

Portrait of Tacita Dean, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.



TACITA DEAN with Jonathan T.D. Neil

It was mostly by chance that I happened to be in New York City for just one day on September 11, 2021. This afforded me two unique opportunities: one was to view Tacita Dean's assortment of impressive new work that had just opened at Marian Goodman earlier in the week (on which more in a moment); the second was to visit the World Trade Center site, a place I had never chosen to visit in the 15 years that I lived in New York following the events of September 11, 2001.

Tacita Dean
Marian Goodman Gallery
September 7 – October 23, 2021

On that morning I was teaching an early morning class at Columbia University ("Logic and Rhetoric," not the most stimulating content for a pre-9 a.m. start) and emerged at its end into a changed world. I stood in line at a payphone on College Walk to check in on members of my family. I took out the maximum amount of cash I could at an ATM. I walked from 116th street to 49th, where I lived at the time; friends came over, and together we watched the same footage as the rest of the globe. In the days that followed I went to vigils at our local fire station, and dropped off food and drinks for the crews that were headed downtown. I spent time with friends and family. But I never went to ground zero—not for the purpose of going to ground zero.

20 years later, in New York City for one day only, I woke up as early as west-coast jet lag would allow and went for a run down the West Side Highway. I was not paying attention to the time, and I did not have a destination in mind. But after 20 minutes of dodging strollers and dogs on the bike path, I found myself across West Street from the Trade Center site. It was about 8:40am. I rested against a bollard next to the street and caught my breath. I was joining a disorganized crowd, with no focused attention and nowhere really to look—just across, and up, at a blue and empty sky.

At 8:46am our world went quiet. For the next 20 minutes, and without much success, I fought back tears.

A few hours later I was in midtown watching Luchita Hurtado tell Julie Mehretu about the loss of a child to polio. Hurtado herself passed just over a year earlier at the age of 99, but in the film that Dean made of the two painters talking, Hurtado is very much alive and rescuing her memories from the abyss by gifting them to her interlocutor, Dean's cameras, and to us. The losses here are domestic, and individual; tragic rather than traumatic, in their sense of inevitability, yet nonetheless they are suspended in Dean's film,

and so in time, between having happened and having yet to.

"Most of us reside in purgatory," Dean tells me reassuringly in our conversation. We're talking about the new series of works that she made in conjunction with *The Dante Project* at The Royal Ballet, the largest of which (in size, not number) is *Purgatory* (2021), comprised of five large composite and hand-colored photographs of jacaranda trees in Los Angeles. Literalness aside, Dean was more right than I initially realized. We all reside between two states, at some distance in space and time from both the sacred and the profane. It took 20 years, two cities, and the poetics of Tacita Dean's pictures for me to trace a line that began on 116th Street in Manhattan and ended nine miles south at Ground Zero. It is a line of fate. Different from the one we discuss below, but a line of fate nevertheless, or still.

JONATHAN T.D. NEIL (RAIL): I want to begin with your experience with Los Angeles and your history with the city. When did you first come to LA? What were your first impressions? How has your experience with the city evolved since then, to the present day?

TACITA DEAN (T.D.): Well, to be honest, I'd hardly ever been prior to the Getty residency, which was 2014. I'd really not spent anything longer than a few days there. I had a film, *JG*, showing at the Hammer a bit before that. We actually had to fly to LA to film *JG*. But before that I really had no experience with the city, so I came with all the apprehensions and prejudices that everyone comes with.

RAIL What were those apprehensions and prejudices?

T.D. Well, no, I mean assumptions, like I assumed that the sky was always blue. So to discover the clouds was quite a radical thing. I had done some teaching at UCLA and Cal Arts a long time before, particularly UCLA, and I didn't completely bond with it; I felt like it was a very stretched out city, and then there is the whole traffic and driving thing. I'm a happy driver, so actually I rather like that aspect of it. And then there is LA's whole relationship

to cinema, of course, which was one of the reasons I actually decided to go and do the residency, because of the danger to film.

RAIL So that was about the time that you were beginning to become more conscious about the possible obsolescence of analog film and a need to advocate for it?

T.D. It wasn't right at the beginning of it, because I was living in Berlin, and had done the Turbine Hall in 2011. It began as a small threat to 16mm film and then very rapidly became a threat to all film. So in 2012 I worked with others to launch *savefilm.org*, and I tried to do everything I could to get attention to the problem and found that it was just not happening. I had to take it to the industry, because they had the power, because art doesn't have power, financial power. And I was trying to get hold of Christopher Nolan, who I heard was also trying to fight for film. When I got offered the Getty in 2014, I knew it was potentially going to be a big rupture to my life and practice, but then I thought, well, it's really important for the medium: I have to try and take my advocacy there, to the center of the industry, and that's just what I did.

RAIL Was the Getty perch a helpful one from which to be able to do that?

T.D. Yes. I was doing my *Monet Hates Me* project, in parallel, but the main thing I did in that first year was to organize this big event called "Reframing the Future of Film," which I did with Christopher Nolan, and with the help of Kerry Brougher, who was Director of the Academy Museum at the time. We had a boardroom discussion, followed by a big auditorium event. The boardroom discussion was about bringing together people that really could make a difference.

RAIL What's the status now?

T.D. The fight is different now. We were doing much better before COVID. Early on, it was trying to establish that there was a difference between film and video, between film and digital. People in the entertainment industry didn't even understand that you could make different things with different mediums. There was a very, very aggressive campaign to always describe film as obsolete or old fashioned or out of date. Now, I think people understand that they're different mediums, but the problem is just getting people to be empowered enough to use them—often financially empowered to use them. So it's still hard. Post pandemic—if we are post pandemic—the labs have very reduced staff. That's always the first thing to go. We were just beginning to turn a corner where people were beginning to use it again, and younger filmmakers and artists were beginning to use it again. Obviously, there have been similar returns to analog, as it were, to some extent within still photography, and vinyl records, etcetera, etcetera—some sort of return and acknowledgement of the importance of keeping analog technologies available, but film because of the manufacturer, that's the problem. Kodak is the sole manufacturer of film.

RAIL So it becomes a business argument that one has to make for the market for film, for the manufacturers, the laboratories to process it, and not just for the people who are dedicated to wanting to use it as a medium. There needs to be a demand to do it at scale, where it's not so precious and becomes prohibitive from a cost standpoint.

T.D. In 2014, there was no acknowledgement of what you will get to watch in the theaters, whether you get to watch a 35mm print or you get to watch a digital production. Now they say, "We've got a wonderful 35mm print," and the audience cheers. That's the shift. The New Beverly Cinema, which only shows film, when I first started going there, it was just us and a handful of people. Now it's hugely popular, with queues around the block. So there is a shift. Watching a film is different from watching

Tacita Dean, *Pan Amicus*, 2021. (Film still), 16mm color film, optical sound, 31 minutes, continuous loop. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery. © Tacita Dean. Photo: Alex Yudson.



digital. As long as people have that experience, and they see that it's different, they will seek it out. And then we will continue to have a market for it. But it takes effort. And that's just the showing side of it. There's barely anyone who cuts negative anymore. I mean, there's me and there's Chris [Nolan]. The Academy Museum is just about to open and they're going to have a lot of film projection, and, you know, negative is always very popular. If people make new prints, and create a market for Kodak to still produce print film, and then FotoKem gets work—you know what I mean?

RAIL I would think that the film schools would be incredibly important partners in this whole process, because you have to have a place where people become interested in or dedicated to film. Most of the next generation is going to approach that beginning through digital, obviously. But they will become enamored of the history of film, and enamored of the medium, and at some point, they have to be in a place where they can get access to working with it.

T.D. You're quite right. And we haven't had a lot of allies. You know, in fact, we've had the opposite.

RAIL From the schools?

T.D. Some schools aggressively took the stance to not teach film and to hide all their film equipment. But my experience is that the younger generation is actually more excited to try it than my generation, who want to prove themselves as digital aficionados. They don't want to look like Luddites or behind the times, but the younger generation, they know, they know digital in and out and there's a bit of boredom there.

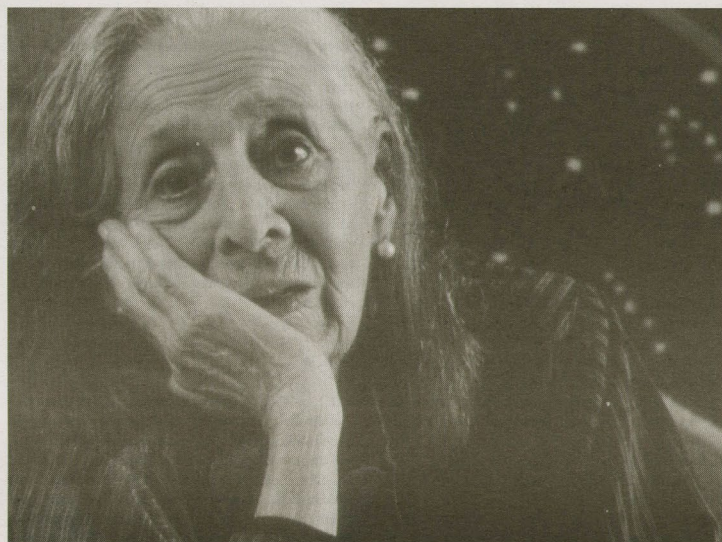
RAIL There's prestige in mastering a prior medium.

T.D. I've always been impressed by how my crews love working with film, and they're all quite young. They were all well under 25 when I started the gate masking films. I need other people's energy to pull all this off though [Laughter]. I mean my world is the art world. Film schools, I don't have much connection to them.

RAIL So let's shift gears. I want to talk a little bit about the film *Pan Amicus*. I've heard you refer to this film as a representation of, or an inquiry into, an idea of Arcadia. And so I'm curious about your thoughts on Arcadia. How do you think about it and that film today?

T.D. *Pan Amicus* came about when Jim Cuno (CEO JP Getty Center) asked me in 2018 to make something in celebration of the 20th anniversary of the Getty Center. I'm British, and I arrived from Berlin, and when I was first up at the Getty, I was in wonder about the landscaping up there: that strange sense of the Mediterranean yet not, and the higher you go, you almost feel like you are with the gods. There's this rarefied space up there, isn't there? It's kind of hyperreal. I don't know if you ever had that feeling. But I used to always feel that I was almost in the afterlife somehow, or on Mount Olympus. So when Jim Cuno asked me to do something in celebration of the Getty Center, which was, of course, very specifically about the building, I thought, well, how on earth can I make anything that touches on the poetics of that building? It's a difficult thing to do. So I returned to these feelings that I had when I first arrived, this sense of Arcadia.

I make reference to this *Wind in the Willows* chapter called "The Piper at the Gates of Dawn." It's a very beautiful piece of text about this baby otter that goes missing. And eventually, at dawn, you find out that the otter is being protected by the god Pan. I've always had a thing



Tacita Dean, *One Hundred and Fifty Years of Painting*, 2021. (Film still), 16mm color film, optical sound, 50 1/2 minutes, continuous loop. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery. © Tacita Dean. Photo: Alex Yudson.

about Pan. So I thought what I will do is I will try to make a film that's about that place but without in any way referencing the building. And then I asked Jim Cuno if he would authorize me borrowing museum objects that I could put in the landscape. Coincidentally, the head that they found me was the head of Hermes. And Hermes, in some tellings, is the father of Pan.

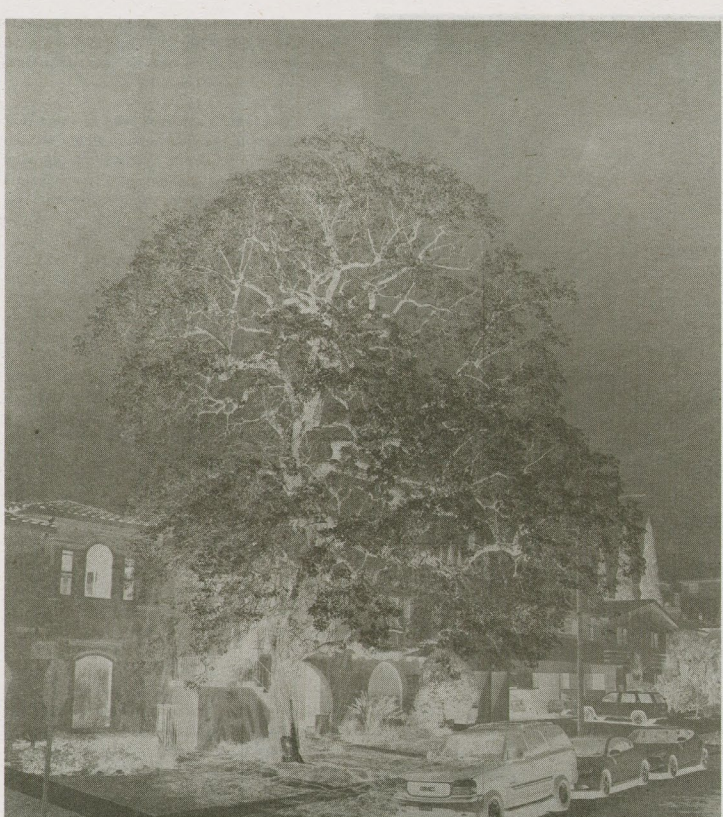
The two feet, the pomegranates and the apples, I wanted them to be in the landscape as if they'd always been there—just found. So I was trying to create a film of Arcadia that is actually about the place, that is very much about the Getty Center, even though it's not present at all. It's all filmed on the Getty grounds, and any shot that had even a tiny flicker of the white building in the background had to be cut out. And anyone who's been to the Getty knows how much of that stuff is there, all the CCTV cameras, the railings—it's very hard to create Arcadia at the Getty Center, but I really wanted to try because that's what that landscape reminded me of. And, of course, John Paul Getty—that was his fantasy too.

Then I call it *Pan Amicus*. Pan in reference to the god of the wilderness, the god of the countryside, the god of the landscape, of the expanse—the Pan who gave his name to "panic" and "panorama" and "pandemic" even. And then *Amicus* which means "friend" of course, so it was Greek and Latin, "Pan Amicus," friend and helper.

RAIL Because it was paired with the other film, *One Hundred and Fifty Years of Painting*, the film of Luchita Hurtado and Julie Mehretu, I found *Pan Amicus* to be very elegiac in its sensibility. And I was put in mind of other paintings at the Getty, the ones by Poussin, and I started thinking about *Et in Arcadia Ego* and how there's a sensibility that comes across which feels less otherworldly and more melancholic. Is that something you were also after in this work?

T.D. It definitely comes out of an art historical trajectory, *Pan Amicus*. It's this exactly, *et in arcadia*. "I wish I was in arcadia"—don't we all wish we were in Arcadia? It's not nostalgic. That's the point. It can't be nostalgic because we've never been there. It would be a misinterpretation to say that it's nostalgic. It's of course longing for this state, and this place, this kind of ur-place that has existed in our imaginations. The trajectory of that's very, very clear. When I filmed, there was this incredible wind, and it had just rained so it was very green. So the Getty landscape disguised itself as well in a way, which I liked. You don't quite know where it is. When I showed it to the timer at FotoKem, I asked, "Where do you think this was

Tacita Dean, *Purgatory* (1st Cornice), 2021. Colored pencil on Fuji Velvet paper mounted on paper, 149 5/8 x 136 1/8 in. (380 x 345.5 cm). Installation view, Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, 2021. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery. © Tacita Dean. Photo: Alex Yudson.



filmed?" And he had no idea. I wanted that, I wanted to mystify that sense of place, to create another place as, exactly, *et in arcadia*.

RAIL This connects it to *One Hundred and Fifty Years of Painting*, this sense of both watching a film that is about a kind of impossible loss, and being lost in it at these moments. Particularly this moment in the film when Luchita Hurtado is talking about the loss of her child to polio and her dream, her premonition about it. And the fact that this film is now being screened after Hurtado has passed away. So there's this other strange overriding sense of loss, which is not immediately sad, but a kind of Arcadian or elegiac sensibility that pervades.

T.D. Yeah, definitely. Definitely.

RAIL Then there are the works that have been produced for *The Dante Project*. The works of *Inferno*, *Purgatory*, and *Paradise*, and—not to make this all about LA—but I'm curious about why Los Angeles became *Purgatory* in your representation [Laughter].

T.D. I think LA might enjoy being purgatory [Laughter]. It was all done in LA actually, but I love LA being in the background of *Purgatory*. The whole concept for this ballet is to go from negative to positive, from upside down to the right way up, from black and white to color, and also from representation to abstraction. And through mediums as well, so beginning with drawing, and then going into photography, and then coming out into film. I wanted a between-state, between negative and positive. And when you turn a jacaranda tree into negative, you get this incredibly weird green. Jacaranda trees are so unusual in the sense that they don't have leaves, the whole tree turns that color. So it's a complete transformation. That's what I was so stunned by. I'd never seen a

jacaranda tree before I was in LA. I became quite fixated on them. I wanted to do something with jacaranda trees. They are just extraordinary, beautiful things. And then on my iPhone, with "classic invert," I just flipped it one day, and I saw that it turned green. And I thought, well, that's going to be my middle state.

Purgatory for me is a very, very important state. *Inferno* is obviously something we all understand. And in terms of the *Divine Comedy*, paradise is quite frankly dull. [Laughter] We all much prefer inequity to godliness. Most of us reside in purgatory; that's what life is in a way. I wanted to make it pedestrian, so it's nice to have the streets in the background.

RAIL Like *Pan Amicus*, there's almost a complete occlusion of the architecture, of the other representation of Arcadia. In the *Purgatory* works the architecture isn't totally occluded, but it's very much background, almost to the point of being illegible. There's this odd kind of landscape in Los Angeles, which has a bizarre relationship between the natural world and the built world. It's sprawl and has immediate proximity to extremes of landscape, the ocean on one side and high desert on the other; it's prone to wildfire and other extremes of climate. It's highly unbalanced. The images of those trees really come across as having this incredible sense of poise and balance, of stability, even though they've got this ineffable quality to them.

T.D. Thank you. I think so too. They're beautiful as well, I mean they're just stunning trees.

RAIL But I was interested in how these works are situated in this landscape, or in this region, and have an almost troubled relationship to architecture. Some of your past work has a very affirmative relationship to architecture, particularly in the films. I'm thinking of

Bubble House (1999) and *Teignmouth Electron* (2000) or the restaurant in *Fernsehturm* (2001).

T.D. Yes, yes that architecture is very specific, and also all of it is anachronistic or is in some way unusual. You know, out of its time, or declining. In terms of the Getty Center, there's nothing attractive to me at the Getty Center, architecturally, as an artist or a filmmaker—from a filmmaking point of view.

RAIL Because it's so present?

T.D. It's so present, and I suppose of its time, in a way. I mean, it's not dated. I'm not being insulting. It's just the way it is. And so it was something I said no to. This was my way through, really, to take another road.

RAIL A film of the Getty Center could never be anything but PR.

T.D. Yes.

RAIL Do you think there's a privileged relationship between film and architecture? Either in your work or more generally?

T.D. Privileged relationship? I'm not sure what that really means, but there is a—I don't really know if I can answer that question. For me, in a work like *Boots* (2003), or the reason why I filmed Casa Rosa in Serralves Museum in Porto was that there was something that was recognizable from cinematic history that made it attractive to me; it just looked like a set already. It's hard, of course, because I'm so connected with my medium that I am not sure I necessarily would have thought of any other way of making a work.

RAIL The way I was thinking about it is that architecture can be a set or setting. But it can also have a sort of force, in terms of directing perception, in directing where the camera points or how the camera points or how the view is constructed. Le Corbusier in *Towards a New Architecture* creates these sketches of the Acropolis that are really these kinds of storyboards, about the procession through a space, and could almost be blocking for a film. I've always imagined that there are artists for whom architecture is only ever a backdrop for some other drama, and then there are artists for whom the architecture is the—

T.D. The modernist architecture tradition came of age at the same time as film, so maybe they have that interconnectivity. All the curves and the vistas and the panoramas, they just call out for film, and film more than just the moving image.

RAIL There's a sense that film and drawing and architecture have a relationship to one another that's different from the one that, say, painting and photography have to each other. It might be pushing the point a little bit, but in some of the works in the show, like the photogravures and the depictions of *Inferno*, which have these drawn elements and recall like the blackboard pieces—it feels different than the more purely photographic and painterly work. I've always been curious about that kind of constellation of work together, which seems to come across very strongly in this show, and in your work more generally.

T.D. I guess it's also to do with the series, isn't it? The sequence. Film is just still images that are moved to create movement. So they're not moving images, per se. The sequence of still images has always interested me in terms of how it creates time or narrative. When I use it for something like the photogravure *Inferno*, it is very explicit. I've never managed to make singular images. I've always worked more with sequencing and series and continuum. I can see your point in relation to architecture. But then again, I wonder—I guess it is, even a camera is, by its very etymology, a "room." And I always feel that, especially

Above and Below: Tacita Dean, *Pin Amicus*, 2021. (Film still). 16mm color film, optical sound, 31 minutes, continuous loop. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery. © Tacita Dean. Photo: Alex Yudson.



with the aperture gate masking films that I make, like *Antigone* or *JG* or *Paradise*, it's all what happens inside that room, with the lights turned off, within darkness, in the camera. I always have a very strong sense of the architecture of the camera, that things go on in there, and I don't know what they are, until we turn the lights on when the film gets developed and we can see. Do you know what I mean?

RAIL Absolutely, that this is space of the medium itself, which is somehow embedded within the images and can't be pulled out of it. I'm biased in this way because my background was in architecture, so I think about the description or the representation of space as always beginning with a sketch, with the function of drawing. So there's something about the relationship between the drawn line and space that goes hand in hand. A number of different works in the show brought that back to life for me, especially when you get very close up to those *Purgatory* pictures, you see the colored pencil strokes, you can see the drawing at work.

T.D. I think there's something you've touched on which is quite true about the architecture within the

manufacture of filmmaking. It's about space, and I think that's its most profound difference to digital in a way—

RAIL I don't see a lot of reference to the filmmaking of the 1960s, structural filmmaking, which is the height of 16mm activity in my mind. Do those artists loom large for you in any way?

T.D. I mean, that's not where I came from, I came out of painting. So it's not that they don't loom large, but it's not my roots.

RAIL When I read you talking about film as film, and I read the interviews about your efforts to save or rescue the medium and understanding your practice as one that is very interested in the materiality of that medium, I can't help think about Hollis Frampton and others who were engaged in a similar kind of battle.

T.D. You're completely correct. I'm not disavowing them at all. They are absolutely there. But it's not from whence I came. When I found 16mm, I was in a painting department, and I just found 16mm by chance. I never

had any of that teaching. I never had a formal lesson in filmmaking ever. Everything I've learned, I've learned later, or taught myself. I know about these artists, these filmmakers, but it wasn't in my DNA.

RAIL Of course it's at that same moment that video appears on the scene, and so all of a sudden there's a need to define film against the background of this new insurgent technology. Those moments feel very pertinent for anybody's education on the subject.

T.D. I went to art school in the '80s. And if you wanted to make moving images, it was in Super-8 and 16mm. I remember there was this new clunky pneumatic video and one or two kids were thinking about trying to work these machines, but it was just a turn-off for me. I went to Falmouth School of Art, where there was a tiny media department and just one or two people mucking about. So I was drawn to film. One of the people there was Annabel Nicholson, and she was associated with the feminist movement and the London Filmmakers' Co-op. She used to come down as a visiting lecturer. Film was the medium of the moving image in the '80s at art school. At the Slade School of Fine Arts it was still very much the context. Digital hadn't happened yet; it was VHS. And then everyone was using Hi8. Video went through many, many permutations.

RAIL Can you imagine any future moment where someone is committed to the materiality of VHS as someone could be to film?

T.D. Well there are, there are people out there! They're very much into pushing that medium in various directions—probably not on the same scale, but there are people who will push their medium, whatever it is, in various directions. But no, it's just a different order of things, film; it really is. Its magic is embedded in the material. I wish I could remember how many layers of emulsion, but it's something phenomenal, the many layers of emulsion needed to create film. So, film has depth. It's already three dimensional. It's just a different animal. The world changed around me but I was very happy to carry on with film. That was what happened. [Laughter]

RAIL Film is a machine and still very much a creature or an entity of the machine age. You can take it apart, understand how the cameras work, understand how the projectors work, see on the filmstrip in a physical way the procession of individual images. It gratifies that sense that one can pull it apart and put it back together again. Video and digital entails a completely different order of translation into information. There's this black box that it goes into and then comes out of and so there's a loss that's involved there as well.

T.D. Yes, exactly. I mean, I still cut on cutting tables. I need that materiality. I need that process and I need the labor also: the to-ing and fro-ing and the pace of it. It's important. I'm slightly mocked for still cutting on a Steenbeck. But I always say people are still painting oil paintings; it's how an artist works with a medium. That's the point; there's legitimacy in that. It's just within the industry, which is much more utilitarian, they don't understand it. But in my world, it's totally permissible.

RAIL I have one last but unrelated question. If you had one book or essay by Leo Steinberg to recommend, which one would it be?

T.D. "The Line of Fate"

RAIL Why?

T.D. Are you a reader of him?

RAIL Yes.

Tacita Dean, *One Hundred and Fifty Years of Painting*, 2021. (Film still). 16mm color film, optical sound, 50 1/2 minutes, continuous loop. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery. © Tacita Dean. Photo: Alex Yudson.



T.D. That was a revelatory text for me. It was also so easy and beautiful to read. It relates to purgatory as well, in a way. The fact that people "improving" Michelangelo's paintings in later etchings and copies was a way for Steinberg to understand Michelangelo's purpose. I thought that was just the most extraordinary thing to have discovered. And especially, to see this line of fate, this line going through the flayed skin of Saint Bartholomew and working out that that is Michelangelo's own self portrait, where he's put himself midpoint between heaven and hell, I just thought it was a wonderful text. What was yours? The "Sexuality of Christ"?

RAIL For me it is *Leonardo's Incessant Last Supper*. I saw Steinberg give that as a talk at the Met in the late '90s. It became a kind of touchstone for the thorough-going connection of that painting to the architecture in which it sits, and for all of the things that one can do as an historian and a close watcher of the work to put forward a take that I felt surely must be correct. I remember just being blown away by how he marshalled evidence by the strength of the argument—

T.D. He's also a paragon of how to write absolutely simply and intelligibly about art and history. I remember just telling that to him, and he said, "Well, you know, it takes an awful lot of effort to appear effortless."

RAIL I think that goes for most art forms.

T.D. Yes, yes.

RAIL Steinberg certainly raised the writing of art history to its own art form.

T.D. Roland Barthes did as well actually,



RAIL Barthes is also an incredible stylist. What text were you thinking of?

T.D. The text he wrote on Cy Twombly. It's just such an amazing text on another artist's work. That was the trajectory I was putting him in, in relation to Leo Steinberg.

RAIL Twombly is another artist of the line.

T.D. Yes, absolutely.

RAIL The underground threads of drawing.

T.D. Yes, the line of fate. You see it's there, everywhere, the line.

Jonathan T.D. Neil is a writer and professor. He is the editor of the *AI Held Critical Essays*, published by the *Brooklyn Rail*.