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Intimate Portrait

British Superstar Tracey Emin flashes her underwear – and bears her soul – to Luke Crisell.

**When I was 14-15**  
**There was nothing in my life**  
**but dancing and sex.**  
**I'd go to night clubs and dance**  
**Then I'd meet someone and have sex**  
**it was Fine and easy**  
**Nothing to do**  
**BUT Think with my body like a bird**  
**I thought I was Free.**

- Tracey Emin, *Strangeland* (Sceptre)

In 2002, former Institute of Contemporary Arts chairman Ivan Massow publicly derided Tracey Emin when he wrote in *The New Statesman* that "anyone who has ever met Emin knows that she couldn't think her way out of a paper bag." Funny, but I'm not getting that impression.

It's a perfect afternoon in East London. Pastel-yellow sunlight is streaming through eight large windows on either side of Emin's long second-floor studio and across a 30-foot table laden with assorted fabrics and sketches. Two beautiful assistants are sewing quietly on a round table on one side of the room, the floor of which is covered in ongoing projects. Neatly arranged under one window are white cloth letters spelling out "Tracey Your Eyes are Flashing." I look up briefly from writing the details down: Emin is standing in front of me. And she's not wearing any pants.

Instead, she's attired in an oversized white shirt, black underwear and a bra. She regards me inquisitively. "Are you gay?" she asks, in her slightly abrasive South London accent. When I shake my head no, Emin promptly disappears behind a screen to change, emerging five minutes later in jeans, a sheer black top and a profusion of gold jewelry.

There is currently no more fêted, acclaimed, and vilified artist in Britain than Tracey Emin, whose celebrity status is so luminescent that it pales other Young British Artists into insignificance. Everyone has an opinion of her, and of her art, which first achieved

international attention in 1999 when Emin was nominated for the Turner Prize for "My Bed," an installation of her slept-in bed that had art critics around the world in uproar.

"I wouldn't wish that experience on my worst enemy," she recalls, softly. "Imagine it. Every day, for four months, what you've been doing every single day for 10 to 15 years being completely slagged off? It was very naïve of me to think I could show that bed and it would be OK. Of course it wasn't. And I had no fucking chance of winning, so it was particularly stupid of me to accept the nomination." Despite her domestic notoriety, however, the American press has always limited its interest to her art alone. "I was just saying to my assistant that this is the first proper interview I've done with an American magazine," she says, "It's odd, I've got so used to the ways things are here. Here, when I have an opening it's on the front page of the papers, and on the national news. 6,000 people come to the gallery. But in America, 1,500 people turn up. It's a weird thing for me. I can have huge parties here, but I don't know anyone in New York. I get embarrassed shaking the hands of people that I don't know."

Emin's latest stateside show opens at New York's Lehmann Maupin gallery this month. "It's called 'I Can Feel Your Smile,'" she says, with a hint of pride. "I have this friend whose husband died, and we had been texting each other and we had this little private joke... Anyway, I wrote this message that said 'I can feel your smile' because I felt that I could feel her warmth, and to have that kind of bereavement and be able to smile is a triumph. Originally the show was going to be called 'Everything For Love,' because I wanted it to be positive, but I thought 'I Can Feel Your Smile' is really lovely. It kind of makes me want to cry."

The artist (who has a bachelor's degree in fine art and a master's in painting from the Royal College of Art) is arguably as famous for her discordant, often autobiographical words as she is for her installation work. Her new book, *Strange/and*, currently only available in the U.K., is a searing, disjointed account of Emin's life. At the end of the chapter in which she writes about how she was raped at the age of 13, are the words 'I'm going to get you you cunt you FUCKING BASTARD. And when I do - The whole world will know That you destroyed part of my childhood.' I ask whether her relentlessly autobiographical approach ever leaves her feeling vulnerable. "I recently did a project of five Polaroids for a magazine," she says, "and as I was putting in the last one [a naked portrait], I just said 'Fuck it, I'm never going to have a boyfriend anyway.'"

As she turns and stares at me, I begin to realize just how deep Emin's melancholy runs. This is an artist who has total financial security, galleries across the world clamoring for her art, and David Bowie's number in her cell phone, but who, above all else, just wants to be loved. She seems to have finally decided that it's an impossible dream. "I have to

100 percent accept that I have a vocation and I am going to be alone and that's the end of it," she says. "It's better for me to make that decision than to constantly wonder what's wrong with me and ask why I feel so lonely. I'm 42, so even if someone fell madly in love with me today, the chances of me having a baby are pretty slim. Unless they're into fecundity and we fuck like rabbits. But I want a relationship first, and there's not enough time. So it just has to be me." Can't she imagine herself finding love in the future? "In the future I see myself driving down to my flat on the cliff, looking out of the window and writing, alone," she answers.

There's no weak joke to disseminate the weight of what's been said. No change of subject. Just a silence that isn't awkward, or protracted, but poignant. Emin's work may divide critical opinions, but there's no doubting the fact that the artist herself is vital, ardent, and, it would appear, lonely.