

## THE COMMON GUILD

Visual arts: Projects / Events / Exhibitions



Image by Kendall Koppe

# 9.1

COMMENTARIES

## Tacita Dean

20 November 2010 – 05 February 2011



### Tacita Dean

The score for John Cage's famous silent piece 4' 33" is in three movements, with the instruction for each being simply 'Tacet.' In Tacita Dean's remarkable film of dancer Merce Cunningham interpreting this score, we see six takes, each shot from a subtly different position within a mirrored dance rehearsal space, in all of which Cunningham remains still and seated. Though Cage and Cunningham often spoke of their collaborations as allowing music and dance to go their separate ways, in this film they seem to follow the same course. Watching the stillness of Cunningham's body with an awareness of how animated it was in his long dance career, and with an awareness too of Dean's series of works featuring elderly men who are close to death, it is hard not to feel that Cunningham's joining of his stillness to Cage's silence is a way of tacitly acknowledging that he is close to following his partner into a final, irrevocable quietude. And yet, for all that, the film — just like Cage's 4'33" and so much of Cunningham's choreography — lets life and its ordinary noises and motions have their say within the experience of the work. The second film Dean made with Cunningham, *Craneway Event*, seems to celebrate precisely the enduring vivacity of his work and his active involvement in dance even in his 90s. It also celebrates film's ability to capture the chance moments, shifting moods and luminous atmospherics of the extraordinary glazed sea-front factory in Richmond, California which Cunningham's company were using for rehearsals.

The works Dean showed at The Common Guild comprised a large photographic print of a dolmen stone, isolated from its surroundings by blackboard paint; six exquisite 19th-century albumen prints of trees, over-painted so as to leave only the gnarled forms of the trees visible; and the short film *Prisoner Pair*, in which two preserved pears are shown in close up, visibly diffusing into the alcohol which contains them. All these works seemed to imbue images with a mute but palpably

physical presence — imposing in the case of the dolmen, delicate and unstable in the other pieces — and all had a sombre tone to them at first glance and, as with the Cunningham films, almost a memento mori aspect. Given time, however, they opened out to other readings. Though each has an intensity of affect in its own right, each also associatively or implicitly suggested relationships to other works, and to larger narratives; for instance in the way *Prisoner Pair* might be a pair to the 2007 film *Michael Hamburger* and its tangential response to WG Sebald's *Rings of Saturn*, in which *Hamburger* appears.

One of Dean's hallmarks as an artist is her ability to quietly convey complex narratives and intense emotions in work which is pared-down and formally precise. Writing of Dean's 2003 film *Pie*, Briony Fer has noted that it is a work in which emptiness and fullness are coincident rather than contradictory. While narrative incident is rarely an explicit feature of Dean's practice, her work is often full of telling details, intense observation and the pleasures of association and articulation. The fullness in Dean's work, Fer suggests, "is more likely to seep out than to be sealed in." The works shown at The Common Guild, and most especially *Craneway Event*, a film positively flooded by light, and into which natural and commercial life continually permeate, would suggest that this seepage flows both ways. Life and death, as well as silence and eloquence, are given equal say in Dean's recent work.

Dr. Dominic Paterson is a writer and art historian based at the University of Glasgow.