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Tracey Emin: Love Is What You Want, Hayward Gallery, London

By Laura Mclean-Ferris

Tracey Emin: beloved of the tabloids, and despised by them too, for her outspoken position as a celebrity artist, but also for being a woman who shows and tells all: of used condoms, bloody tampons and masturbation. Whether you are interested in contemporary art or not, you'll have a sense of Tracey: the bed, the drunken television appearance, the tent with appliqué names of everyone she has ever slept with.

Much of this coverage, however, neglects to mention why we might be interested in paying attention to her in the first place, and this extensive survey seeks to put that right. Emin is an excellent storyteller, and her blanket works, stitched and embroidered with letters, phrases and shapes, demonstrate the intimacy with which she can relate fragments of her life. In a work such as *Hotel International*, names of family members and phrases, are accompanied by notes handwritten on patches of fabric full of the optimistic pathos that Emin has made her speciality: "Whenever I see the sign KFC and Colonel Sanders I always think of home" (the inclusion of the snowy-haired founder of the fast-food restaurant in this statement being the detail that drives home the sense of cold comfort).

The piece that made me love Tracey a little bit, when I first saw it, is the 1995 video *Why I Never Became a Dancer*, on view here, in which shots of Margate are overlaid with Tracey's rather sweet voice, as she relates how she dropped out of school, spending her time drinking cider on the beach and having sex. By the time she was 15, she announces, she had had them all, and threw herself into disco dancing. After a group of boys ruin her chances at a dancing competition – her route out of Margate – by shouting "slag, slag, slag" at her, she runs off the dancefloor: "I'm leaving this place – I'm getting out of here". The video culminates with her dancing ecstatically, a big grin on her face: this one's for you, boys.

Emin conveys this mixture of emotions in her distinctive drawings and prints, which are wavery and blotchy: a fragile, curious mix of the doubtful and certain. Never-had children haunt the exhibition at certain stages (tiny lost shoes, left outside on the sculpture terrace), but many of her recent paintings now feature women alone, pleasuring themselves in pale cloudy landscapes of custard, white and rose; a surprisingly singular vision, singularly executed.