Tacita

MYSTERIOUS MECHANISMS


Dean

Tacita Dean first came to prominence as a leading light of the YBA generation of artists. More recently her work with 16mm film has caused her to become an advocate for the endangered medium. Away from the campaign trail, however, her practice remains thrillingly diverse. 'I never had, from the beginning, an orthodoxy,' she tells *Emily Steer*. 'It's always been imposed by the outside.'

'There are no quick rewards,' Tacita Dean states, with characteristic certainty, as we speak ahead of the third Istanbul Design Biennial in which her work will be featured this autumn. She's responding to a question about the nature of art viewing—Dean often requires extended passages of viewers' time and mental stillness—though the answer could be used to sum up much of the primarily Berlin-based artist's work: favouring a time-consuming process, releasing new work at a less meteoric speed than many of her peers and, of course, dedicating endless hours to campaign for the things that she cares about. Time itself often finds itself a central subject of her work too. 'I love all those notions of time,' she says. 'Not time on a day-to-day basis, but this whole sense of narrative time, allegorical time, prehistoric time and edited time. There are so many elements of it which are endlessly satisfying.'

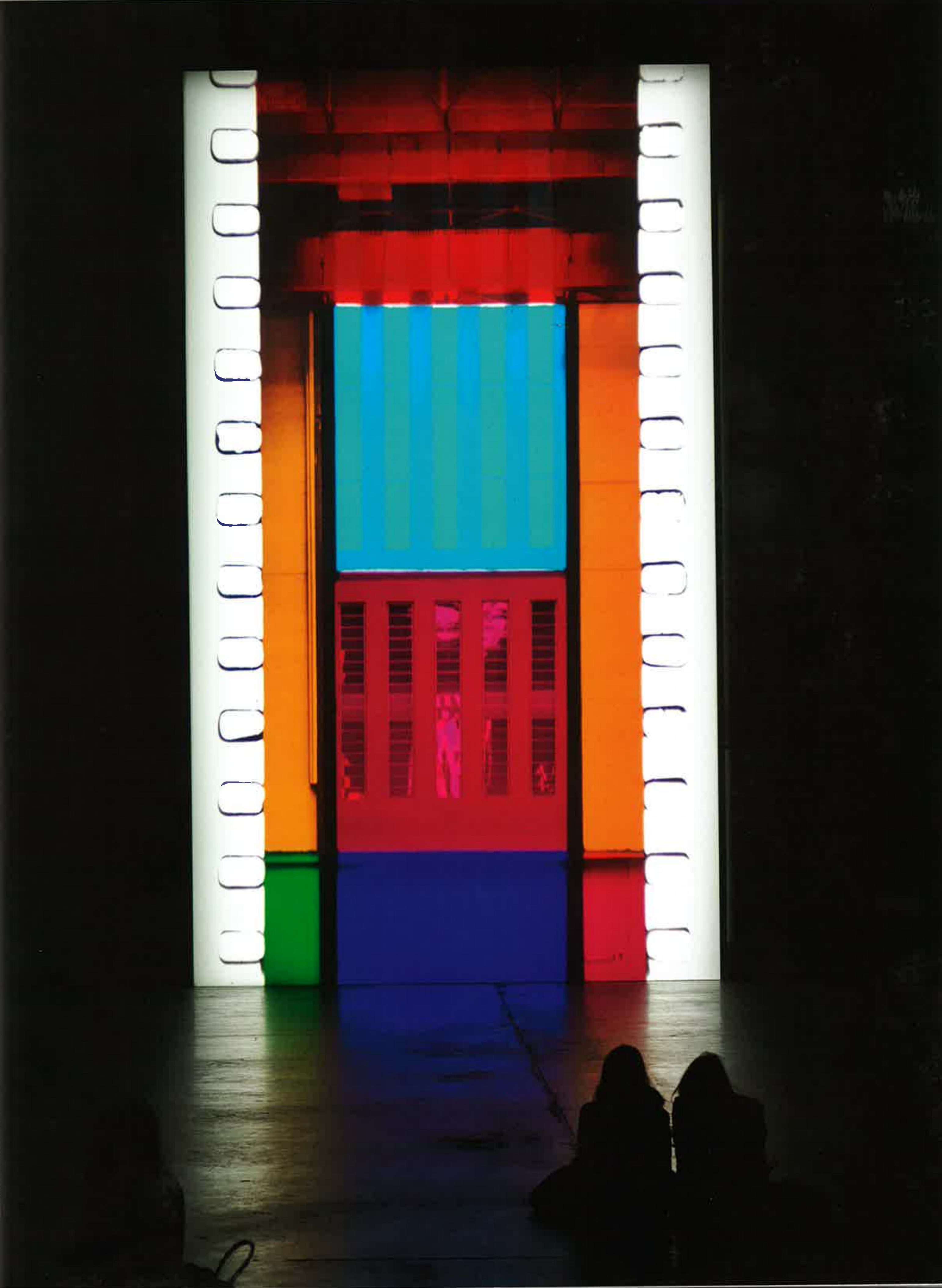
At the biennial, Dean will be showing the 16mm colour film *Human Treasure* in response to the theme 'Are We Human?' 'It's a film I made in Japan in 2006,' she tells me. 'It's about the "Living Human Treasure", the Japanese designation for someone who has excelled in traditional Japanese art. I think there are only a handful of them, 100 or so, and they're only in traditional art so there wouldn't be a contemporary artist who would be a Living Human Treasure. I liked the phrase. I went to find a Human Treasure and I eventually found this Kyogen—which is a sort of Japanese comic theatre—actor called Sensaku. Because of the deference paid to him it was very difficult to have close access with him. It was always done through mediation, so it's a strange film in that way.'

Sensaku, like many of Dean's subjects, was already at an advanced age at the time of filming. 'I film a lot of things that have subsequently disappeared,' the artist says. 'Maybe I'm attracted to things that are threatened. When I film them they are not in their heyday. They are as they are, right now. Maybe that makes them anachronistic and slightly dysfunctional in their time. But I'm not making a film that pines for the old days at all. That's what nostalgia is, and people use that word so wrongly for me.'

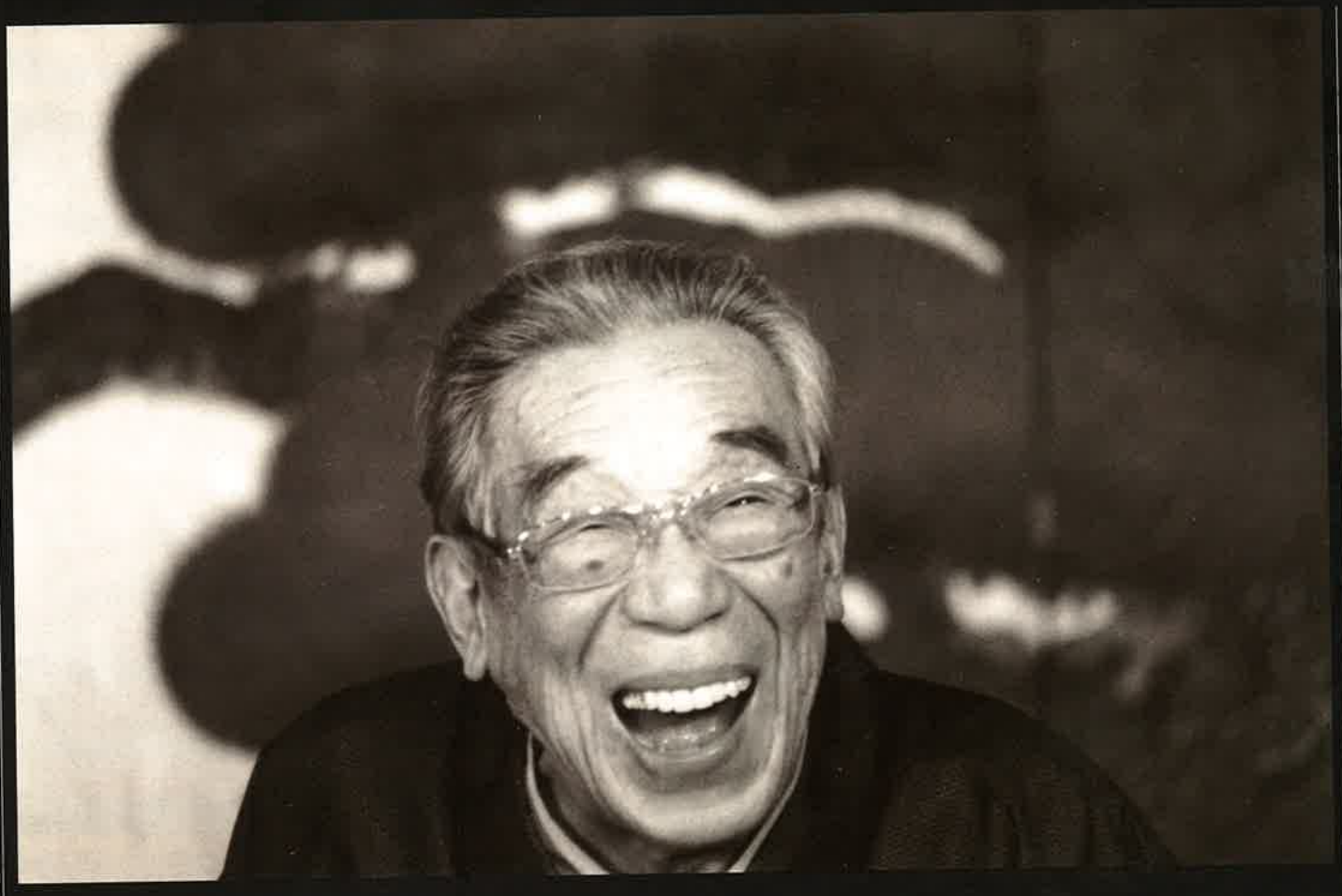
There are many instances of Dean's work being discussed in terms of nostalgia, much to her irritation—Dean, it seems, doesn't suffer fools gladly. 'It's a different word from "longing". Longing is this much more amorphous emotion. It doesn't get tied down to time, or better days. I'm not filming Michael Hamburger and waxing lyrical over his youth. So it's a misunderstanding of what they are. They are just pictures of time, just like a portrait painter painting a sitter. You wouldn't say Whistler's portraits are nostalgic because the people are no longer there. So something is amiss in the language but that doesn't mean that the longing isn't there.'

The idea of nostalgia is perhaps attached to her practice so regularly because of her to-the-death commitment to keeping the medium of analogue film alive and well. I ask if having her work constantly read as making a stand for its medium rather than simply being a work of art in her chosen medium can become tiresome. 'Because I tenaciously try and continue to work with and look at the medium, I've had to become more aware of it than I would otherwise have wanted to,' she tells me. 'Sometimes institutions would be quite lazy and call my work "video" and I'd be very upset; not institutions but the press releases which would then be picked up. So I used to ask to be very clear in the press release that this is photochemical, 16mm; it is not a video, video is different. I had a show in Melbourne once and they overdid it slightly and then there was a reviewer saying "By the time we got to the third film, we'd had enough": he no longer looked outside of the medium. So there are problematics. I've spent a lot of time working on the protection of film, when I could of course just have been making more of them. I spent more time last year as a campaigner than an artist. But I hope we have turned a corner. The Turbine Hall [she was commissioned to produce a film—entitled *FILM*—for the Tate Modern Unilever Series] made me into a campaigner in a way, because that was the critical year—2011–12. All the labs are closing in my wake. I've been through a lot of labs in Europe. Now I say: OK, it'll always have to be film and it'll die with me.

'The whole point of *FILM* was that digital could not capture the flash that was a thousandth



ALL IMAGES COURTESY THE ARTIST, FRITH STREET GALLERY, LONDON, AND MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK/PARIS



"It's much closer to lying on a bed and something comes across your mind than graphically researching an idea and being really clear that it must be this, this and this"

"You wouldn't say Whistler's portraits are nostalgic because the people are no longer there"

Opening spread
Portrait by
Benjamin McMahon

Second spread, right & previous spread, left
FILM, 2011
35 mm colour and black-and-white portrait-format anamorphic film with hand-tinted sequences, 11 mins, installation view, Tate Modern, London
Photographs Marcus Leith & Andrew Dunkley

Previous spread, right
Human Treasure
2006
16mm colour film, optical sound, 15 mins
Location photograph

Opposite
c/o Jolyon (detail)
2012–13
100 original postcards of prewar Kassel, hand-painted with gouache

of a millionth of a second but film could, because [the green ray] is bright enough to burn the crystals. Even with *Portraits*, my recent film of David Hockney, cigarettes look much more beautiful on film than they do in digital.'

There is a looseness to Dean's work also, that, despite her precision in many areas—especially around semantics and the public/press perception of her work—gives the sense of an artist who is still freely hunting around for ideas rather than following a prescribed formula. 'If I'm very aware of what I'm doing I find that distracting,' she considers. 'Obviously the longer [my] practice goes on the more aware I become of what I'm doing, but I don't like knowing what the next work is going to be, or seeking it out. It's much closer to lying on a bed and something comes across your mind than graphically researching an idea and being really clear that it must be this, this and this. I need that mystery where things come to the surface and you don't know why. Later you may realize why, but to know at the time is dangerous, I think. I find that work that is so clearly consciously sought out irks me. I'm interested in the more mysterious mechanisms.'

I'm curious to find out when the structure emerges in her work—she famously leaves her subjects to be as naturally themselves as possible. 'In terms of a film, it really comes through the editing. That's when the work gets formed. And that's at the heart of what I do. Before then I'm just accumulating material, like a bag lady. Dragging things. I don't sit there thinking: I need that shot because that's what I'm going to cut next to that one. I never know that. But, for example, with Michael Hamburger in his orchard, he tried to perform in a strange way and in the end I had to cut around the edge of anything that was too self-conscious. And that's why the editing is so important.'

The world itself, despite Dean's desire for her subjects to be natural, often finds itself warped in unfamiliar ways through the artist's lens. Locations have something of the Other about them, present no more so than in her 2013 film *JG*, which was inspired by her conversations with British author J.G. Ballard about the play between *The Voices of Time* (1970) and Robert Smithson's film and landwork *Spiral Jetty* (also 1970). Here, many of her ongoing concerns come together: the beauty of the film medium; a warped sense of time; the natural world, captured, but not quite. 'With *JG* it's definitely a lot to do with film and the allegory of it, and the strange Ballardian relationship to time and landscape. That was very specific, finding a place that was otherworldly. That was about a union between Smithson and Ballard in this strange landscape which was supposed to be both futuristic and prehistoric, so getting that right was very important. I didn't want it to look of the day, right now.'

Alongside Dean's fierce and very public presence as the champion of film, it's easy to forget that she is, in fact, somewhat of a mixed-media artist—creating large-scale print works, drawings and paintings which have a similar sense of visual weight to them. I wonder how Dean came to her current position—is it as a result of a gradual broadening of interests, or has her practice been this diverse from the word go? 'I was always the kid with the oil painting set. I always wanted to be an artist. I mean, thank god, that's a blessing to know exactly what you want to do, all the way along. There was never a moment where I wanted to do anything else. I came from an academic family who weren't impressed in any way with the idea of going to art school. That was the struggle. But the decision was clear to me,' she says. 'I went into a painting department at Falmouth, and immediately was making a drawing-animated film, which was kind of like William Kentridge, changing the image in the frame and taking 16 mm film frames and making an animation. I was in painting, but I had one foot down in the media department. I never had, from the beginning, an orthodoxy. It's always been imposed by the outside. At Falmouth, I had drawings, paintings, writing and film all in my graduate show. Despite the difficulties of doing that, that's what my work was. Weirdly enough, I'm still doing exactly what I did then.'

The third Istanbul Design Biennial runs 22 October–4 December.