Medium Newspaper
Date/Issue 29.Sep.2016
Categorie Article
Event Group Exhibition
Online version https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/29/arts/international/when-celluloid-is-both-the-medium-and-the-message.html?_r=0

Publication The New York Times
Section International
Author Nina Siegel
Cataloguing COD.JMP.00001.2016

THE ART OF COLLECTING

Film as medium as well as message

AMSTERDAM

Amsterdam exhibition celebrates celluloid, hoping for a revival

BY NINA SIEGAL

Tacita Dean was in the midst of a commission for Tate Modern in early 2011 when she learned that the film laboratory where she bought 16-millimeter film for her artworks had stopped making it, almost overnight.

As a purely business decision, the move made some sense. Digital film has made extraordinary inroads in the last five years. In 2013, 90 percent of feature films worldwide were made and screened on digital film, according to Variety, and now that number is closer to 99 percent. Until about 15 years ago, all films were made, stored and projected on celluloid film stock.

For Ms. Dean, though, the news ''was like eviction,'' she said recently in a telephone conversation from her studio in Berlin. ''At that moment I had this existential feeling that I had no idea what to do.''

But out of necessity came a change in artistic concept, and the birth of a cause. ''I realized that the work had to be about the medium of film, and it had to be made entirely of film, in a portrait form,'' she said.

Thus began Ms. Dean's campaign to save celluloid, including the 16mm and 35mm film that she has long used as artistic media. For the last five years she has created artworks, hosted symposia and lobbied the film industry, with the help of directors like Christopher Nolan and Quentin Tarantino, to save analog filmmaking materials for the use of artists like herself, and for posterity.

''FILM,'' the installation Ms. Dean made for Tate Modern in response to her existential epiphany, is a silent, 11-minute, 35mm looped film on what appears to be a giant vertical strip of celluloid, projected onto a 43-foot-high monolith in the London museum's Turbine Hall.



TACITA DEAN, MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK/PARIS AND FRITH STREET GALLERY, LONDON; PHOTO BY MARCUS LEITH & ANDREW DUNKLEY

"FILM," by Tacita Dean, will be shown at the EYE exhibition.

Ms. Dean created a slightly modified version of the artwork for the EYE Film Museum in Amsterdam for the exhibition ''Celluloid,'' which runs until Jan. 8. The show includes work by other artists and filmmakers who are pushing back against the tide of digitization and choosing to work with celluloid as a tangible medium.

''What we intend with the exhibition is actually to make people aware of the difference between celluloid and digital,'' said Jaap Guldemond, director of exhibitions at EYE and curator of the show. ''It's also to make people more aware of the history of the moving image and to really show the beautiful and specific qualities of celluloid — the intensity of the colors, the soft contrast between darker and lighter areas, and also the magic of the projector.''

Two duos are represented — João Maria Gusmão and Pedro Paiva from Portugal, and Sandra Gibson and Luis Recoder from New York — as well as the Italian-born, Berlin-based artist Rosa Barba and Ms. Dean, who now lives in Los Angeles.

Mr. Gusmão and Mr. Paiva make two- and three-minute nonnarrative films that focus on movement, color and light, often using extreme slow motion. The works are mesmerizing and sometimes create optical illusions: In one short film, two men stand at the edge of a river and throw a rock into the water. The film is projected upside down, so that the ripples from the rock appear not on top of the water, but underneath.

Gibson + Recoder, as the two artists call themselves, create installations using film apparatus. In the center of an empty black space, an old purring projector is fed a stream of celluloid. After projecting abstract light onto a free-standing screen, it spits it back out onto a growing mountain of loose film on the floor. Their installation ''Available Light Series'' uses raw celluloid that has been exposed to direct sunlight to create Mark Rothko-like abstract light projections.

Ms. Barba marries elements of documentary filmmaking with images of static or industrial landscapes, including projectors and elements of film production in sculptural, conceptual installations.

Ms. Dean's work often explores the process of trying to capture ineffable or mercurial qualities, like a cloud or waves on the ocean, and she has said she ''courts the unknown.'' She described her films as most akin to documentaries, ''but they're totally dysfunctional — they don't tell you anything. I call them depictions, closer to painting than cinema.''

The exhibition will also include

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ROEL MEELKOP

Running out The New York artists Sandra Gibson and Luis Recoder, who call themselves Gibson + Recoder, create installations using film and related equipment. This 2005 piece, ''Light Spill,'' runs film through a projector that then spits it out, forming an expanding mound on the floor.

screenings of longer films in the museum's theaters, accompanied by symposia and other public events. Although not explicitly engaged in the campaign to keep celluloid alive in the film industry, as Ms. Dean is, the EYE museum was motivated to create this show by its own interest in preserving and promoting the medium of celluloid.

About 99 percent of the 40,000 films that make up the EYE's historical collection are analog films, Mr. Guldemond said. When the museum screens analog films, it typically does so on reel-to-reel projectors, even if the films have been digitized, to honor the artist's intention.

And contrary to popular belief, he said, it can be easier and less expensive to store analog films than to preserve digital ones. Celluloid can be stored for at least 100 years in the right climate conditions, while digital files need to be updated every three years.

Like the vinyl long-playing record, the Polaroid camera and the manual typewriter, celluloid has attracted a generation of artists who have come of age in a digital world and have developed a nostalgic soft spot for analog.

''Young people have the thirst for this; they get it,'' Ms. Dean said. ''My generation are the worst; they are the ones who have just gone marching into the digital direction. They have turned their backs on film so readily. But the younger ones are totally into it.''

Mr. Guldemond sees the exhibition as a celebration of the medium, as well as the message. ''None of these artists are using film as a vehicle for a story,'' he said. ''It's a bit like poetics — you need to see it to understand it.''