

Wall Street Journal Magazine March 2012

The Art Star With Everything to Lose

By Natasha Garnett

There was a time when it was almost impossible to read an article about Tracey Emin without some small derogatory qualifier attached to the contemporary artist's name. Invariably, throughout the end of the '90s and for the best part of the next decade, she would be described as the "loud," "brash," "bad girl" of the British art scene. Within the art world, she would often be dismissed for being both self-promoting and self-obsessed, partly due to the autobiographical nature of her work.

Emin brought a lot of the bias on herself. When she first rose to notoriety, as part of a group of artists including Damien Hirst, Sarah Lucas, and Jake and Dinos Chapman, who would come to be known as the YBAs (Young British Artists), Emin certainly lived up to her reputation. She was the artist who embroidered the names of everyone she had ever slept with on the inside of a tent. Her monoprints and drawings told of broken relationships and rape in her teenage years, and catalogued her abortions; she offered up her unmade bed and told viewers to consider it a work of art. Then, in 1997, live on national television, she appeared to be drunk and incoherent, eventually storming off the show muttering, "I want to be with my mum." From that moment on, in the United Kingdom at least, and even to those who had never paid much attention to contemporary art, Emin became a celebrity. Known, perhaps, for all the wrong reasons.

Now, at 48, Emin finally seems to have sidelined her own personal distractions. Lately, not only has she established herself as a leading figure in the art world, but she's also become part of the establishment. The same steely fortitude that helped propel her from a humble childhood in the seaside town of Margate to the Maidstone College of Art, and later to London's prestigious Royal College of Art, has emboldened her work with a disarming honesty and made her one of the most prominent artists of her generation. In 2007 she represented Britain at the Venice Biennale. Two years later, one of Emin's idols, Louise Bourgeois, asked her to collaborate on a series of drawings titled "Do Not Abandon Me," exploring themes of sexuality and female identity. Recently, Emin was appointed professor of drawing at the Royal Academy of Art. She was even invited to greet the queen when Her Majesty visited the Turner Contemporary gallery late last year, which Emin admits was a proud moment. And, at the request of David Cameron, her neon "More Passion" now hangs in 10 Downing Street. In addition to a number of international exhibitions this year, and on the heels of a retrospective of her work to date at London's prestigious Hayward Gallery, come early 2013, Emin will have her first solo show in the U.S. at Miami's Museum of Contemporary Art. Could it be that the enfant terrible of the British art scene has finally grown up?

"I'm not sure about that," says Emin, as she takes a seat at the kitchen table in her East London home. It's a cold winter afternoon, and instead of making the tea she had suggested, she decides to open a bottle of red wine. "I'm certainly older, and that all seems a long time ago. Things change, you change, your thoughts do, your

life moves on and my work has changed because of that too. I'm asking questions that I wasn't addressing before and doing things that I wasn't doing before. I know people have a view of me that can be quite one-dimensional, even within the art world. But they don't know me, so that's OK, and they are entitled to their opinion."

In terms of Emin's art, her various mediums—ink and pencil drawings, monoprints, neons and embroidery foremost among them—haven't changed, but the content has evolved. For last year's Frieze Art Fair in London, she created "The Vanishing Lake," a site-specific exhibition of her drawings and tapestries shown within a Georgian house on Fitzroy Square. "I called it that because I saw part of myself as drying and not there anymore and I wanted to question the whole idea of love and passion, whether love exists anymore," Emin says. "Why? Because I'm nearly 50, I'm single, because I don't have children."

To demonstrate what she means, Emin makes the short walk over to her new studio, a former 17th-century weaving works that she purchased and restored last year for \$7.6 million. As Emin stands before the impressive four-story building and searches for her keys, it's impossible not to notice how far the artist has come. Twenty years ago, she was renting a dreary bedsit in Waterloo, making art on her bedroom floor and struggling to find enough money to keep the electricity on. Today, in addition to her rambling home and studio, she owns a house on 35 acres in the South of France, near Saint-Tropez, where she retreats for most of the summer to work.

It's late in the day, and the 15 people that she employs are long gone. As Emin walks through the building, she turns on lights. It's clear why the studio took two and a half years to complete. There is an installation and sculpture room, as well as individual spaces for sewing, embroidery and drawing. On the top floor, Emin has her own private studio, with a kitchen, a well-stocked wine rack, a bedroom and bathroom. "I put the bedroom in because sometimes I don't sleep very well at night and sometimes I like to rest in the afternoon," she says. "But I've been thinking that when I'm really old and the stairs get too much for me at home, then I could just put an elevator in here and move in."

Emin's own touches are everywhere, from porcelain ornaments of cats, which she collects, to well-worn sofas that add a more personal feel to the space and on which she likes to think, draw and sew. But the *pièce de résistance* of the building has to be the 52-foot single-lap pool that she installed in the basement. The pool area is designed in the style of Victorian swimming baths, with porcelain tiles and a high ceiling. There are changing rooms and shower facilities, even a steam room. Swimming has always been one of Emin's great passions, along with "drinking, dancing, sleeping, making art and reading, though not in that order," she says. "The pool is a luxury, I know, but it gives me time to think."

Lately Emin has been spending a lot of time exploring notions of love and the limits of desire. On one of the studio's floors, the walls are lined with recent preliminary drawings intended for her solo show at the Turner Contemporary in Margate this spring. She's already named the exhibition "She Lay Down Deep Beneath the Sea." "When I make art, when I'm thinking of a show, the title is always there first," Emin says. "I can't begin to work until I have that in place because I have to have the dialogue about what I am doing, that discourse within my head."

Although love has always been an overriding theme in her work, it is something that seems to have eluded her in life. Of course, she has had significant relationships, most recently with the photographer Scott Douglas, with whom she split last year, and before that with fellow YBA Mat Collishaw. Despite the breakups, Emin remains friends with both—especially Collishaw, whom she still deeply cares about, if for no other reason than that he gave her Docket, her beloved cat, when they were together 10 years ago.

"You know, what I thought was love maybe wasn't," Emin says. "I understand that now. Maybe it was something else and I got it really wrong or misunderstood it. This is the kind of stuff I'm drawing, this is what I am thinking about when I am making art. What is love? I judged love against how I received it, and what I should have done is judged it on what I gave. Because that's what I truly know. I've never been that successful with relationships. I have with friendships. So that means I have to put a big question mark over myself.

"I said to my mother the other day, 'You know what, Mum, I could never have kids,' " Emin continues. "And she asked why, and I said because I could never have done that. Can you imagine—I'd be working all day, would be really tired, and then I wouldn't be able to cook. And then you've got this husband sitting there with three children, and they're all waiting to be fed, and I'd be like, 'Do it yourself. Let the kids drive themselves to school.'

"I just wasn't born or built for that. Don't get me wrong—there are lots of people who manage to be creative and have families. But you know what they are called? Men!" she says, laughing.

Studio visit complete, we head back to Emin's house. Hers is not some massive minimalist loft conversion filled with contemporary art and little else. Instead, home is a Georgian townhouse in the heart of Spitalfields that she has owned for 10 years. The residences that line her street, where fellow artists Gilbert and George also live, were built in 1729 for the Huguenot silk weavers who had settled in London and as such are Grade II listed and protected. "It's a historic house, built and labored by hand, and the stairs are lethal," says Emin, who painstakingly restored everything from the floorboards to the Arts and Crafts kitchen. "It's a bit like being on a ship, really, because everything is crooked and creaky. But it has character."

Looking around the rooms, most of which have original paneling and are painted in neutral hues sympathetic to the era of the house, I see none of the signs of Emin's bad-girl days. There's none of the bottles of vodka and condoms that surrounded her seminal 1998 "My Bed," which she showed as part of her entry for the Turner Prize (an award that eluded her). In fact, Emin's bed couldn't be tidier. She loves fine linens and recently traded the Connaught Hotel in London a drawing in return for a box of its sheets. On the first floor, an old-fashioned drawing room is lined with sagging shelves holding her extensive collection of books—novels, biographies, poetry—and a roaring fire beckons. There is a large dark-wood Victorian table here, around which Emin likes to serve afternoon tea in bone china cups and play dominoes with her friends on winter afternoons. On the bench where she sits to play the game is a pile of toys—most of which appear to be mice that belong to Docket. Everywhere you look there are porcelain ornaments: of more cats, of mice, even a couple of rabbits on the kitchen hearth, which she has adorned with a string of colored fairy lights.

"I know it's probably not really what people expect of me, but I like it," she says with a smile. "The thing that's important to me about this place is the fact that I live alone. It's a house that's big enough to live in with someone else but also small enough to live in alone, and there are very few places that have that feeling."

In person, Emin is slighter and prettier than photographs suggest. She has a gentle manner that at times borders on vulnerability, and she is incredibly soft-spoken, despite her Estuary accent. When I arrived at her house this afternoon, her first priority was to introduce me to her mother, who was sitting by the fire in an upstairs drawing room. As I leave and make my way out into the cold, I struggle to connect Emin's past with the woman she is now. I can't help but think that the kind of girl who makes a point of introducing you to her mother is exactly the kind you would want to introduce to your own.