

The evolution of Tracey Emin

The one-time wild child of British art has a new show in her home town of Margate. Novelist Jeanette Winterson explains why she is 'extravagantly in love' with the drawings

JEANETTE WINTERSON | SATURDAY 19 MAY 2012



The work on the wall is what we can see. Self-evident. We're here to look. We're here to look because we aren't good at looking. We see what we need to see for information and interest, for safety, for certainty, but our observational powers are limited. Human beings are not microscopes or telescopes. We see what is within our range and miss the rest.

The work of art, like the experience of falling in love, is a useful remedy for blurred eyesight. Think of it this way; when we fall in love we pore over every line and curve of body and face. The outline of the beloved acts like a stencil on top of our badly drawn copy of the world. Suddenly we see how it is – and not just the clichés of romance, moon, flowers, stars – but the rougher energy of love – roads, litter-bins, factories, the street-corner busker, the crazy woman with the black-and-tan dog, Life goes into sharp focus. We stop surfing, start seeing.

Think of that moment in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* where Miranda sees Ferdinand and says, "Oh brave new world that has such people in it". Her father, Prospero, is a magician, but love's magic is more powerful. Miranda sees things differently – including the shape of herself. She redraws everything she knows.

We can't always fall in love, and whatever love does to the optical nerves via the brain, to give us that fearful and joyful clarity, it doesn't last. Love lasts (be optimistic) but its peculiar effect on body and brain does not. When that drug wears off we can go back to life-as-blur, or we can rinse our eyes regularly by going to look at art.

It doesn't matter if we hate what we are looking at as long as we can really see it. Nobody ever said you have to like art – certainly not all of it – that would be insane. But you do have to see it – not talk about it or watch it on TV.

Nothing replaces the act of seeing. Tracey Emin is an artist you can see. We're lucky, because she's alive now, she's working now, and there is nothing to stop any of us looking at what she does.

Schoolkids and OAPs have as much access to Emin as fancy guys buying for collectors or art academics arguing over whether or not she can draw.

She can draw. The beautiful Blues in this exhibition should end that argument forever. The scribbled cahiers and slapdash monoprints that annoyed us as much as they intrigued us have evolved into a still-evolving line. She is always surprising. That is one reason why we can see her. Why? You can't see what you know too well. We know and we don't know Tracey.

She knows and she doesn't know herself – in that she is her own work in progress.

The evolution of Emin is exciting. Her creativity is getting stronger as she gets older. She has this in common with Louise Bourgeois. For me, as a writer who is a woman, remembering how new it is for women to be able to work creatively without secrecy or censure, Emin-evolution is a sign of the power of female creativity. It is not limited to, restricted to, or subject to. Tracey Emin is a full-scale artist. The bizarre idea of the "woman artist", like the "woman writer", where "woman" is used to indicate small-scale replica model, must surely be ready for a stake through the heart.

The dynamism of her Hayward Gallery retrospective in 2011 – *Love is What You Want* – made it obvious that energy and output, quality and scale, are not about gender. That is not to say that it is as easy for a woman to be an artist as it is for a man – stereotypes prevail in the art world as they do in the boardroom. Certainly it is not as easy for a woman to be taken seriously as an artist – and Emin has had her fair share of criticism. What is wonderful about Tracey Emin is that she has just carried on, good times or bad times, poverty or fame.

She is a woman. She is an artist. She sees no conflict there. There is no contradiction. In fact, what she brings to her work as a woman is in itself an educative experience for the viewer; let's think about that in relation to her beautiful blue nudes.

I have to say that I am extravagantly in love with these new blue nudes. I saw them raw, on the floor of her studio, some unfinished, some in progress. The double line she uses is so suggestive of the complexity of the female form. This is not the female body as art object drawn by men for millennia; it is a woman drawing on herself as a woman.

The double line is vulnerable – here are the sometimes wavering, sometimes uncertain boundaries of a woman's body as she negotiates how the world regards her, usually at the expense of how she can regard herself. The double line undulates – it is entirely sensuous. The curves of a woman's body, debased by the fashion industry's obsession with thinness, return here as something strokable, desirable. These are pictures you want to

touch. Like love, the eye reaches out to the hand.

The double line underlines. It acts as answer as well as question. It is a repetition, like an incantation or a prayer. More than once is how we remember – this is how a woman remembers herself. The double line is just that – doubleness. Woman as more than, not less than. Woman as subject as well as object. Inevitable if the painter is a woman. Inevitable if the gaze is turned inwards as well as outwards. And then there is the blue – Madonna blue. Blues blue. Blue is a gendered colour – in the West for boys. Here it is potent lapis – female alchemy – sea-blue.

The title of this show – And She Lay Down Deep Beneath the Sea – is expressive in these drawings. There is a mysterious quality to Tracey Emin's new figure-forms. What kind of a "she" could lay down deep beneath the sea? She would have to be able to breathe under water – like a mermaid. She would need a frame, a form, that could withstand tremendous pressure. There would be a saltiness to her. She would have to be able to open her eyes in deep water – and if she did, what would she see? Not the world as we see it – but what she deep-dives and returns with is a newness and a strangeness that we need.

Emin likes language, so it is worth listening to what she says. Her titles are not labels. Her private graffiti is a message to herself, and then to us. The body is a site of inscription.

Written on the body is a secret code only visible in certain lights. Emin nakedness – those forms vulnerable or ecstatic, revealed or curled up in sleep, dreaming of sex or having sex – alters the ways in which as women we can look at ourselves. We are used to the male gaze. Here is the female gaze, and a gaze that models from the inside to the outside, from the outside to the inside. The psychological states of the naked form are at once present in the line. This is the body as truth. This is not the body as artifice/artifact/artificial.

But it is the self as art. And what happens when a man looks at these naked Emins? I wonder. Whatever happens, there is complexity not complicity. This is a woman by a woman. That's different. It's a land-grab. An Emin-naked is not occupied territory. This is what belongs to her.

I was with Tracey in her studio. She was talking to me about being on the outside. No matter how wealthy or well-connected – Michelangelo's five palaces, Picasso's multi-millions, Damien's dots and diamonds, Perry's pots.

She is right, I think, about this co-ordinate of location, because what happens to the artwork or the artist is a function of the marketplace. Success does not equal sell-out.

Although it can...

"I am the witch," she says. And it interests me that this is the word she uses – with its associations of ostracism as well as power, snake oil as well as sincerity. Does the magic work or do we just want to believe in works? It is an edgy self-description, inevitably female; only women can be witches, and they live alone with their cat, Docket, and they always risk a ducking or a burning.

"Wherever I am, I am aware of where I am, and the me that is in the where I am. So I am always a little bit outside of anywhere, and wondering about it." But Tracey, what happens when the iconoclast becomes an icon?

"I'm a role model, yeah, but that doesn't mean I belong." But doesn't fame and fortune put you in the elite, not the outsiders?

"I'm still me wherever I am. It makes no difference. Wherever I

am, I'm Tracey." She does have a core-self, no question. And she has a questioning self that is the core of her. She asks her questions through the things that she makes, and she shows those questions and their partial answers to us. She won't be censored and she doesn't censor herself. I used to worry that Tracey was too exposed. That as a woman she would be marginalised and/or ridiculed for her confessionals, her intimacy, her sexuality, her body as raw material left raw. I worried that her personal history might make block a bigger history. That her necessary chaos might overwhelm her real sense of form. Her growing fame could not protect her – worse it might have become part of the problem, icon not achievement.

Warhol began the idea of artist as artwork. At its most corrupt it has become celebrity culture where making news is a much more important activity than making anything worthwhile. It is vacuity and spin.

Tracey Emin does make things; she has made a lot of things, and recently in her continual re-visions of hand and eye, body and brain, her work has suffered a sea-change into something rich and strange.

The ugly feral shock of My Bed. The defiant beauty of the blue nudes. It's all Tracey Emin – she can see that. Look at her.

She Lay Down Deep Beneath the Sea is at Turner Contemporary, Margate, from 26 May to 23 September
(www.turnercontemporary.org)

Tracey Emin's favourite things to do in Margate:

The Shell Grotto has always been hailed as a mystery. And for all the years I've been going there and looking at it, it has always retained its magical wonderment.

Having cream tea on the veranda of the Walpole Bay Hotel on a scorching-hot Sunday afternoon. Although I have had much wilder times there.

Walking from Joss Bay to the Lido along the beach. The white cliffs. The sea-shelf covered in all its different kinds of seaweed.

Having cockles at the Harbour wall from Manning's the seafood stall that has been there for an eternity.

Going to Ron Scott's antiques on Bath Place. It's massive, on three floors. You can get everything there from brass doorknobs, chairs and regency and Art Deco things. Even if you don't want to buy it's the most incredible place to go and look around.

The Margate Caves are a must. They conjure up images of pirates and smuggling. A great place to take children – not that I have any.

Cycling all the way around the Isle of Thanet. There are some hills but a lot of it is flat. It's brilliant to see the different characteristics of each town.

And, of course, there's fish and chips on the beach after a day swimming.