

THE COMMON GUILD

Visual arts: Projects / Events / Exhibitions

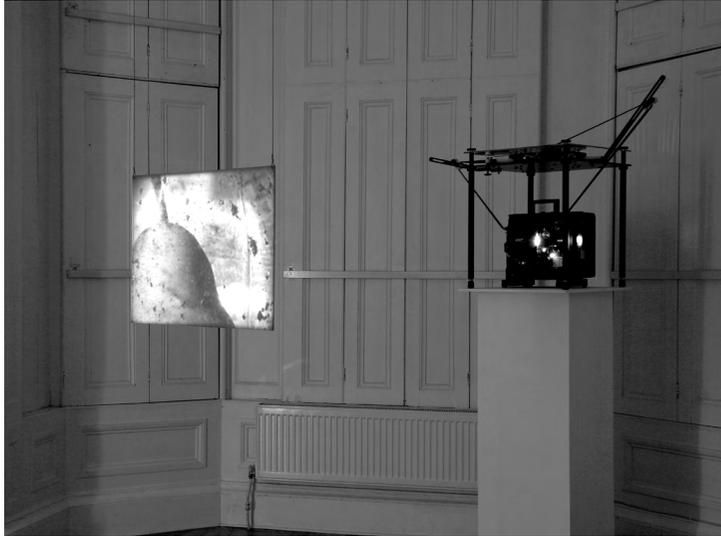


Photo by Kendall Koppe

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COMMENTARIES

Tacita Dean

20 November 2010 – 5 February 2011



Of failure and ferment

Failing is fundamental to the work of Tacita Dean. It has been from the outset. Her fascination with ‘human failings’, in the sense of unsuccessful endeavours as well as innate weaknesses, was epitomised early on by the figure of Donald Crowhurst, the misguided amateur sailor who was lost at sea in 1968 in a botched attempt at circumnavigating the globe. She has written of the various setbacks and faux pas that have turned out to be enabling rather than disabling, in retrospect, in the achievement of particular works. For Dean, to open oneself to the vagaries of what the Surrealists called ‘objective chance’ is a form of wandering as well as wondering. This is reflected in the far-flung places to which she has travelled in order to realise certain works and in the far-fetched tales she has spun around some of them.

The short film *Prisoner Pair* (2008), shown at The Common Guild, is one such instance of fruitfully redeemed disappointment, which evolved from a long-standing desire, as she puts it, “to film pears growing inside bottles and then watch them be picked from the trees”. Having eventually arrived in Alsace in order to realise this ambition she found she had missed the harvest and needed to reconceive her original project. The result is a mesmerising 11-minute film of two preserved pears, one Alsatian and the other French, shown in a languorous succession of tightly framed close-ups that allow us to see the slow process of fermentation as the pears visibly diffuse into the alcohol in which they are immersed. (Belatedness and preservation are also recurring tropes in her work.) *Prisoner Pair* has been aptly described as “a microscopic analysis of time in detail and detail in time”.¹ Precedents and complements to this film include the 1995 video *How to put a Boat in a Bottle* as well as Dean’s more recent, elegaic portrait of *Michael Hamburger* (2007), the eminent poet, translator and assiduous cultivator of apple trees. The exploration of the metaphoric potential of the apple, a recurring image in Michael Hamburger, was notable for an artist more generally given to a metonymic mode of elaboration; which is to say that the internal workings of a typical

Dean film, its moves and movements, are more often beholden to considerations of contiguity than likeness. *Prisoner Pair* presses this further in that it is difficult to ignore the symbolic resonance of the imprisoned pears plucked from two sides of a historically contested border. (The word ‘ALSACE’, embossed on one of the bottles, is explicitly presented as riven in the film’s closing shots.) That Alsace in recent times, unlike many other regions in Europe, can hardly be described as ‘in ferment’ is no doubt largely irrelevant to such a productively backward-looking artist as Tacita Dean. In any case, for much of the film, shot against a failing evening light, the surface of the pears is more redolent, as Dean acknowledges, of some nameless terrain envisaged by a latter-day Caspar David Friedrich. This oblique invocation of nineteenth-century German Romantic painting may remind us of the classic contrast between the beautiful and the sublime, between an ideal encapsulation of form and that which threatens to confound or transcend it. Viewed in this light, the specific historical echoes roused by *Prisoner Pair* simply provide added resonance to what is an exquisite study in the protracted dynamics of containment and release.

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1. Tacita Dean, ‘Still Life’, Fondazione Nicola Trussardi [online], 2009. Available https://www.fondazionenicolatrussardi.com/en/mostre/still_life/