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Tracey Emin: No Bedtime Story

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Once the bad girl of Young British Art, her works taken seriously by only a few, Tracey Emin now has her first museum survey under way. Will she finally achieve a level of art-world respectability that matches her pop-star notoriety?

"YOU PEOPLE AREN'T RELATING TO ME . . . I want to be free. Get this fucking mike off." There was a time when Tracey Emin was best known for this foul-mouthed, drunken rant on British television during a live discussion on the death of painting filmed after the 1997 Turner Prize ceremony. Her friend Gillian Wearing, who had won the \$33,000 accolade that year, phoned her the next day to talk about the TV outburst, but Emin had no recollection of the incident. Since then, we've become almost intimately acquainted with Emin's universe through cathartic, autobiographical works such as her embroidered tent, *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With* 1963-95 (1995), and *My Bed* (1998), as well as through her numerous writings, performances, profiles and interviews. After a troubled childhood, she studied at the Maidstone College of Art in Kent, and at the Royal College of Art in London before becoming a leading light of Charles Saatchi's infamous touring "Sensation" show and the so-called Young British Art (YBA) movement. The rest, as they say, is history, or even ancient history. As Emin told me on a recent visit to her studio: "That all feels like a million years ago." ¹

Or at least it did until Emin was offered a midcareer retrospective at the Hayward Gallery in London this summer. The show presents a fresh opportunity to look back at two decades of her work in drawing, sculpture, installation, photography and video. Her national status stands to be further cemented, too, given that this survey, titled "Love Is What You Want," is headlining the 60th anniversary celebrations of the Festival of Britain being staged across the entire Southbank Centre. This festival harks back to the great postwar exhibition of 1951 and thus, according to one commentator with tongue firmly in cheek, effectively makes Emin "a latter-day Vera Lyn n." ²

Emin may not quite be the nation's sweetheart—"There's still enough people out there who really hate my guts," she says. She has, however, certainly become part of the cultural establishment, having been elected to the Royal Academy in 2007, represented her country at the Venice Biennale that same year and more recently come forward as an important ally of the current Conservative-led Coalition government during a time of unpopular cuts to arts funding in the UK. Emin defends her position. "I went to a really small dinner at 10 Downing Street with the prime minister and about 15 people," she remarked. "And he said, 'the good news is we appreciate everything you've done in the last 10 years, but the bad news is that there's no money there to show you.' If Labour had got back into power the cuts would have been a thousand times worse, I promise you." Such is her individual pull that in April 2010 a visibly proud Emin almost single-handedly launched a brand new David Chipperfield designed public art museum, Turner Contemporary, in her

hometown of Margate. The project would have been impossible without her support. She is scheduled to have an exhibition there in 2012.

AS SHE APPROACHES an institutional landmark show at the Hayward, and, in the not-too-distant future, her 50th birthday (she was born Tracey Karima Emin in London in 1963), there remains a suspicion that her celebrity has made her art popular rather than the art itself being responsible for her fame. It is true that the well-publicized bad-girl antics and the tell-all confessional style of her written outpourings-her memoirs to date, detailing horrific tales of abuse, rape and abortion, were collected and published in 2005 as *Strange/and-have* helped endear her to a personality-hungry public, while perhaps also projecting an image of the artist as wallowing in her own never-ending psychodrama. Indeed, she is aware of being typecast in an ongoing, tail-chasing soap opera of her own creation-even admitting to using her art as therapy: "Yeah of course it helps-it doesn't just help me, though, it helps other people too, although they can get cut off from the work on the walls and forget that I'm an artist."

Yet, even when Emin's work is competing with the bright lights of fame and all the attendant media scrutiny, there's an equally strong argument to be made that it should be taken more seriously and deserves much more credit for sealing her starry reputation, both inside and outside of the art world. Even if there's an overriding scrappy esthetic to her output-from early collections of personal objects or curios now presented in vitrines (such as the performative documentation left over from "The Shop" that she ran for a brief time in 1993 with her friend and collaborator Sarah Lucas) to her trademark feverish line drawings and scarified monoprints-her career is also studded with numerous formal leaps. One such moment was her brazen adoption of neon, manifested in brutal hand-scripted text pieces such as *My Cunt is Wet With Fear* (1998) and *People Like You Need to Fuck People Like Me* (2002), which co-opted an industrial, masculine material generally associated with Minimal and Conceptual practitioners in America. Those neons hardly convey anything as specific as the bleeding-heart narrative of an oversexed, half-British, half-Turkish-Cypriot female artist from a small seaside town in southern England.

ONE PIVOTAL PIECE among the 160 or so gathered by curators Ralph Rugoff and Cliff Lauson for the Hayward show is Emin's first text-based applique quilt, *Hotel International* (1993), which not only signaled a novel subversion of traditional handicrafts in the service of her unique mode of storytelling, but also announced her arrival on the global stage-in ways other than initially intended (the work's title actually refers to the name of a 70-room guesthouse her mother ran that was also Emin's childhood home for a time in Margate). Fresh from her first solo show in London, Emin traveled with *Hotel International* and her new dealer, Jay Jopling of White Cube, to New York for the Gramercy International Art Fair (which would become the Armory Show) at the Gramercy Park Hotel in May 1994, unwittingly falling asleep under her painstakingly sewn patchwork before the collectors streamed in. "I'd never been to New York before and I couldn't understand the jet-lag thing so I stayed up all night at a party," Emin recalls. "When the Gramercy opened I was too exhausted to get out of bed, so people just came and met me. It really was an accidental performance." The unexpected encounter with the artist under her own hotel room- ready work of art has since become part of art-world legend, as has her first show with Jopling's fledgling London gallery the year before. Ingeniously titled "Tracey Emin: My Major

Retrospective 1963-1993" (she firmly believed her first show might also be her last), it included tiny photographs of previous paintings that she had burned, alongside the autobiographical blanket. While such anecdotes don't necessarily further the interpretation of

Emin's work, as any survey should surely aim to do, they do prove that her life and art are so intertwined as to make it nearly impossible to detach some thorny stories from these complex and highly personal objects.

Perhaps the danger with a bona fide major retrospective- rather than her previous invented proto-surveyor another early foray into institutional critique, "The Tracey Emin Museum" of 1995-98-is that we already feel that we know Emin's arc; that the back catalogue is maybe already too well -thumbed (despite the fact that her tent was destroyed in a storage fire in 2004 and the infamous bed, owned by Charles Saatchi, will not be displayed until next year for an Olympic-year exhibition at his own venue).

Without wishing to lapse into Eminesque egocentrism myself or claim any particular originality in critiquing her ostensibly single-seamed practice of self-portraiture, my review of Emin's last London show, "Those Who Suffer Love," at White Cube in 2009, complained of a preponderance of her "familiar bug bears: sexual longing, frustrated affection and self-loathing." I went on to say that "it's hard to feel the requisite compassion for her well-documented life tribulations and pity-poor-me attitude-we've all got problems, sister."³ I've since revised this harsh stance embarrassingly typical among British critics, given that almost all of us were similarly scathing about her figurative paintings for the British pavilion in Venice), first for having

been called out while hosting a discussion with the artist last year-at which my invariably facile, anecdote-based interpretations of her work went down in flames-but secondly, because, frankly, I'm not a woman.⁴

AN ICONIC PHOTOGRAPH from 2000 called *I've Got It All*, in which Emin shovels money into her crotch in apparent disregard for the viewer, is surely meant to antagonize people and inflame charges of narcissism and navel-gazing. The work could also be read as an affirmation of her considerable charms and powers as a woman, in defiance of the male-dominated world looking on. Indeed, Emin has become something of a feminist role model for bringing uncomfortable and culturally taboo subjects-such as sexual promiscuity, abortion, childlessness and her resulting guilt-out into the open, often prompting public outpourings of empathy and emotion toward her: "Many of them want to hug me on the street-or maybe they want me to hug them, I'm not sure." Her on-canvas and on-paper persona, inevitably magnified by art's disposition toward the heroic and the romantic, makes her the modern-day embodiment of the tragic Ophelia or the wounded Madame Bovary, in need of our salvation and love.

Not only is Emin's drawn work the most immediate carrier of these raw feelings-works such as *Sad Shower in New York* (1995) and *Get Out From Living Inside Me* (2008) read almost as entries from a diary-but it is also her most honest and direct medium. With the exception of neon (which she has often described as "sexy"), all of Emin's other chosen materials obviously chime with the feminine sensibility: the applied textiles, embroidery and crochet, of course, but also the pastel-colored paintings and small scale sculptures of birds or baby clothes cast in bronze. Thanks

to their spindly construction and homemade plinths, even the latest large-scale installations, produced for the Hayward, are only grudgingly monumental. Emin calls the works, which resemble seafront watchtowers or beach-combed detritus presented as quasi-religious offerings, "a family of objects."

EMIN'S HOMELY, FRAGILE ESTHETIC, however, doesn't necessarily imply a weakness in her art or suggest an inability to compete with the industrial gallery spaces her work is regularly subjected to, from White Cube's cavernous Mason's Yard space to the Hayward's notorious brutalist concrete halls. Instead, hers is feminism with bite, an annexation of the *vagina dentata*-that traditional symbol of castration anxiety.

The pain and aggression found in a blanket such as *Something's Wrong* (2002) or the photographic series "Details of Depression" (2003) are tempered by this tender yet terrible feminine beauty or, in the cases of *Psyco Slut* (1999) and *Fuck Off and Die, You Slag* (2002), her wry sense of humor. "Living without love, without children and without a husband, and being without all those things that so many people think are imperative, that you need to survive as a human being, means that I do tend to see things as though from the outside looking in-from quite an existential point of view." That Emin regularly punctures her monomaniacal works with self-deprecating title phrases such as *Mad Tracey From Margate, Everyone's Been There* (1997) reveals how she might really consider herself unworthy of such attention in the first place-providing evidence of a very British humility, or at least a healthy streak of false modesty.

So, if the Hayward survey confirms the authenticity and vitality of Emin's expressionistic outbursts as an angry young artist, can she continue to mine her own autobiography in light of such sustained success and a vastly improved lifestyle, as she approaches a prosperous end to her half-century? "I had a pretty fucking rough year last year," she tells me. "My boyfriend left me, my dad died, and I fell down the stairs and smashed all my ribs." The answer, then, despite her enviable position, seems to be, emphatically, yes.

Overriding any fresh trauma, though, is undoubtedly her failure to procreate and the regret of her terminated pregnancies, which have become painful notes in her work, from the 2002 blanket *I 00 Not Expect-where* the text continues, "to be a mother but I do expect to die alone"-to the haphazardly strewn miniature bronze shoes, teddy bears and socks of "Baby Things" (2007-11). Her continued artistic fertility ironically supports the English critic Cyril Connolly's scathing indictment of 1938: "There is no more sombre enemy of good art than the pram in the hall." Her childlessness seems to be undeniably spurring Emin on to new goals; her laments are now becoming self-fulfilling entreaties to put her house in order in preparation for a lonely later life, without children to nurture. "Now that I'm nearly 50 I can look back and question the loss of these things, whereas when I was 30 I wasn't aware that I'd lost them at that point."

Mortality is on Emin's mind, more so than ever before, for example, in her recent Louise Bourgeois collaboration, in which the grande dame sent Emin a series of gouache torsos to be modified, completed and exhibited at Hauser & Wirth in London earlier this year, as "Do Not Abandon Me" (posthumously for Bourgeois, as it turned out). "She's a really good person for me to study, not only how she uses

feminine forms and thoughts but how she goes from the tiny to the big," says Emin.

Emin already has elaborate plans for her own funeral, involving her body being set alight on a pyre by archers off the coast of Margate. She once even fashioned her own bright blue casket, much as she created a series of child-sized "Little Coffins" and a black bronze *Death Mask* (both 2002), all included in her retrospective.

"Someone said I've never seen a death mask look so alive, you can almost see my smirk in it." Indeed she's right when she says that, in comparison with the morbid visions of many of her YBA contemporaries, from Damien Hirst to the Chapman brothers, "I'm more obsessed with life."

Her thoughts have also turned to her philanthropic projects, from her long-term support of the NSPCC (the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children) and the Terence Higgins Trust (an HIV charity), to her wholesale funding of the Tracey Emin library in rural Uganda. Eventually she will open an eponymous foundation, located on the site of her new four-floor studio complex near her house in East London. "This building will be like a museum when I die," explains Emin. "Everything here will be exactly as I leave it, and students will have access to the archive. I don't have children, so I don't want to do all of this for nothing." As if the legacy of such a rich, indulgent mythology were not enough to leave behind, Emin already has an eye on her final bow, on that last major retrospective.

¹ All Emin quotations from a conversation with the author this spring in London. ² J.J. Charlesworth, *Art Review*, March 2011, p. 38. Vera Lynn is a British singer popular in the 1940s and '50s. ³ Author's review of Emin's 2009 "Those Who Suffer Love" show at White Cube, in *Time Out London*, June 4-10, 2009. ⁴ "Time Out Presents an Evening with Tracey Emin," Royal Institute of British Architects, Sept. 22, 2009.