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TRACEY EMIN
LEHMANN MAUPIN, NEW YORK
By Johanna Burton

Tracey Emin claims not to have been reading much lately, but it's obvious that she remains invested in the poignancy and poison of words. In 2005, she published a memoir of sorts with the self-mythologizing title *Strangeland*, and she has also taken to writing her own weekly column in an English newspaper, *The Independent*. Just days before her November opening at Lehmann Maupin, her entry from abroad bore the subtitle "When I'm miles from home I sometimes have a clear view – and God my life's a mess." The refrain is a familiar one from this artist who came to prominence during the '90s YBA explosion.

Emin's art practice has, from its inception, been steeped in provocative, confessional language. She is best known for brash, faux-folksy, handmade goods, including colorful quilts appliquéd with (regularly misspelled) phrases such as PSYCO SLUT and her infamous (and now infamously incinerated, in 2004's Momart warehouse fire) *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-95, 1995*. Emin's latest New York exhibition was, true to type, rife with phrases that run the gamut from badass to pathetic. Here, as ever, the artist seemed mainly preoccupied with mourning the absence of some beloved who was unable or unwilling to stick around. Yet, while maintaining her now-familiar aesthetic, a particular blend of schoolgirl scrawl and delicate draftsmanship, Emin opted here for a relatively muted palette, with most of the works on view – blankets, sketches, and small fabric pieces among them – executed in pastel colors or shades of white.

The immediate effect of the show, titled "I Can Feel Your Smile," seemed to suggest that Emin had chosen to quite literally tone things down. A large appliquéd and embroidered blanket (*Fuck Fuck Fuck You [all works 2005]*), for instance, appeared nearly devoid of content, though on closer inspection it bore an image of the rearing pelvis of a woman, legs spread and surrounded by a school of cartoonish sperm. A few FUCKS executed in string drove home the not so subtle title as well as pointed to the artist's continued interest in the pleasure and pain of a good buggering. Still, there was a difference: If in the past Emin's work screamed from across the room that you were a bastard, these flirted from afar, pulled you in close, and then gave you the finger.

Also included were sculptures made from neon and reclaimed lumber, bearing titles such as *Looking for Fire* and *Salem*, and a washed-out three-minute film of a dog curled up, licking its hind leg, then wandering about an isolated beach. Shot in Cyprus, where the artist regularly made films of her aging father, *Reincarnation* evinced a less overtly performative, more meditatively metaphoric, pathos, even though its celluloid, too, bore superimposed scribbled phrases, including I LOVE YOU, I LOVE YOU INSIDE OF ME.

The question of whether Emin's work embodies a breed of balls-out feminism or simply buoys up preexisting notions of female hyperbole or hysteria had been posed with regularity since she came on the scene. Yet imagining that the success of contemporary feminism can be gauged by whether a woman can talk trash at the volume of her male counterparts would be decidedly simplistic. Strangely, Emin's endless pleas for love, for pregnancy, for attention, don't point, as is most often asserted, to any intimate truths about *her*. Rather, the sheer banality of their accumulation reflects a larger social context, in which hoary but still surprisingly resilient assumptions about gender make it easy to lose sight of the fact that the girl who is the most lurid might also be the most conventional in her desires. If there is anything surprising about the artist's latest venture, it is seeing the ways in which Eminism (not to be confused with *feminism*) confronts and navigates its own limits.