

The Times May 17, 2011

I arrived a sceptic and left a convert

By Rachel Campbell-Johnston

Cultural phenomenon or self-obsessed freak? Take a quick vox pop on the subject of Tracey Emin and you will find a pretty equal balance of wildly unbalanced opinion. This lack of indifference speaks volumes in itself.

Mad Trace from Margate has made quite an impression in the course of a career that has now lasted for close on a quarter of a century. The enfant terrible has turned into the grand dame. In 2007 she was elected a Royal Academician and represented her country at the Venice Biennale. She has been honoured with a gallery of her own at the Tate. If she turns up at a party, her snapshot appears in the social pages. Every charity auction demands one of her works. She has even been anointed a sort of unofficial artistic laureate: *The Independent* newspaper employed her to sketch the balcony kiss at the royal wedding. It will be "national treasure" next.

Does Emin deserve to be quite so eminent? A Hayward Gallery exhibition provides the opportunity to ponder. Here, in the first major survey of her work to come to London, the visitor will find anything from a display cabinet packed with the sort of handmade personal mementos that she sold in her career-launching 1993 Bethnal Green "shop", to the 2011 neon that lends its title, *Love is What You Want*, to the entire show.

Here are her evocative drawings as scratchily awkward as the pictures drawn by a victim of child abuse and just as poignant; there is her powerful *I've Got It All* (2000), a photograph of herself with money pouring from between splayed legs - the sort of eye-catchingly confrontational image with which, at her most striking, she can make her stark point. Here is a rickety reconstruction of a Margate pier, a collapsing walkway on wobbly stilts with broken handrails and missing planks, leading to a wooden hut. It overlooks the eternity of imagined tides. Emin is clearly aware that she is confronting the test of time and she does so with customary courage and integrity to her experience.

These are grouped for the most part according to the media in which they are made, which makes sense not only because it highlights the diversity of her techniques - she draws, paints, scrawls and collages, stitches, knits, crochets and nails, hammers and assembles, directs the camera and does the performances - but also because, although certain themes are picked out by the hang ("family and friends" or "trauma", for example), Emin is not an artist who makes a pronounced chronological progression. Her work remains rooted in the emotions of her upbringing, in the domestic aesthetic of a little flat above a Margate shop, in the style of the tacky seaside town where a vulnerable young girl grew up hoping that sex might be the path to true love. Emin has an obsession with her own experience. Her greatest talent is to translate confession into a cultural currency.

Little wonder that she soared to celebrity in our modern confessional culture. Her

dyslexically annotated drawings, her crudely appliquéd messages and brash neon slogans, in which she deals with anything from anal sex to abortion, appeal to a prurient Jerry Springer culture that revels in the most abject details of life. Emin has certainly earned her 15 minutes of shame. As she spills out her stories of rapes and abandonments, of bullying boyfriends and self-abasing depressions, of an absentee father and a much-loved nan, she holds up a mirror to our voyeuristic *Big Brother* world.

The cult of personality, with its queasy mix of self-pitying revelation and unabashed self-promotion, of maudlin sentimentality and blatant commercial interest, is presented with a blend of appalling brashness and unbearable poignancy. The spectator sees how sad and superficial - and yet how compulsive and horribly successful-it all is. If you hate Emin for that, then she's doing something right. If you like to feel shocked, there will be plenty here to affront you.

Emin is an artist who will put her used tampons in a display cabinet, who will draw herself masturbating again and again, who will hurl expletives in luminous neon and embroider swear words on to Women's Institute style quilts. But it's no good just huffing and puffing about the parlous state of contemporary art. Emin is here, alive and kicking against proprieties, and very much present. So it's pointless to take this mid-career show as the perfect opportunity to knock her. Make the most of it. Try to listen to the quieter voice that is speaking behind the scream for attention; try to assess her contribution in a more measured way.

I have to admit that I would love to hate Tracey Emin. But I can't: a compliment which, apparently, she does not return. She was furious, I was warned by her gallerist, when once I compared her with the model Jordan. I'm still not quite sure why. Just as Jordan, with a determination that can only be feted, developed her God-given assets (a fine pair of mammaries) to stir up public interest in her life, so Emin, armed with an inborn talent for drawing and a similarly implacable ambition, has turned her experiences into a cultural phenomenon.

Often, I feel that I hear a great deal too much about Emin. I turn up to each new show inclined to be sceptical. Those awkwardly confrontational confessions applied to blankets, that detritus of remembered despair left lying about, those pleading, self-pitying neon pieces have become almost a caricature. Emin now counts among Britain's best recognised artists. She is rich and famous. And yet still she seems discontented. She sits at the centre of our culture parading her wounded psyche like some contemporary martyr, displaying her vagina like St. James displayed his cockle shell. Can't she just pull herself together and move on?

It's easy to feel intemperate in advance. And yet the reality of her work is that each time I see it I find myself slowly, ineluctably, drawn into her world. This exhibition is no exception. It's not just that the Hayward provides an atmospheric forum, including the outdoor sculpture terraces, evoking the maze of the psyche that this exhibition explores - and with several felicitous chances thrown in, such as the way in which a flick-book style animation film showing a woman masturbating, a sort of headless human-frog in high strappy heels, is reflected in plate glass windows so that, when you gaze out, the film seems almost to be playing across the surfaces of the National Theatre beyond; it is also that, just as the more you get to know a person - all their failings and foibles included the harder it becomes simply to dismiss them,

the deeper you venture into Emin's character, the harder it becomes to remain unmoved by her work.

Beyond the raucous shout for help, for pity, for love, is a universal plea for understanding. Behind the brash desire for money and fame is a more profound craving for freedom. And it seems from this show that Emin is beginning to discover it. As she gradually leaves her gaudy ghosts behind and finds in her more recent monochrome pieces not that liberation which comes from saying as loudly as you can exactly what you think, but the profounder freedom which comes from a philosophical acceptance, she moves away from the visceral urge to expose herself like some artistic flasher and towards a more cerebral, but just as deeply felt, desire to find the truth. There is nothing more boring than a lie. That is what makes Emin's work – but not necessarily the events of her life so interesting. I may have arrived at this show as a sceptic. But, as has happened before, I left a convert.

Tracey Emin: Love is What You Want is at the Hayward Gallery from tomorrow until August 29. southbankcentrc.co.uk