 by 4 m. (Courtesy the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London, and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, Paris and Los Angeles; exh. Menil Collection, Houston).

Tacita Dean: Blind Folly

by Chris Townsend • 14.03.2025

The first major museum survey of Tacita Dean (b.1965) in the United States takes its title from the artist's fondness for allowing her chosen media to create chance outcomes. However, although the condition of 'blindness' here implies a step into the dark – an ignorance of what the finished work might become – the artist's use of 'folly' should be not necessarily be understood to imply 'whimsy'. Foolishness, in pre-modern societies, was a useful corrective to authority – one that was institutionalised in the figure of the jester and the time of carnival. The notion of folly, therefore, allows Dean to critique the ambitions of post-Enlightenment technologies, and even the aspirations of the modern episteme itself. For as much as photography and film are crucial technologies for Dean, she also works critically against their governing principles.

Curated by Michelle White, Senior Curator at the Menil Collection, Houston, the exhibition pursues thematic strands that weave in and out of Dean's oeuvre. In the opening room, Dean's 'portraits' of trees **FIG.1** introduce vital and persistent issues of scale, tonality, temporality and substitution. In this series, the artist has worked over photographs in gouache and pencil, her myriad marks gestures of prolonged engagement with the 'instantaneous' image. *Beauty* **FIG.2**, in particular, evokes William Henry Fox Talbot's photographs of trees from the 1840s. This early exploration of the arboreal was predicated upon stillness and the long exposure times required by light-sensitive papers. The aspiration of photography as a technology of industrial modernity was containment – whether of nature or 'otherness'. If the photograph can be understood as an act of taking, of fixing a subject both in time and as an object of knowledge, then Dean's practice becomes one of 'taking back' – something made explicit in the tree portraits, where the gestural overwrites the mechanistic. It is a reclamation of human relationships with nature, a recovery of nature as mystery, as strangeness and as beauty – a beauty that is better apprehended once the containing structures of science and technology are elided. Such a reclamation is emphasised by the scale of Dean's large portraits, which return their subjects from the miniature to the majestic.

Questions of size and substitution also dominate Dean's landscapes and 'cloudscapes', which are drawn in chalk on blackboard. *The Wreck of Hope* **FIG.3** depicts a melting glacier, and yet it is difficult to identify which skilfully rendered surfaces

represent frozen water and which signify rock. The extraordinary cracks and cavities bear testimony to the agency of natural forces that far exceed human capacities. At the same time, they recall the detail and strange forms of minute subjects exposed and magnified in electron microscope photography. The vastness of the image is so overwhelming that it becomes impossible to place it within any ordering structures or technologies, or even to ultimately decide 'what' it is. This excess of the natural over the ontic – in other words, the work's sublimity – is reinforced by Dean's use of writing on the blackboard. Far from being the basis of pedagogical instruction, here text is an often almost-invisible, fragmentary and ephemeral reminder of temporary and overshadowed human presence.

This interplay between the human, or human-scaled, and the natural is achieved in another way in *Delfern Tondo* **FIG.4**, which is made with chalk and chalk dust sprayed onto Formica. Although the circular form immediately invokes pre-Enlightenment painting, the subject-matter, despite its materiality, more closely resembles a photograph. Moreover, the subject itself is not immediately evident: are the nebulous forms clouds? As a transient entity that ceases to exist at the very moment of its arrest, can a cloud truly be fixed in time and space? The billowing forms of *Delfern Tondo* seem to have been extracted from a Baroque painting, bereft of the expected putti and elaborate ornamentation. Instead, here they are monochromatic and magnified, empty and unfixable either by fantasies of Classical myth or the realities of science.



Fig. 1 *Sakura (Totsube)*, by Tacita Dean. 2024. Coloured pencil on Forma matte silver gelatin photograph mounted on paper, 2.9 by 4 m. (Courtesy the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London, and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, Paris and Los Angeles; exh. Menil Collection, Houston).

Dean adopts a rather different perspective to Enlightenment painters on the relationship between the human and the natural worlds in Antiquity, one that focuses on the pre-Classical relation of man to nature. Her view is derived from Cy Twombly (1928–2011), perhaps the most important single influence on her practice.¹ Although Twombly was preoccupied with the largely lost Classical culture of the Mediterranean, in some of his work one can almost hear the restless spirits of the Ancient world whispering to one another. The governing spiritual presence, or loss, in Dean's work, is Pan as a god of nature, rather than the later Olympian deities, and far less the Judaeo-Christian trinity. Twombly's influence and the shared concern is made clear in *The great god Pan is dead* FIG.5. The title itself, taken from a line in Plutarch's *Moralia* (c.100 CE; properly ascribed to Pseudo-Plutarch) has more than a touch of Twombly about it. Pan is a medium between humanity and a holistic conception of nature that resists organising structures – he was not worshipped in temples, for example, but in sacred groves – and the announcement of the god's death is understood, allegorically, as marking the triumph of Judeo-Christian culture.

In much of her practice, Dean attends to visual technologies; however, one of the most impressive pieces in this exhibition is one that eschews a critique of the optical and instead addresses the aural. *Magnetic Aviary: Crows, Raptors, Fowl, Game, Water Birds, Ornamental, Vulture, Seabirds* (1996) FIG.6 consists of the names of birds written in chinagraph pencil on magnetic sound-recording tape. As the title makes clear, this work concerns ontology: the naming and ordering of nature. It also considers the role of technology in that project, and its failure. The bird song endures, whereas the recording tape – already obsolete – has a limited life before it decays. Regardless, here it is unplayable, as only one side of the tape has sprocket holes. The viewer is left only with the imagination of bird song, wherein the distinctions between species seem arbitrary. Adjacent to this work is *T&I* FIG.7: a grandiose perspective of the sun breaking through cloud over a river estuary and hills. The image is recorded across a grid of twenty-five fragments, which attempt to stitch the event back together retrospectively, but do not quite succeed. Into the panels are woven fragmentary texts from the medieval tale of Tristan and Iseult and the poem 'The Thermal Stair' (1964) by the Scottish Neo-romantic W.S. Graham. This attempt at sublimity began, however, in a perfect model of the picturesque: a small photograph found in a flea market.



Fig. 2 Installation view of *Tacita Dean: Blind Folly* at the Menil Collection, Houston, 2024–25, showing *Beauty*, by Tacita Dean. 2006. Gouache on black-and-white fibre-based photograph mounted on paper, 3.6 by 3.7 m. (Photograph Paul Hester).

Repeatedly, *Blind Folly* emphasises the inadequacy of the ordering technologies of the Enlightenment to fully encompass nature, and seeks through gestural making to introduce a differently mediated relationship between the human and the natural world. Just as her mentor Twombly yearns through gestural traces for a lost, Antique world, so Dean conveys a longing for ‘natural’ and ‘spiritual’ relationships that art can never reclaim from the maelstrom of modernity.



Fig. 3 Installation view of *Tacita Dean: Blind Folly* at the Menil Collection, Houston, 2024–25, showing *The Wreck of Hope*, by Tacita Dean. 2022. Chalk on blackboard, 3.6 by 7.3 m. (Photograph Paul Hester).



Fig. 4 Installation view of *Tacita Dean: Blind Folly* at the Menil Collection, Houston, 2024–25, showing *Delfern Tondo*, by Tacita Dean. 2024. Chalk and spray chalk on blackboard paint on Formica, diameter 3 m. (Photograph Paul Hester).



Fig. 5 *The great god Pan is dead*, by Tacita Dean. 2021. Collage on vintage index card, framed 32.4 by 32.4 by 4.1 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London, and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, Paris and

Los Angeles; photograph Alex Yudzon; exh. Menil Collection, Houston).



Fig. 6 Detail of *Magnetic Aviary: Crows, Raptors, Fowl, Game, Water Birds, Ornamental, Vulture, Garden, Seabirds* (1996), by Tacita Dean. 1998. 16mm magnetic track each with the sound of a bird, 9 parts. (Private collection; courtesy the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London, and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, Paris and Los Angeles; photograph John Berens; exh. Menil Collection, Houston).



Fig. 7 *T&I*, by Tacita Dean. 2006. Photogravure on paper, 25 parts, overall dimensions 3.4 by 4.3 m. (© Tacita Dean; Museum of Modern Art, New York; photograph Tom Bisig; exh. Menil Collection, Houston).

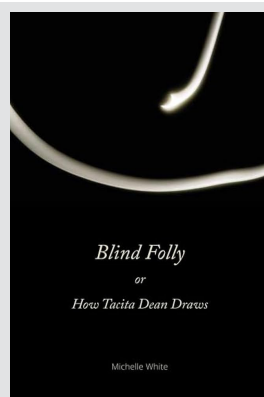
Exhibition details

Tacita Dean: Blind Folly

Menil Collection, Houston

11th October 2024–19th April 2025

About this book



Blind Folly or How Tacita Dean Draws

By Michelle White

Menil Collection, Houston, and MACK,
London, 2024

ISBN 978-1-915743-78-7

Footnotes

- 1** Dean has published an artist's book based on a residency she undertook in the Cy Twombly Gallery at the Menil Collection, Houston, see T. Dean: *Why Cy*, London 2025. See also T. Dean: *Base Matter and Uncommon Solvent: Drawings, Prints, Collages, and Objects 1988–2024*, London 2024.

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