

TAMARA DEAN



Portrait of TAMARA DEAN. All images courtesy the artist and Michael Reid, Sydney/Berlin.

In the Vanishing Wild

BY OPHELIA LAI

Every ritual tells a story of how we relate to the world. It connects us to a sense of order, structuring our days, imparting fortune, marking our place in society. Australian photographer Tamara Dean remembers devising rituals using stones and feathers when she moved as a teenager to a place at “the end of a dirt road out in the bush.” When the artist spoke with me via Zoom from her current home in Cambewarra, located between a mountain range and the Shoalhaven coast south of Sydney, she recounted another experience, in Israel, that had helped her overcome her fear of spending the night alone in the wilderness: “I made a circle of rocks under this tree, and challenged myself to stay there. It was a ritual to show that I was strong and brave enough to be by myself out in the world, and that was important to me—to know I had that kind of resilience.”

Rites derive their power from place in Dean’s dreamlike scenes of people immersed in the great outdoors, from youths wandering the bush to swimmers floating among lily pads. The artist’s reverence for nature began in her childhood home, which bordered a nature reserve. Dean relocated after her parents’ separation when she was seven or eight. “Having those sights and scents [of nature] as part of my becoming in the world, and that feeling of when my parents were together and the world felt quite safe—not that I want to go back to that place in my life, but I have a yearning to be in nature. It’s where I feel most at peace, alive, and connected.”

After high school, Dean enrolled in a studio art degree, but only completed a year. At the encouragement of artist and professor Simone Douglas, who noticed her photography, Dean joined a visual communications program at the University of Western Sydney, where she thrived as an illustration major. After graduating, while working as a designer at *GQ* magazine, she rediscovered her passion for photography when the art director decided to take an evening photography course and invited her along. In 2001, while documenting her friends at a protest, she noticed the technical expertise of the photojournalists and was impressed. “I approached the *Sydney Morning Herald* for work experience, and on the strength of how I performed they started taking me on for casual shifts.” She ended up working at the broadsheet for 13 years.

Dean’s conceptual photography practice flowered after she had her first child, in

2005. “It was the first time I wasn’t working. Suddenly life shifted, and I was a mother. I had no time that was my time. So when I was washing my hands or the dishes, or having a shower, those interactions with water felt spiritual to me in a way.” These thoughts on the ritual symbolism of water developed into a suite of dusky images that evoke the woodland nymphs and travelers of fairy tales. In *The River* (2009), a white-robed woman stands in the still water, bent over her reflection, as blanched fallen trees rise out of the shallows like a skeletal fence between her and the towering foliage.

For her project *The Edge* (2015), Dean asked teenagers to take her to their local haunts, where she photographed the youthful rites of passage happening in nature. The tensile release of fear ripples through a shot of a boy—sun on his back, arms outstretched—leaping into the tenebrous river. By contrast, *Ebenezer Rock Drop* is a quiet tableau of six teenagers by the water in the fading light. Dean brings a clear idea of composition and narrative to her image-making, but encourages naturalism in her subjects’ engagement with each other and their surroundings to capture “a sense of integrity and realness.”

In 2015, Dean produced her first immersive installation, *Here and Now*, during a residency with the University of New South Wales’s Creative Practice Lab. Dean installed mirrored walls and an artificial pond inside a black-box theater, then projected her photographs of the bush. To be encircled by their reflections and inhale the musky, earthy fragrance produced with scentsmith Ainslie Walker was to experience the sensory fullness of Dean’s imagery, which people often tell her “they feel they could almost walk into.”

The series *Instinctual* (2017) marked a turn for the artist, who began sublimating her human subjects into the natural landscape. Looking down from a bridge at the pale nude swimmers during a shoot, Dean was struck by the resemblance of the bodies to fish; she titled the work *Shoaling*. “That image really opened up my thinking. I started obscuring their faces because I wanted to take the focus away from the individual and distill my messaging to the universal, leaning towards the bigger questions of humanity and our place in nature.” Rather than serving as a backdrop to human dramas, nature is indivisible from the quasi-human characters of later projects. In *Our Nature* (2018), for example,

includes images of nude dancers running on all fours through an autumnal forest, and of octogenarians whose snowy tufts of hair blend in with the silver-tinged dusty miller. A picture of brunettes sitting among wilted lotus leaves from the series won the Josephine Ulrick and Win Schubert Photography Award, administered by the Gold Coast’s Home of the Arts.

During a Climate Council consortium at Heron Island in Queensland, Dean went snorkeling in the Great Barrier Reef. The trip inspired the undersea images of her next project, *Endangered* (2018–19), which garnered the prestigious Moran Contemporary Photographic Prize. Dean brought 21 women to Jervis Bay, not far from Cambewarra, with the intention of photographing them swimming like a spiral shoal. This proved impossible due to the choppy waves and poor underwater visibility, but the turbid water photographed beautifully, casting a lambent turquoise haze over alabaster limbs.

At the start of 2020, as Dean and her family were evacuated due to the raging bushfires in the region, the idyllic landscapes of her artworks became in reality a terrifying reminder of “the effects of climate change writ large in our lives.” Dean recounted an acrid rain of burnt leaves and contaminated water that tasted like ash. Yet she shies away from scenes of catastrophe, choosing instead to channel these “painful realities” into works that poignantly capture the “entwined fates” of humans and the natural world.

Now secluded at home due to Covid-19, Dean is working on a new project for her inaugural solo show at Ngunungulla – Southern Highlands Regional Gallery, opening in 2021. Dean has been walking around her seven-acre property with her equipment and creating technically elaborate self-portraits. *Tumbling through the treetops* (2020), in which the artist appears to do a backwards somersault from a bough, has been nominated for the highly selective William and Winifred Bowness Photography Prize. Dean remarked of her experiments in the early days of lockdown: “My feet would be all scratched, bruised, and battered; I was really throwing myself into the landscape.” But her practice has also become “a ritual of connecting with the land and with the elements,” she explained. “Photography feeds the connection, the connection feeds the photography. It’s a cycle of creation.”