

## Modern Painters November 2008

### God Save The Queen

#### Tracey Emin: failure + charisma = success

By Matthew Collins

**Ascendancy** Historically, Tracey Emin's rise was a touch-and-go situation: you could laugh in embarrassment or ignore her or maybe embrace the madness - and the last one won. Between 1993, her first show at White Cube, and 1999, her Turner Prize nomination, she took the artworld. After that, she took the world and became Cleopatra, with Elton John as Caesar and Prada as the Roman army.

**Bowing and scraping** Art writers round the world who want to be thought of as informed tend to be admiring toward her. She is thought to have suffered in life and to have found ways to transform suffering into art. In England, knowledge of her greatness reaches far beyond the artworld: art writers in the UK national press at first combined sneering with sympathy and then gradually caved in. Now it's all-out fawning. She's a household name. Years ago, she could be mocked as a media tart and a hopeless exhibitionist (in the pathological sense), but now it's considered a great faux pas to come out with an opinion like this.

**Very good** I like her sewn blankets on a visual level. Typically, they have headline information about her childhood or else announce important, sometimes misspelled thoughts she's just had, such as I AM DISGUSTED BY YOUR ENVEY or HOW COULD I EVER LEAVE YOU? Their verbal-diarrhea element, the sewn-on words not having anything deep to communicate but just being a kind of gushing, shouldn't be troubling. There seems to have to be something unreflective about the slogan-making process in order to get the energy going to be able to come up with such good color and shape decisions.

**Nude** Emin's paintings - which are a relatively recent stylistic turn for her - consist of preciously handled, separated-out scrawls articulating a weak figuration: typically a sign for her nude body (for example, *Asleep alone with legs open*, 2005). In artworld circles, the conventional thing to say about them is that they are maybe a bit weak. Her failures always have the effect of successes. The audience beyond the artworld has no interest in degrees of weakness but just swallows the Emin act as a whole, which is more or less what the insider group does (with the exception of the *October* crowd, which is appalled by any betrayal of revolutionary ideals in favor of consumer ones).

**Emote** Someone shrieking on the reality-TV show *Big Brother* is the same as Emin shrieking outside Munch's house; there's no difference at all in depth of feeling. (She made a film in 1999 of herself nude screaming on a wooden jetty outside Munch's summerhouse, called *Homage to Edvard Munch and all my dead children*.) Someone getting depressed on *Big Brother* is the same as Emin being depressed. But unlike them, she produces a lot of slogans about it - "You forgot to kiss my soul"; "My cunt is wet with fear"; "Every part of me's bleeding"; "Exorcism of the last painting I ever made" and sometimes makes them into needlework. The depression still isn't

interesting but the pleasure of the art object is. When these slogans or sound bites are made into neon signs like Nauman's, or videos like Acconci's, or driftwood sculptures like *arte povera* or little gouaches or oil paintings by any artworld me-too striver, it's possible to feel impressed by the confidence but at the same time completely unengaged emotionally.

**Pain** *My Bed* is a famous work, exhibited in New York, London, and Tokyo: her unmade bed transposed from the private space of the bedroom to the public space of the gallery, but otherwise untransformed. What is it? A manufactured saintly relic: the great power it memorializes or stands for is Saint Pain, Saint Class, Saint Gender, Saint Femininity, Saint Abjection, Saint Ethnicity (English mother, Turkish father), and, of course, Saint Victim. Her devil muses are Drunk, Raped, and Can't Spell. The popular audience receives all this simply as amazing glamour - simplicity is pretty powerful. For this audience (as expressed in a sublime moment in Spinal Tap when the band's manager tries to sum up ideology), the operating notion when it comes to loving Emin is that we live in a sexy world or maybe a sexist one, and art like hers exists on some kind of edgy interface between the two.

**Crawl** Another famous work (unfortunately destroyed in a fire) is *Everyone I have ever slept with, 1963-1995* (1995), a tent with the interior embroidered with the names of her sleeping partners from birth to the moment of making the work, not just sexual ones but her grandmother and two aborted fetuses as well. The interior had a lot of visual interest in the changing scale of the sewn shapes plus their placement and coloring. Visual pleasure went with a witty concept, making men crawl to see their names.

**Self** A lot of contemporary art requires mystification. It requires that an object not have anything visually engaging produced by the sum of its uninteresting parts. The sum must actually not add up and the magic ingredient X that solves the problem of little seeming to be there is Mystery. But with Emin, all hiatuses are explained by seeming to be an expression of self.

The weak paintings are, in fact, not weak, it turns out, because they say, "I really love Edvard Munch, I really love Cy Twombly, I really love being a painter, and it's only right that the ad for my career retrospective (at the Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh, until November 9) should be a photo of me painting in my underpants, because I'm a great artist who is a woman and when I paint something sexy it's because I'm sexy."

And if something by her looks very, very sculpturally feeble, like a wooden thing with a flabby structure and a little birdie stuck on top, that's because she comes from Margate and there really was something like that there. These justifications are pseudo and hysterical, but they result in a completion, a sewn-up quality about her artist act.

**Lots of levels** In our age, art (as opposed to design, say) is allowed to have inconsistency. One object can be visually nothing much while another is rich, but as long as there's an explanation that encompasses all the variety of visual levels, it isn't troubling that the variety exists.

Between rich and nothing much, Emin's objects are somewhere quite low on the meter. It feels awkward to just come out with it and declare that if Richard Serra (say) is 10, then she's 1, or maybe her sewn blankets shoot her average up to 3. But

supposing you did try and think about her objects not as fetishes but as art, of a kind that has to compete in a context of certain visual traditions, what could you say?

Serra once complained in an interview that because of the emphasis on merely reiterating the moment of the readymade, a lot of current art only adds up to insipid surrealism. He is an egotist monster, that's for sure, but I think he's on to something with that statement. Both Emin's sewn blankets (which she's done throughout her career) and Serra's *Torqued Ellipses* of 1997 basically reprise other things: not Duchampianism but the abstract values of 1950s sophisticated art: wonky rectangles in a pleasing relationship.

But the reprising that Serra does is more exciting. When we see his curving metal plates - so large we know they'd kill us if they fell on us - we're getting the old abstract values of modern art but in a theatrical way. We can't see the whole geometric shape all in one. Instead, parts loom over us, and we can only experience them by walking through them, and the effect is that the old values are being staged for us so we can feel distanced from them - as our cultural moment feels distanced from any kind of idealism - so now we can re-enjoy them. You know where Serra got the aesthetic from, but you feel it's staged so cleverly that it's a literalization of the absolutely best kind.

With Emin's sewn works, good as they are, the visual level is greatly lowered compared with Serra. But still, their literalization of a past aesthetic can sometimes seem witty and spry, and this is a relief compared with much of her art, which tends to be abject and pathetic (a literalization of a combination of Rauschenberg at his most indulgent and Jerry Springer).

**Belief** Emin's best formal quality is self-belief. The way this apparent non sequitur works is that no matter how abject, scribbled, or pathetic what she produces is, it has the force of conviction behind it, and that conviction rubs off on the audience, so that even hard critical taskmasters and -mistresses whose whole professional lives have been devoted to going around awarding points for impressiveness are wrong footed.

**Powerful** Where does that leave feminism? It's a simple black-and-white issue, but both at once. She's good for it. And bad. Good because the Emin persona is powerfully confident, bad because it's myopic and repulsively egotistical.

**Medal** Emin has achieved such a level of success that it's only when the objects are really desperate - the lamentable dreadfulness of that sentimental birdie on a driftwood sculpture - that even though she has her finger on the popular zeitgeist you still find yourself saying: I'm sorry the tide has gone alit and left you on the beach. But so often, because of the confidence for which she really does deserve a medal, even though you never see anything by her that transcends a level-3 visual experience, you feel you're in the presence of artistic hotness.

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