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Two Artistic Outlooks, Heightened Side by Side

Mary Frank and Tacita Dean Shape Two Documentaries



By NICOLAS RAPOLD
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The artists Tacita Dean and Mary Frank might not make the most obvious pair, but they share space — and explore it — in a portmanteau program at Film Forum. Ms. Dean’s latest film experiment “JG,” traces time in stark outlines with desolate landscapes, triptychs and some dazzling cutout techniques, all of which are followed by “Visions of Mary Frank,” a comradely portrait of that sculptor by the musician and documentarian John Cohen.

Ostensibly the companion piece to Mr. Cohen’s film, “JG” plants itself indelibly on the screen with views of Utah and California moonscapes that seem to span the ages. Shot in 35 millimeter, Ms. Dean’s 26-minute piece often displays three, shuffling inset images at once (including, at points, various vistas and a prehistoric-seeming armadillo). But its signature flourish is its dynamic pastiches, fashioned through stencils and multiple exposures: images embedded within the frame in spiral or coinlike cutouts, like holes and lines scored onto the screen.

The effect recalls one of Ms. Dean’s reference points, Robert Smithson’s Great Salt Lake artwork, “Spiral Jetty,” which can feel like a curve drawn onto a watery backdrop. During the film, we also hear excerpts from the writings and correspondence of the author J. G. Ballard — the source of the intimately terse title — as well as of Smithson (all read by Jim Broadbent). Slowly but surely, the film pulls you in, thanks to the spiral motif, the rhythm of the edits and the quotation from a 1960 Ballard short story that itself features an organic artwork.

In a gallery setting, “JG” has been shown on continuous loop, but here it has an end and nicely leads into the story of Ms. Frank and her gesturally informed art. Weathered and beautiful, she speaks with disarming grace and vividness about her sculpture and drawing, in her studio and home. Mr. Cohen describes her primitive figures and vision as reflecting the “omens and obstacles” of the world, though her own characterizations of their contours and inspirations hit home better. (Of drawing birds, she asks simply, how could you not?)

“Visions” (which swirls with diverse music) also tries to spotlight its subject in a crowded history. Marrying young to the photographer Robert Frank, the London-born Ms. Frank came up in a male-dominated 1950s New York art scene (though, for her part, she says she didn’t let her two children hold her back). We get a sweet but telling glimpse of her with her current husband, the musicologist Leo Treitler, who clearly has his own opinions about her work.

There's a loose, bohemian quality to Mr. Cohen's sketch of a film that makes it a curious match to the rigor of the British-born Ms. Dean's intertextual, gallery-ready piece. But it evokes a rhyming of themes and of visual movement more than a clash of sensibilities.

JG

Visions of Mary Frank

Open on Wednesday in Manhattan.

A double bill of documentaries: "JG," directed by Tacita Dean; released by the Marian Goodman Gallery. "Visions of Mary Frank," directed by John Cohen; director of photography, Mr. Cohen and Harvey Wang; edited by Mr. Cohen and Edmund Carson; music performed by Leo Treitler. At Film Forum, 209 West Houston Street, west of Avenue of the Americas, South Village. Total running time: 1 hour 21 minutes. These films are not rated. The program is free.