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Tacit appreciation

Tacita Dean film portraits capture medium's unique quality



Still featuring David Hockney from Tacita Dean, *Portraits* (2016). Courtesy the artist; Frith Street Gallery, London and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris

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In a dark upstairs room in London's [National Portrait Gallery](#), three English actors appear on a small screen, not much larger than a mobile phone. They are flanked by cases containing miniatures from the 16th and 17th centuries and portraits of English literary giants William Shakespeare and John Donne.

As a projector clatters and light passes across the actors' faces, they sit, stand and shift position—sometimes together, at times alone. The actors span three generations and their faces show their respective years.

The craggy features of the classical actor David Warner, 76 (known from the stage and from Hollywood hits such as *Titanic*) twitches and trembles with passing thoughts which occasionally give way to twinkly looks. Stephen Dillane, 61 (who

portrayed the doomed would-be king Stannis Baratheon in *Games of Thrones*) gives a direct gaze, at one point erupting into laughter. Younger actor Ben Whishaw, 37 (who currently plays Q in the James Bond films, among other blockbusters) reads, smiles, lies on his back and curls up on his side.



Still from Tacita Dean, *His Picture in Little* (2017) by Tacita Dean. Courtesy the artist; Frith Street Gallery, London and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris

The title of this film by Tacita Dean, *His Picture in Little* (2017), comes from a line in *Hamlet*. While all three actors have famously played the melancholic Danish prince on the London stage, their only direction in this role has been to do nothing in particular. To various degrees they seem less comfortable choosing their own actions. Each small gesture is amplified through Dean's concentrated focus, begging the question of whether they are acting or being themselves. Is there a difference?

Dean shot the same strip of film at different times and in different locations. While the actors often appear next to each other, they were never actually together in real life. Their seeming interactions and exchanged glances happen entirely by chance.

What Dean describes as "blind cohabitation in the film frame" forms an intimate and compelling meditation on the nature of portraiture. She plays with, and riffs off, the scale and close facial scrutiny of the centuries-old miniatures that surround the work (Whishaw is also a dead ringer for the young John Donne).



Still from Tacita Dean, *His Picture in Little* (2017) by Tacita Dean. Courtesy the artist; Frith Street Gallery, London and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris

This intense jewel is one of nine filmed portrayals in "[Tacita Dean: PORTRAIT](#)" at the National Portrait Gallery (until 28 May). The exhibition is one of three co-ordinated shows dedicated to the artist in London institutions, each focusing on a different genre within her work: "[Tacita Dean: STILL LIFE](#)" is at the [National Gallery](#) (until 28 May); while "[Tacita Dean: LANDSCAPE](#)" is

scheduled to open at the newly refurbished and extended [Royal Academy](#) on 19 May (until 12 August).

In the National Portrait Gallery, a floor below *His Picture in Little* in the main exhibition spaces, Dean portrays in film a succession of elderly men, both alive and dead (and a diptych of the artist Julie Mehretu working in her studio).



Merce Cunningham performs in Tacita Dean, *STILLNESS...* (2008). Courtesy the artist; Frith Street Gallery, London and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris

Once again, David Warner is captured, this time ruminating alongside hummingbirds which flit amongst flowers in Los Angeles while artist Claes Oldenburg lovingly dusts his collection of knick-knacks. David Hockney smokes incessantly while Mario Merz cradles a pine cone against a background of chirruping Italian cicadas and poet Michael Hamburger shows us the rare apples in his Suffolk orchard.

In a memorable grand finale, the dancer Merce Cunningham sits motionless for four minutes and 33 seconds across six screens as he performs six different versions of his life partner John Cage's silent composition 4' 33". It is profoundly moving and, in fact, far from silent as the outside rumble of New York pours in.

This is the first time the NPG has devoted an entire show to portraits captured on film, and in each case we receive much more than a likeness. Each of Dean's films celebrates the unique painterly qualities of celluloid and its ability to capture time and atmosphere. Her subjects, pictured little or large, slowly reveal themselves and their surroundings to her still, watchful camera.