

Tacita Dean (born 1965)

England

JG 2013

35mm colour and black & white anamorphic film, optical sound

Courtesy the artist, Frith Street Gallery, London and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York and Paris

In April 1970, American land artist, Robert Smithson created his monumental earthwork, the *Spiral Jetty*, on the north arm of the Great Salt Lake in Utah. Quite probably the most famous land-art project to have been created, *Spiral Jetty* has become a mythic entity, lying submerged for many years and only appearing when the water level of the lake drops sufficiently to reveal the jetty's approximately 1500 metres of rubbly groin.

For years British artist, Tacita Dean, has been attracted to locate *Spiral Jetty*. First making a pilgrimage, which she sound recorded, only to discover the work was unseeable. Later, to revisit and film it, resurfaced. Like Ballard, Smithson was also concerned with time, but more optimistically, he was creating a work that would ebb with the flow of time and tide and speak across millennia as ancient earth forms have done. Smithson found optimism in the entropy that Ballard found despairing and terminal. For Smithson 'The strata of the Earth is a jumbled museum. Embedded in the sediment is a text that contains limits and boundaries which evade the rational order, and social structures which confine art.'

Entropy and disorder were exciting and liberating for Smithson:

One's mind and the earth are in a constant state of erosion, mental rivers wear away abstract banks, brain waves undermine cliffs of thought, ideas decompose into stones of unknowing, and conceptual crystallizations break apart into deposits of gritty reason. Vast moving faculties occur in this geological miasma, and they move in the most physical way. This movement seems motionless, yet it crushes the landscape of logic under glacial reveries. This slow flowage makes one conscious of the turbidity of thinking. Slump, debris slides, avalanches all take place within the cracking limits of the brain. The entire body is pulled into the cerebral sediment, where particles and fragments make themselves known as solid consciousness. A bleached and fractured world surrounds the artist. To organize this mess of corrosion into patterns, grids, and subdivisions is an esthetic process that has scarcely been touched.

Over a number of years Tacita Dean corresponded with J G Ballard. Originally she had hoped to film him as one of her artist 'Portraits', for which she is very well known. When he died this quest was halted, but Ballard's words lived on. Writing not long before his death he encouraged Dean to solve the mysteries of the *Spiral Jetty*.

Dean has brought Ballard's 'The Voices of Time' together with Smithson's jetty, seeing the clear links yet opposites between Whitby/Power's mandala and the earthwork, and understanding the twin artistic obsessions to explore time and matter. As she has written:

While Smithson's jetty spiralled downward in the artist's imagination through layers of sedimentation and prehistory, in ancient repetition of a mythical whirlpool, coiling beneath the surface of the lake to the origins of time in the core of the earth below, the mandala in 'The Voices of Time' is its virtual mirror, kaleidoscoping upwards into cosmic integration and the tail end of time.

Using voice over narration, provided by the British actor Jim Broadbent, and enlisting her own invention of inside-film-camera aperture gate masking to superimpose the spiral structure and shape into and onto footage, Dean's film *JG* moves backwards, forwards and intersperses time and content, studying in forensic details the minutiae, grandeur and formations of nature to produce a filmic thesis on life's intersecting patterns and reiterations, collapses and reformations.

With her inventive filming Dean examines glacial and cosmic time, sends our planet into a dance with other galactic matter; remains mesmerising with the slow drip of liquid time and spirals ever inwards and outwards in mimetic sympathy with her precursors and artistic collaborators across time. Dean's film is elegiac and a hymn for our Anthropocene age in which Ballard and Smithson's prophetic ideas resurface. All the while Broadbent's sonorous voice intones Ballard's mantra: 'These are the voices of time, and they're all saying goodbye to you . . . every particle in your body, every grain of sand, every galaxy carries the same signature . . . you know what the time is now, so what does the rest matter?'