



Tacita Dean

BY JENNIFER HIGGIE IN REVIEWS | 11 NOV '96

The strongest presence in Tacita Dean's exhibition 'Foley Artist' isn't something you can see - it's sound. In the Minimalist expanse of the gallery, eight discreetly placed speakers transmit eerily clear, but fractured, evocations of sea, storms, Shakespeare, romance and dark alleys. A small video monitor makes it apparent, however, that the noises aren't 'natural' but generated by two middle-aged people in a studio. They are foley artists, and their job is to simulate sounds for the post-production of films. On the far wall, the action is meticulously dissected, timed and described on a dubbing sheet which is framed and mounted on a light box. Against another wall, what appears to be an elaborate tape recorder is revealed, on closer inspection, to have only a metaphorical function. The room plays tricks and the visuals don't prepare us for the aural effects.

'Open your ears...', intones a voice, and, as the lines from Henry IV Part II dissolve, the gallery fills with the lonely sound of high-heeled footsteps echoing down a narrow street. But the mental images of gloom, night and isolation are countered by the corresponding scenes we see on the monitor screen. A woman in leggings and sandals walks cheerfully up and down on what appears to be a metal tray in a well lit and populated recording studio. With the illogical abruptness of a dream, seagulls suddenly scream and waves crash as the camera leaves the woman and pans slowly across the technology responsible for this art of artifice. For the next 20 minutes or so, images and noises describe the disjointed narrative of a hallucinatory journey. Along the way, Dean plays expectation against assumption: as we hear people kiss and murmur on a beach, for example, the startling visual image is of the foley artists, who, staring blankly into space, lean towards their microphones with gentle indifference as they kiss and tongue their own wrists.

With its breakdown of the eight tracks of sound, footage and action cues, (the action we're supposed to imagine rather than what we witness on video) the dubbing sheet turns anticipation into a game of prediction. However, as far as fact sheets go it's as deceptive as it is illuminating - to read it, you have to turn your back on the video, and in doing so, once again fall prey to the fiction of the atmosphere that surrounds you. What the sheet describes is ultimately the thing we have no access to - the final product, the film.

Whilst all this is going on, the large Sondor loop-to-loop sound machine never stops turning. With its technological and efficient air, it looks as if it generates noise, but the tape is in fact silent, generating nothing but an image of itself. It's not connected to the speakers. Its lights don't flash. Thwart a machine's function and it becomes a simulator of different realities - a sculpture.

Rather than creating an exhibition about the construction and artifice of cinema (which is a possible but obvious reading) Dean uses film's shadowy metaphors to explore the gulf between the idea of something and how to explain it. Employing the crude mechanics of evocation to exaggerate subtle misunderstandings between media, her communication becomes as confusing as a game of sensory dominoes. She sets up narratives only to break them down again, and tries to make you believe in the presence of a thing or a place that's not there. If the world is a space of fluctuating appearance and sensation, how and why should it be represented? And, without being too didactic, how do we make ourselves understood? Obviously, these aren't new questions, but then none of the best ones are. And as none of them have been adequately answered, the twin enigmas of deception and reception might as well be explored using the foley artist, a person who - not unlike the visual artist - is paid to make everything seem like something else.



JENNIFER HIGGIE

Jennifer Higgie is a writer who lives in London. Her book *The Mirror and the Palette – Rebellion, Revolution and Resilience: 500 Years of Women's Self-Portraits* is published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson, and she is currently working on another – about women, art and the spirit world.

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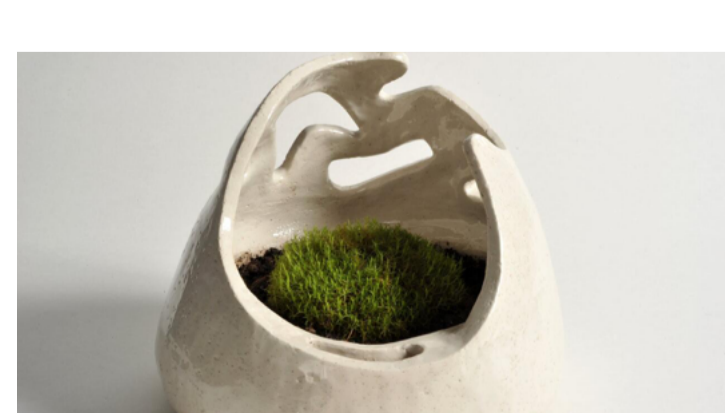


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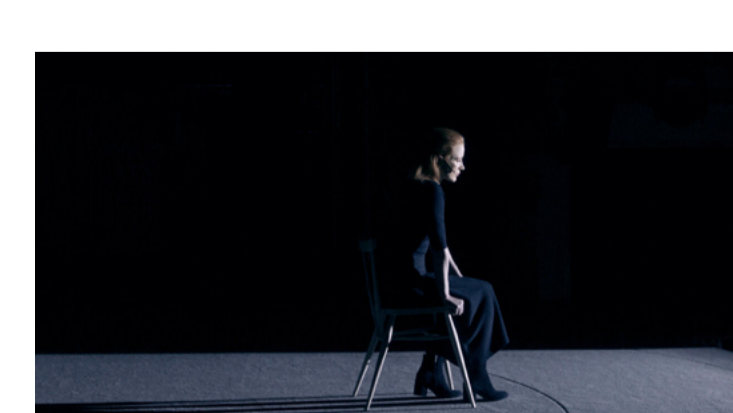
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