

ArtUS 2010

Tracey Emin

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I love Tracey Emin. There, I said it. Now I'm sure to get up the nose of a certain American cabal that has long seen this Saatchi sensation seeker as a dime-a-dozen, one-hit wonder.

And do you know why I like her, or why she continues to garner awards in her native Britain? It's because she's the genuine article. Unlike many gallery-bred American artists, Emin is a talented conceptual artist who lays her soul bare by continually stirring up inner demon~. As Eric Konigsberg reports in the NY Times, her art is "so closely bound up in her persona that detractors," are bogged down by all the kvetching, which prove ultimately a turnoff. A good first date perhaps, but not someone to bring home to meet mom.

What's so wrong with being so open? Are audiences now too afraid of getting personally involved in the artist's life? If true, it would fly in the face of what's been happening on TV over the past decade, with its endless stream of voyeuristic, cringe-worthy Big Brother programming. Are American art goers so different? Then again, dodging personalities is par for the course on this hallowed ground. Emin, meanwhile, is standing by her mantra. For her fourth exhibition at Lehmann Maupin (through last December 19), the notorious British "bad girl" amassed her standard litany of crass personal confessions. And even if chronic coping isn't your bag, the show was nonetheless a breath of fresh air in the mostly recession-drowned season.

Upwards of 60 objects in a wide range of media—a large-scale film projection, new neons and sculptures, embroideries and monoprints—helped to define "Emin the artist" as "Emin the self-deprecator." At every turn in "Only God Knows I'm Good," visitors got to witness Emin's insecurities about sex, romance, her mother, fame and, most importantly, herself ("Nothing touches," says one embroidery). In fact, the show brimmed over with self-loathing, most especially her mononoprints. In *More Nothingness* (all work 2009), for example, the artist's boundless energy manages to shine through the nervous, heavy-handed lines and selfgratifying figures. Grotesque yet anonymous, it's hard not to read these prints as autoerotic escapism. Although beautifully rendered, they look more like an angry schoolgirl's diary scribbles than genuine fine art. And you know what, that's okay.

In conjunction with Performa 2009, Emin gave a reading at University Settlement, just steps away from the gallery. She read poetry and selections from *Strangeland*, her 2005 collection of autobiographical writings. Awkwardly overdressed—not to be outdone by Performa founder Rose Lee Goldberg's leather pants—the artist began by apologizing for her shyness and not talking loudly enough. She spoke about her promiscuous youth and turbulent years in near poverty, as well as her love of drinking and dancing. Neither pretentious nor a wretched plea for sympathy, her prose was brutally honest, devoid of sentimentality. On at least two occasions, embarrassed at having to speak about her exploits, Emin admitted: "This is terrible ... I'm afraid this one's going to be quite stupid."

Hung on the back wall of Lehmann Maupin was a new white neon piece reading, "Only God Knows I'm Good." A line from a David Bowie song, Emin seeks our approval without directly asking for it. She seems to need to convince herself that despite a night of anonymous sex and heavy drinking, she's still a good person. It's as if she is waiting for us to give her absolution. Perhaps I'm overreacting, but there's something more to this than a simple prayer for forgiveness. Just as Bowie's lyric

goes on to say, " surely God will look the other way today," I too hope to whisper in her ear, "Yes, Tracey, you are *g-o-o-d!*"