

The Saturday interview: Tracey Emin

Tracey Emin, who opens one of the biggest shows of her career today, talks about swapping sex for stargazing, why she likes David Cameron, and wanting her art to make people feel better



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'I've got to start using my brain more – I've got to be more ethereal and more enlightened' ... Tracey Emin at her new show at Turner Contemporary in Margate. Photograph: Christian Sinibaldi for the Guardian

Demanding artist, selfish (her words) seeks an intelligent man with good sense of humour, probably not for sex because she's going through the menopause and has lost the urge, but definitely for laughs and companionship.

"I want love," says Tracey Emin. "I want to spend my life with someone and do nice things and go on adventures, read books and have nice food and celebrate things. I don't want to spend the rest of my life in the bedroom like some people who just go to bed and never get out again."

Emin is approaching 50 and she is worried about the possibility of a lonely, gentle descent to death. "I am going through the menopause and I have been for ages," she says. "It is a nightmare, an absolute nightmare. It's horrible. And I don't look like that kind of person; you don't put menopause on top of my head, it doesn't associate with me."

Emin is talking as she finishes the installation of a show that she regards as one of the most important of her career, because it is in her home town of Margate.

The works going on public display from today are almost all new or never previously exhibited. They explore themes of love and eroticism, but overwhelmingly, they mark a farewell to the old Emin – the wild child, the one that got drunk all the time, the sex, the bed, the tent. Her "animal" lust has gone. Now there is the new Emin.

"People don't talk about it, but the menopause, for me, makes you feel slightly dead, so you have to start using the other things – using your mind more, read more, you have to

be more enlightened, you have to take on new things, think of new ideas, discover new things, start looking at the stars, understand astronomy ... just wake yourself up, otherwise it's a gentle decline.

"For women, it is the beginning of dying. It is a sign. I've got to start using my brain more – I've got to be more ethereal and more enlightened."

Emin is 48. In 2008 she told Piers Morgan she wanted to adopt children – an idea she scoffs at now. "I have friends who have adopted, and they had to radically change their life, their homes, the way they dressed – everything, to get through the adoption agencies. I am not going to change anything."

She's not even sure she'd make a good mother. "I'd make a good friend, not mother. I'm too selfish. I think a lot of mothers are selfish and they end up having children, but I don't want to put some small tiny person through that. I don't want to be Joan Crawford.

"I would really like the idea of someone small and cute to dress up, we all do, but that's not what it's about, is it? I don't want a mini-me."

The truth is she has now made a conscious decision not to have children, and finds herself something of a role model for other similarly minded women. "I'm never going to have children, I'm never going to be a grandmother, I'm probably never going to get married. I'm nearly 50, and it is not happening. I've got too much on the other side now, and I understand that."

But being childless can be difficult. "You're treated like a witch. And I'm not a witch, it is just that I have chosen to do things in another way. It is not by accident."

There are some stunningly beautiful works in her latest show, and much to get hearts singing, especially in the first room, which features a series of blue drawings bathed in exceptional light. "This room is about not being alone, and there's a nice feeling in this room. It's uplifting."

We look at some drawings of her in bed with a friend reading Daphne du Maurier short stories to her. "It was such a nice, cosy thing. No sex, just a really good story." Emin suddenly seems downbeat. "I've thought I experienced love, and now I'm nearly 50 I'm saying, have I? Maybe I haven't. Maybe I don't know what love is. Maybe what I thought was love was a kind of greed, or desire, or something? I think there's different kinds of love – that's where I'm at at the moment. But I don't think I've experienced love."

Emin came closest in her five-year relationship with fellow YBA (the so-called Young British Artists who emerged in the late 1980s) Mat Collishaw, which ended 10 years ago (they are still good friends). In 2010 she split up with boyfriend Scott Douglas, and her closest relationship now, she says, is with her cat, Docket.

"When you have a really good friend and they're reading you a book in bed and it's all cosy and all snuggly, that can be love, too. It doesn't have to be hardcore. There's different kinds of love, and I'd never experienced that kind of totally platonic love. All the love I've experienced has always been a kind of deal, and now, as I get older, I realise that there's this other love out there."

At the other side of the room we look at some works she has never shown before, from when she was in Australia in 2007. "I was in Sydney on my own for two months, trying to work out why I felt so ill. I went on this complete health thing – I stopped drinking, I cycled every day, I walked about 10km every day, I swam every day, went on a really strict diet. My legs and arms went completely skinny, but my stomach was just getting bigger and bigger, because I was ill, and didn't understand why. What I was trying to do

with these drawings was try and make myself feel sexy again, but it was difficult. It was almost there, but wasn't."

What was her illness? "I had a tapeworm."

We move on to works she did in Carrara, Tuscany, when she was looking at marble with a friend. "It was the first time I'd been really happy in a long time. You know when you wake up and you feel good? I realised then I'd been low for a long time."

One is a simple drawing of a heart, which Emin now wants to make in pink alabaster. "I'm sure the first alabaster heart will be a disaster, I'd have to keep working at it, but it's about me being driven by myself," she says. "Whether people like my work or not, I want to show people I can do things. I look at this show and I'm enthusiastic. It makes me want to do things."



Tracey Emin's She Lay

Down Deep Beneath The Sea from her new Margate show. Photograph: Dan Kitwood/Getty Images

Emin's path to art superstardom began when she opened The Shop in Bethnal Green with YBA Sarah Lucas in 1993, cashing in on Damien Hirst's new fame by selling ashtrays with his face on. People began to sit up and take notice with works such as her tent (Everyone I Ever Slept With, from 1963 to 1995) that was bought by Charles Saatchi and shown at the Royal Academy's Sensation show in 1997 – the same year that she so memorably appeared on a late-night Channel 4 discussion show completely hammered. Two years later, Emin was shortlisted for the Turner prize, exhibiting her unmade bed complete with stains, condoms and dirty underwear.

Unlike some other YBAs, her success has endured. She represented Britain at the Venice Biennale in 2007, staged an enormously successful mid-career retrospective at London's Hayward gallery last year, and not long after that was voted by her peers as Eranda professor of drawing at the Royal Academy, the first woman to occupy the role.

Critics generally warm to her these days. Reviewing the Hayward show, Rachel Campbell-Johnston of the Times wrote: "I would love to hate Tracey Emin," but she left "a convert". The Guardian's Adrian Searle called her art touching and surprising and said "the cumulative effect is extremely powerful".

She may shake her head at the suggestion, but Emin, once "Mad Trace from Margate", is now firmly part of the establishment. She's even a Tory. "I like David Cameron because I think he is fair compared to a lot of politicians in history," she says. "He's in the centre. Probably more centre than someone in Labour, not mentioning any names, who's actually Opus Dei – that is extreme right-wing thinking."

She is baffled by all the political fighting that goes on. One work in the show, The Vanishing Lake, is a rusting metal bath with a scrunched-up union flag in it, and is a

comment on Britain – "politically, socially, morally". The flag is a scar. "I don't understand why people don't pull together. I don't understand why there's so much disunity. I don't understand why people can't just say: 'It's a mess, let's pull together.' Why is everyone so angry with each other on everything? It's so easy – if everyone relaxed and said we should work together, rather than against each other."

The Margate show is at Turner Contemporary, the David Chipperfield-designed gallery that opened in April last year and is helping to spearhead the town's desperately needed regeneration. Emin has been a staunch supporter, and she was the obvious choice for a major show in Olympic year (the exhibition is part of the London 2012 festival). It is clearly a big deal for her, and she's written an open letter to Margate, asking people to come. "I do feel really positive about this show, because even if people don't like it, I like it. And that is the most important thing. I didn't know that I would, because there's so much new work, and I thought I was setting myself up for a fall, but I've done it. I wanted to do something exceptional because it is Margate."

"I'm always anxious with a show, but more so with this one. I've been tearing myself to pieces ... chronic nerves."

Reassuringly, there is a bed in the show. Or a Heal's mattress at least – quite astonishingly stained – on which Emin has placed a bronzed dead branch. The mattress saw service between 2000 and 2003, and is called Dead Sea. But how did it get into such a state? "I'm not going to go into the gory details. Believe me, it was all naturally made. It wasn't all on my own, I can assure you."

"It goes back to that thing of being over." She's talking about sex again. "It's over. This explains it very well. It was there, but it's gone."

And though she's one of the most successful and feted artists of her generation, is rich and has beautiful houses in east London and the south of France, where she spends around four months a year, it's still not easy finding a man. "I don't think it helps," Emin says. "Any woman who is successful and top of their game will tell you that it is not attractive to men."

She says she has not had many close relationships in recent years, and her friends "have seriously stopped" any attempts at matchmaking. "I say to them, 'Would you give him a blow job? No you wouldn't, so don't expect me to.'"

A flash of the old Emin – full-on, confrontational, up yours. Now she simply wants people to come to her show and enjoy it. "A lot of my shows generally make people feel worse," she says. "I'd like it if people came and left feeling better."

She Lay Down Deep Beneath the Sea: Tracey Emin at Turner Contemporary opens today, until 23 September. Details: turnercontemporary.org