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Neon Works Light Up the Art Scene in Miami

By *PATRICIA COHEN*

“Neon makes people happy,” the British artist Tracey Emin said Tuesday night, “That’s why you see it in Las Vegas, bars, brothels and theaters.” She was standing in a darkened gallery at the Museum of Contemporary Art North Miami, surrounded by dozens of her signature neon works and looking very happy herself.

She was delighted with the way the exhibition of her work, “[Angel Without You](#),” had turned out, due, no doubt, to the fact that she was the one to curate and configure the candy-color array of her illuminated creations. One guiding principle, she said, was not “to have messages that are really stupid together.”

It is only fitting that this Miami museum should be the first in the United States to host an exhibition of Ms. Emin’s work. It was, after all, the first American institution to buy one of her works, “Why I Never Became a Dancer” (1995). That video was running in a small room opposite one of her first neon word constructions, “The Tracey Emin Museum.” Bonnie Clearwater, the museum’s former director and the one responsible for organizing the exhibition, explained that when Ms. Emin set up a work space years ago in a storefront shop, the rent seemed very expensive for a studio, so she called it a museum.

Hundreds of opening-night visitors crammed into the museum’s gallery and giant outdoor backyard to celebrate the opening — and help kick off the start of [Art Basel Miami Beach](#). Here, as at practically every other venue, the art had to compete with the fashion and the free alcohol.

Ms. Clearwater noted that Ms. Emin’s hometown, Margate, England, a seaside resort with a lot of faded glamour, has a lot in common with Miami.

Some of Ms. Emin’s neon works start out as words and dissipate into images. Others talk about God, love, sex and death. Some are raunchy enough to be banned from a daily newspaper. What they are not, Ms. Clearwater said, is ironic. There is a profound emotional truth and spiritual yearning in neon sayings like “Only God Knows I’m Good” or “I followed you into the water knowing I would never return.”

Ms. Emin recreated several of her works for this show, but they did not necessarily inspire nostalgia. “It all looks so present,” she said.