

Left and bottom: Christine Borland, *Fallen Spirits* [installation details], 2001 Photos John Brash
 Right: Tacita Dean, *Sound Mirrors*, 1999 Photo courtesy Melbourne Festival



Intimations of mortality

Christine Borland
Fallen Spirits

Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne Festival
 10 – 27 October, 2001

Britain was at the nucleus of the 2001 *Melbourne Festival's* Visual Arts Program, owing, one assumes, to curator Juliana Engberg's research while on residency at Spike Island in 2000, and to the support of the British Council. However, based less in sensation and more in sensuality, the choice of artists reflected strong personal affiliations rather than the latest cool thing. The exhibited works were variously fragile and sublime; largely low-tech [or at least hand-made], and almost exclusively by women artists. In short, the Engberg stamp seen in the ill-fated *1999 Melbourne Biennial* was firmly placed on the Festival Program, the closest thing Melbourne now has to a major international art event.

Engberg's curatorial nerve, and particular skill, to insist on accessible yet historically nuanced forms of contemporary art, was in evidence throughout the Visual Arts Program. The various projects, scattered around Melbourne's contemporary art spaces in October, were given an unexpected poignancy by September 11 and the emergent 'war against terrorism'. A certain ambience of fear pervaded Melbourne, lending art-making a marked gravity or irrelevance, depending on your faith. In fact, these divergent possible responses were both registered in Scottish artist Christine Borland's exhibition *Fallen Spirits* at Anna Schwartz Gallery – which, despite its modest scale, felt like the symbolic, vulnerable heart of the Program.

Although she has only shown in Australia once before [in *Pictura Britannica* in 1997], Borland is well known internationally for her gentle but provocative examinations of material culture, and especially for her museological works. So it was appropriate, then, that only at this bunker-like venue could this particular work have achieved its effect. As anyone who has been there will agree, Anna Schwartz Gallery is cold and austere, all concrete and white, very long and narrow, perhaps Australia's most minimal space [Borland's work at Australian Centre for Contemporary Art fared far less well on the floorboards]. Otherwise vacant, dramatically lit in the centre, one encountered a patch of bleached white leaves on the floor, part immersed in evaporating pools of liquid, soaking into the concrete gallery floor.

The leaves appeared like wizened petals, as tissue paper, some of them almost melting into the floor [the ordinarily unyielding concrete made strangely porous by the alcoholic substance]. Suspended in these little pools of liquid, which almost seemed like slowly melting ice, the leaves offered random Rorschach blots. Squatting, and staring intently, one was made forcibly aware of the pale membranes of the leaves and the minute cracks within the concrete. Of course the extreme, almost

impossible minimalism of this event – its silent, contemplative demands – came as a shock, especially if one had just come from another festival venue. There was none of the catchy raw humour and sexuality in the best of *Humid* at ACCA, or the lush excess of Tacita Dean's 16mm film imagery at Span Galleries [the other major British artist comprehensively introduced in the Festival]. But what all these works shared was a kind of poetic density based on an historical consciousness; that is, an awareness of mortality. A bit like poetry itself, Borland's is 'slow' art; you either take it or leave it, and those looking for more immediate thrills, grunts, or conceptual puns would have left disappointed. Like Dean's sublimely decayed ruins of weird utopias, the materiality of history and art, of war and sadness, is combined in Borland's *Fallen Spirits*, fetishised even. Somehow it's all about the light emanating from these abandoned residues, these *memento mori* of washed up boats or preserved leaves.

A whole explanatory narrative was available to readers of Geraldine Barlow's erudite catalogue text to *Fallen Spirits* – about how the leaves come from a plane tree which grows in the grounds at the Medical School of the University of Glasgow, which is part of an international family growing at such schools around the world, and how it is believed that Hippocrates taught his students under the shade of these trees over two and a half thousand years ago. This gives us a sense of Borland's project to explore the terrain between art and science, life and death. But although much is made of the symbolic significance and origin of the leaves, Borland's fragility and intimations of mortality are perhaps better experienced than read about. Still, the abundance of text surrounding the work is illustrative of Borland's rational approach to themes of life and death, and the underlying violence within Western modernity. Her work is very much an open laboratory experiment, where viewers are part of a logical equation. If we don't react in the anticipated manner, that's our problem. Some winced at the painful authenticity of it all. But we can be in no doubt about the sincerity of the artist's intervention into threads of history.



Daniel Palmer



God is in the edit

Under/Above
 Tacita Dean

Span Galleries, Melbourne Festival
 10 – 26 October, 2001

Moving through the nine darkened spaces of the Span Galleries, Tacita Dean's films might seem like rather simple though evocative choreographies of light, sound and time passing. They are however highly mediated, meticulously constructed and anything but straightforward. For instance, the only sound piece is *Trying to find the Spiral Jetty*, which takes Dean off on a journey or pilgrimage, to find Smithson's famous totem. We listen to the sound of the car driving down the rocky road, the rustling of maps and pointing out of landmarks – for the listener it's all an act of faith that she is actually doing what the title describes. A faith betrayed by the fact that she's not. As with all her work, artifice is implicit in the framing, cropping, editing and dubbing, which comes together in a highly constructed world. A world in which Dean is in control.

One of the most prominent formal devices Dean uses to exert control in her films is the lock-off stationary shot. In a TV age when reality takes the form of fast edits, gymnastic camera angles and complex tracking shots, her slow compositions walk a tightrope between unease and hypnosis. You can see people in the gallery wanting to get up and leave half way through, perhaps impatient for more to happen, but also transfixed, unable to leave. As with hypnotism, one feels a little constrained, even entrapped by the fixed position of the camera. The inverse of the standard tracking shot, Dean does not follow the action with her camera, she brings the action to the unmoving camera.

In this respect her work seems to belong more to the genre of landscape painting than the fast flowing frames of film. It is not surprising then that Dean started out as a painter, a practice which she continues today. The compositional strategies and framing of her films often seem as if lifted straight from the canvas. This association between film and painting is also evident in her fascination with that great untamed territory beloved of the Romantics – the sea. In fact if I were to describe *Banewl* [filmed during the solar eclipse of 1999 in Cornwall and something of a magnum opus] I could do worse than quote Robert Rosenblum's description of Caspar David Friedrich's *Monk by the sea*. "The picture is daringly empty... with the hypnotic simplicity of a completely unbroken horizon line, and about it a no less primal and potentially infinite extension of gloomy, hazy sky".¹

Rosenblum's thesis traces a history of Northern European landscape romanticism, an alternative to the Parisian beaux art tradition that connects Friedrich to Mondrian to Rothko. Based on a secular reading of the sublime as emanating from behind the material surface of the seen world, it is a tradition in which Dean's work appears very much at home. Dean's work also shares with this tradition a very Northern melancholia which courses through her work, engendered by the subjects of failure, redundancy and loss. But this is only part of the story. Dean is not a romantic, nor does she attempt transcendence.

Through the artifice of post-production, the manipulation of time, the careful composition of each sequence and the use of subjects rich with associations, we are constantly reminded that these are stories being told, fabricated and crafted. This is reinforced by the credit list of each work, some which acknowledge up to forty-five technicians, services, assistants and general helpers. The concern that Dean brings to every last detail and subtle nuance is as close to total as is humanly possible. Therein lies the contradiction at the heart of her work, knowingly articulated. Dean's subjects – machines, buildings, landscapes – as well as her own rigorous practice, speak of the human desire to control a world which will remain forever untamed.

Even the movement of heavenly bodies in the solar eclipse of *Banewl* is an opportunity for Dean to exert control over that magisterial moment and make it dance to a different rhythm. Its otherworldliness is rendered banal by jump cuts to contemporaneous scenes of rural normality – cows chewing the cud, chickens scratching the ground, grass blowing in the wind, time passing. The camera, motionless, recording both with equal attention, as the moon moves slowly into its preordained place between earth and sun cutting to a cow, oblivious, wandering into the distance looking for fresh grass – the epic and the everyday.

In this way Dean evokes universal themes but does so in a way that also betrays the illusion that we humans are in charge. All our storm controls, monitoring apparatus and sea defence in the end comes to naught. Ultimately the only world that we can ever really control is in the flickering time machine known as the edit suite.

Note

¹ Robert Rosenblum, *Modern Painting and the Northern Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko*, Thames & Hudson. London, 1988: 13

Andrew Mackenzie