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Lunch with the FT: Tracey Emin

By Jackie Wullschlager

Scott's of Mayfair is full of braying voices, too-wide smiles, glinting sunglasses and, looking down from every wall and alcove, the brash, bright Young British Art aesthetic. I pass a Rebecca Warren sculpture as I enter and am shown to a table beneath a Gary Hume gloss painting. "Tracey is running late," a waiter confides but, almost immediately, a bird-like figure in cool linen blouse fastened with a safety pin, demure knee-length skirt, fishnet stockings and cowboy boots darts in and lands beside me.

Instantly friendly, flustered, mopping her neck, Tracey Emin leaps up again within seconds to fling her arms round the maître d'. She has piercing eyes, delicate, mobile features and teeth less wonky than photographs suggest. Gold rings, earrings and several necklaces all flash as she talks, breathless and animated in an intense Estuary English, for the next three hours.

"This is absolutely my favourite restaurant," she opens. "I come here every Saturday when I'm in London. My powerful lady friends – Virginia Ironside, Lynn Barber – lunch here. You see everyone – Charles Saatchi and Nigella eat here. I love lunch more than dinner. I always get too pissed in the evening." Without a glance at the menu, she orders caviar and oysters. "There, you can write that she orders from the menu without looking! And that the whole restaurant stands up when I come in." This last is not quite true but certainly she turns heads and is welcomed by every passing waiter. "You'd better behave," she tells one, "because this is the FT." Trying to match her pace, I order the first things that catch my eye from the extensive, fish-strong menu: asparagus tart followed by Dover sole.

The waiter interprets "any white wine" as the cheapest on offer: a crisp Sauvignon Blanc arrives speedily and Emin raises her glass to toast Carol Ann Duffy, whose appointment as poet laureate has just been announced. "She was up for it 10 years ago and didn't get it because Tony Blair didn't like her private life. Now a self-sufficient, openly gay woman has become poet laureate – it's f***ing brilliant. Things are changing." Duffy is 53 and one of Emin's pet themes is that "women go on getting better. It's like a light bulb, women burn and burn and burn, with men it's just one big flash. At about 40, a male artist has this massive ejaculation and then the work – though not the prices – goes down. It goes back to the sex thing: women keep coming and coming, men just do it once. It's a metaphor for life."

Emin turns 46 in July and her new show, *Those Who Suffer Love*, is about sex in middle age. It centres on a short animation film of a woman masturbating. Emin shows me an image on the invitation card and we agree that the headless figure, drawn in her characteristic spidery lines, looks like a frog. "Masturbation is supposed to be self-appreciative but it's also about self-loathing," she explains. "For women coming up to 50, the mind isn't as agile as it used to be. What was once possible isn't. You know, one minute you're being gang-banged by Hell's Angels, the next minute you're being f***ed by a dog. The film is about what happens to your mind in

middle age. So it's honest." She finishes with a pleading smile that makes me realise – recalling her two iconic pieces, the embroidered tent "Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-1995" and "My Bed", an installation of unmade sheets surrounded by a detritus of condoms and blood-stained knickers – that it is the fragile, childlike, almost ingratiating quality of her art, rather than its outrage or shock, that is most memorable.

A tower of tiny blinis appears. She peels off each one slowly and deliberately, dotting it with caviar with a subdued delight that recalls a child absorbed in a pack of sweets. Checking that my asparagus tart is acceptable – it is delicious – she continues: "Middle age and sex – it's taboo. This film is supposed to relate to all women. When you see it, you'll think, 'F***ing hell, I wish it was me!'"

In an age where self-exposure – reality television, confessional memoirs – is standard, Emin's autobiographical bravado stands out. "I was suicidal up to 10 years ago," she says. Her drawings, paintings, films, neon and textile works document broken love affairs, loneliness, desire, and depression following two abortions. She cites Edvard Munch, Egon Schiele, German expressionism and Louise Bourgeois as influences, though I reckon she depends most on post-minimalist conventions and installation media. Although nothing in her art is formally radical, her impression of emotional authenticity evokes both passionate responses – mostly from women "and a hell of a lot of gay men", she grins – and stinging criticism.

She represented Britain at the last Venice Biennale in 2007, where her exhibition of intimate drawings was widely panned. "I cried about Venice because people were so cruel," she admits. Did she get her revenge? "You know what Vogue said – the party of the century was Tracey Emin's party in Venice, the whole canal was blocked for my boats, Fatboy Slim was the DJ ... Jerry Hall was there in her boat – it made Britain look so glamorous." Yet the criticism still rankles. "You know what? I'll do Venice again. When I was there I imagined myself as a really old woman walking up the steps of the pavilion. When I'm 80 I'll have a great f***ing machine there" – she pounds her arms together suggestively – "or a swimming pool. I'll fill the British pavilion with water and I'll swim in it every day and it'll be a performance thing: a bit wanky but so lovely."

Is her whole life not a performance piece? "I only show what I want to show. Do you remember how fuzzy the drawings in Venice were? It's like Daphne du Maurier, everyone said she was so open. In fact, she only gave you what she wanted you to see – there were so many layers." An astrologer recently gave a talk on similarities between her and du Maurier's birth charts, since when she has been reading her way through the novelist's oeuvre. "She's like a female Edgar Allan Poe, very dark." I note the parallels between her text-based works and du Maurier's – both are storytellers, both tread a line between psychological disturbance and sentimentality.

Emin slips down oysters alternating with spicy cocktail sausages – "the fat of sausages with oysters is a nice sensation" – and leans forward eagerly, tapping my arm. "Do you ever write stories? My favourite favourite time is in the winter, when the morning dark is a different colour from the night dark, not the darkness which is coming but the darkness which is leaving. Then, I live in bed and write stories in my head." Ed Victor is her literary agent and she is planning a collection of stories, *Hotel International*, "that are a bit f***ed up. That's where I'm going to vent my spleen. They

say never summon the devil because he'll come. Well, I'm going to sit down with the devil and battle it out. I'm not afraid!"

Hotel International refers to her parents' hotel in Margate, Kent, where she was brought up with her twin brother Paul, at first "like a princess", then in poverty when the business went bust. Her Turkish father – who had lived with them half the week, spending the other half with his wife and family – "left my mum with absolutely nothing". Emin suffered abuse and neglect, her father was "phenomenally cruel – he has no sense of ethics or moral judgement" and "we had an electric fire with one bar; two meters, one for gas, one for electricity. We couldn't run them at the same time because there wasn't enough change. I washed in a bowl because there was no hot water. We squatted for six and a half years. I was down there hanging on for dear life" – she makes a ladder with her hands, and stabs a fingernail at the bottom – "I was suicidal. When Saatchi asks why I never send him any work, I say, 'You put Margaret Thatcher in power. Thatcher should be tried for crimes against humanity.'"

Yet, to her own surprise, she "voted for Boris" in London's last election. Her "favourite prime minister of all time is Ted Heath, health and education were his priorities. He wrote poetry, sailed, wore pink shirts and wasn't ashamed". She groans about Gordon Brown's income tax rise and recently attended a Conservative arts dinner, where her neighbour was [Tory MP] Ed Vaizey. "When he realised he was sitting next to me, he was petrified, he started shaking." This seems far-fetched: Emin, elected a Royal Academician last year, increasingly belongs to the establishment. In 2010 her first London retrospective opens at the Hayward, followed by a show at Margate's new Turner gallery in 2011. "The prodigal daughter returns. Then I'll have gone full circle, I'll be back where I started and be able to reassess my life."

Last Christmas, she got ill – a tapeworm, some chest and kidney infections – and her doctor advised five years off from the stress of making exhibitions. "A year ago, I got so upset about not having children, I stopped drinking to make me look more mummyish. I wanted to be more conformist, to give the idea of ordinariness. I always said I'd have kids when I had £1m in the bank and passed my driving test." Why didn't she? "I wasn't with anyone. But if you don't have children, you're cut off from a major part of society. Sometimes I wake up and think, 'What's it all for?' I could just disappear into obscurity. But when I was ill, I realised part of my desire to have children was that I want to escape my responsibilities to myself." She is currently in a relationship with photographer Scott Douglas, who lives in Scotland, and they spend alternate fortnights together. "I understand now that my children will not hang as pegs in a tent but on the walls of Tate." She has five godchildren and among many charitable ventures is the "Tracey Emin Library" in Uganda, where "lots of little children are reading books".

Emin says she "wouldn't be where I am now if I'd had those children. But no woman wants to have an abortion." Accidents happen, I venture. "Condoms split – but actually, no they don't if you don't move." She sits up rigid, arms pinned to her sides, mock-puritanical, then swings round to discuss desserts. Can she have the prosecco jelly without the wild strawberries because "I just want jelly"? The staff, who will clearly do anything for her, are willing to make it but warn it will take hours to set. She opts for raspberry ice-cream and mint tea, advises that my chocolate fondant "will kill you" and orders more wine. Finishing it, she looks accusingly at my still full glass.

"You're not going to drink that, are you?" she asks, pouring the contents into her own and downing it as I request the bill.

"I don't pay here," she boasts. "Well, I've paid already – with my art." Nevertheless, she apologises as we leave that my tip is too meagre (she has no cash on her to supplement it), compliments one doorman on his tie and collects a lost umbrella with another, then suggests we share a taxi home. As we crawl east to Shoreditch, she floods me with background information, details I might have missed ("It's good for you to see me in my world") before courteously opening the door to let me out. "Also," she reminds me as I step on to the pavement, "people expect me to be rude, but I'm really polite."

'Those Who Suffer Love', White Cube, London SW1, May 29-July 4

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