

**Interview**  
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TRACEY EMIN

AS A GIRL, TRACEY EMIN WOULD CREATE DOLLHOUSES OUT OF CARDBOARD BOXES AND WALL HANGINGS THAT SHE'D STITCH TOGETHER BY HAND. TODAY HER WORKS STILL HAVE THAT SAME HOMESPUN QUALITY BUT IT'S THE IN-YOUR-FACE, NO-HOLDS-BARRED WAY THEY SPEAK ABOUT HER INNER LIFE THAT BRINGS DOWN THE HOUSE

BY JULIAN SCHNABEL  
DRAWINGS FOR INTERVIEW BY TRACEY EMIN

Tracey Emin is a daring artist, though not necessarily for the reasons many people might initially think. Certainly it takes a kind of bravado to create a work that incorporates the name of every single person you have ever slept with, as one of Emin's early, famous works did--a piece that gained her enormous notoriety. But where Emin really shows her courage is in her willingness to share her pain, her heartbreaks, her faith, and her commitment to always telling her truth. These are just a few of the reasons the artist is such a star in her hometown of London (where an Emin opening is often compared to a rock concert), though her straight talk and at times demanding behavior (the word diva has been used to describe her) have added even further color. Here, she opens up to someone who knows what it means to make a splash--fellow artist Julian Schnabel.

JULIAN SCHNABEL: Hello, Tracey. How have you been?

TRACEY EMIN: Well, today I've had a really horrible day because I went to the dentist and had to have a crown replaced.

JS: So finally, you have a crown.

TE: Yeah. I have my crown--not my princess's crown, but I have a crown. Anyway, I had a complete panic attack and started crying in the dentist's chair.

JS: Were you scared of the drill?

TE: I was scared of everything. I was totally vulnerable and everything bad that's ever happened to me came to mind. I was so frightened, I was having these [makes hyperventilating sound]. And then, walking to my studio, I passed some kids kicking a football, and I got hit in the head with it; they didn't do it on purpose, but it really hurt because I'd just had the tooth done. It was all too much.

JS: That's definitely not funny. Anyway, we have this opportunity to talk, so I thought what I'd do is ask you some questions, and then you'll just talk with me.

TE: Yeah. Okay then.

JS: Have you always drawn?

TE: Yes, but more than drawing, I've always just been creative. I'd make out of cardboard boxes, or I'd make shoes out of napkins--drawing wasn't enough.

JS: Do you still have any of those pieces?

TE: I've got one I made when I was 6, which is an appliquéd elephant with stitching over it. That hangs in my house.

JS: So you haven't gotten very far.

TE: No, I'm still making the same kind of work, if that's what you mean.

JS: And how old were you when you started writing the stories in Strangeland [Sceptre]?

TE: About 18.

JS: I wanted to talk about Strangeland because I think it ought to be required reading for young artists. Your work is so immersed in being open and sharing your most personal experiences with your audience.

TE: People refer to it as "confessional."

JS: I think the work you show in a gallery is different from the book or from the weekly column you write for The Independent because those are forums where you can use more language and tell more stories, whereas the gallery work has fragments of stories--

TE: Sometimes, but I've also had shows where it's all stories told with objects. I call them memorabilia pieces. I show the objects, and I write stories that accompany them. That's what I first showed with Jay Jopling [founder of White Cube gallery] in '93, and people said it wasn't art.

JS: And then what happened?

TE: The blankets kind of took over. The sewing pieces took over, and then I started making neons, and the neons were just sentences or titles. And in '94 I started drawing again after years of not doing it, but the titles of the drawings were really important.

JS: A kind of revolution took place at a certain moment in British art that you are central to--something happened that began to distinguish British from American art, and because you're from England and are in a particular age group, you tend to be linked to the group of artists associated with that movement, but really your work is--

TE: I come from a different place. A lot of my contemporaries are influenced by minimalism and by conceptualism, but when I was a student, I was influenced by expressionism. There's nothing postmodern about what I do. It is what it is. There's no cynicism there at all.

JS: Didn't you make a quilt that said "Fuck modern painting"?

TE: That's just one tiny little bit of my work, and it wasn't an answer to something.

JS: What did you mean by that? You didn't mean that about my paintings, did you?  
TE: [laughs] No, I didn't mean it about yours.  
JS: You could have--it would be fine.  
TE: I know, but I like your paintings. I kind of meant it like, "Oh, fuck it. Fuck modernism. Fuck the whole idea of it."  
JS: Much of your work is about pain, isn't it? TE: Not all of it. Some of it's about love.  
JS: Love and a sense of loss, no?  
TE: Yes, because I have a sense of loss. But if I had a sense of found love, it would be about found love. I've had big love poems in neon, though.  
JS: it's funny how we met. I remember you said to me, "Julian Schnabel? You're not Julian Schnabel!"  
TE: I think you answered, "If I'm not Julian Schnabel, who am I?" and I said, "You're a bear." JS: [both laugh] Talk to me about the Idea of success in the art world.  
TE: There's not room for everybody to be successful. I'm successful in one way. I made two seminal pieces of art--not one, but two. If I never make another piece of art again, it doesn't matter; my name will be somewhere on the list.  
JS: And which two pieces are those?  
TE: They are My Bed (1998) and my "tent" [Everyone I Have Ever Slept with 1963--1995 (1995)]. To talk about it, it doesn't sound like a big deal, and it wasn't in some ways, but in other ways it was. I had a kind of mini nervous breakdown in my very small flat and didn't get out of bed for four days. And when I did finally get out of bed, I was so thirsty I made my way to the kitchen crawling along the floor. My flat was in a real mess--everything everywhere, dirty washing, filthy cabinets, the bathroom really dirty, everything in a really bad state. I crawled across the floor, pulled myself up on the sink to get some water, and made my way back to my bedroom, and as I did I looked at my bedroom and thought, "Oh, my God. What if I'd died and they found me here?" And then I thought, "What if here wasn't here? What if I took out this bed--with all its detritus, with all the bottles, the shitty sheets, the vomit stains, the used condoms, the dirty underwear, the old newspapers--what if I took all of that out of this bedroom and placed it into a white space? How would it look then?" And at that moment I saw it, and it looked fucking brilliant. And I thought, this wouldn't be the worst place for me to die; this is a beautiful place that's kept me alive. And then I took everything out of my bedroom and made it into an installation. And when I put it into the white space, for some people it became quite shocking. But I just thought it looked like a damsel in distress, like a woman fainting or something, needing to be helped.  
JS: And your tent piece?  
TE: My tent was like an igloo, and in it were embroidered and appliquéd the names of every-body I've ever slept with from 1963 to 1995. It wasn't supposed to be a big deal, but it ended up being a very big one because it was just a list of names but made in a very

beautiful way. It looked like a kind of mini religious space or something, and inside the tent it actually smelled a little strange. It was very cozy and sweet inside, but it had the names of people I'd either slept with or had had intimate times with--people I'd had sex with for half an hour, people I'd had sex with for three days, and people I'd never had sex with but had slept beside and whose hands I'd held, like my grandmother. So to some people this list of names seemed to be very important. What was important about it to me was that when I wrote out the names and sewed them it was like carving out tombstones, having to deal with my past. That was pretty cathartic actually. But the tent doesn't exist anymore--it got burned in an art storage place that had a big fire. It was a strange thing, and I was quite philosophical about it. It made me think, Hmm, time to start a new tent. Not literally make one but maybe start having sex or something.

JS: It always seems like things happen to you and you turn these disasters into poetry.

TE: Yeah, nothing's wasted. The show I had in New York last winter was the best I've ever done. Not everyone would agree, but for me it had the most dialogue with myself.

JS: So that's essentially why you have shows--to have a dialogue with yourself?

TE: Yes. it is.

JS: How do you see that fitting into the art market? There's kind of a superficiality that I see in the art world, and I feel like the point of your work is to be not superficial.

TE: Well, I'm not opposed to commerce, even though I'm an artist. It doesn't really matter that it's on the wall and it's for sale. It doesn't matter that it's in a commercial gallery. It's about me making it that's important. But while I'm here I will protect it. So I make sure that it's seen in the context that I want it to be seen in and understood in the way I want it to be under-stood--as much as I can do that. Part of my job is to communicate.

JS: And do you feel understood?

TE: Not always. But it's getting a better.

JS: The fact that so much of your writing in

Strangeland tells about what it was like for you as a kid suggests that your work is the thing that will save you or can save you from your fear.

TE: It does--actually I had a show once called "I Need Art Like I Need God." I always say that art is like a lover whom you run away from but who comes back and picks you up, Art is the thing that's always been very good to me, looked after me, and made sure that I was safe and occupied, but also at the same time art seems to push me to the edge a lot.

JS: I think that if you try to get at some-thing that might not be so obvious or ready to be accessed, confusion, despair, and insecurity pop up that can throw you into a tailspin until that moment when you can organize it in some way.

TE: Yeah, but things are out of your control, aren't they? Or out of my control. And I also think being an artist and having to be responsible for the art that you make is really quite challenging, and as you get older it becomes more and more difficult.

JS: But I think that maybe as you get older, you become a little bit smarter, no?

TE: Definitely. And you understand more what you do; you become more organized. Often I feel the weight of it all, though, and want to go back to a time of greater innocence, when you've got all this creativity ahead of you. Sometimes I wish I had a break from it all.

JS: You like to swim, don't you?

TE: I love swimming, and I swim every day. If I don't swim every day, I get very moody and aggressive. I need to release all negative energy into the water. And I need to exercise or else I don't sleep--at all. Or I sleep lightly, and I have really strange dreams, and it's like sleep deprivation. Things get really difficult for me then.

JS: I love the story in Strangeland when someone said your mom was old-the description of you taking out your false teeth before the fight and later pulling up your socks and tucking your shirt into your school uniform.

TE: [laughs] Yeah, and then just getting smacked on the head. It was a really serious fight, because where I grew up, it was rough--kids fought. Girls hit each other. It was very different from the art world, which is genteel and full of these rational debutantes and nice people.

JS: Well, I don't know. Are they nice?

TE: All right, they're not nice in that sense--

JS: But they don't punch each other.

TE: They don't punch each other, no. And some of them are very nice. I think the art world is probably one of the nicest worlds. In comparison with the fashion world, the movie world, the music industry it's much easier going.

JS: True. Though on the other hand, there's a kind of jealousy that I find fiercer in the art world than in any of the other worlds.

TE: Then let me ask you a question. Do you think art is an industry?

JS: I never really did. I think the art world has changed radically since I started showing. In the old days young artists weren't treated like they were people yet. It was thought they didn't have enough life experience. What's happened now is that people want to buy young artists' work in the hope that it's going to go up in value. It's more of a hedge-fund sensibility than ever. What do you think?

TE: I think you're right. There are a lot of young people going through art school that are just doing it to come out and sell art at the other end.

When you're a student it's probably the only chance you'll have to really relax, though, because afterward it's all just about surviving--mentally more than anything else. It's the responsibility of it all, because you think about being responsible for your ideas as they

go out into the world. Now, I'm really responsible for what I make and for what I do and how I think about it. I've got a show coming up in L.A. [at Gagosian Gallery] this winter, and my big thing about starting to make the works is the conversation I have with myself, like,

"What do I want to learn between now and the time the show opens? What do I want to focus on?" I'm going to spend the next six months researching and investigating and finding out what I think and feel about it.

JS: So you use the show as a catalyst.

TE: Yeah. Also, the subject I'm working with I could spend the rest of my life thinking about, but because I've got a deadline, I really sprint.

JS: So let me ask you, how would you define what it means to make a life of art?

TE: It's a sacrifice.

JS: Is it? It seems to me there's nothing else for an artist to do.

TE: I could have a relationship or children.

JS: Well, I would say the same thing to any young artist I was advising, whether a woman or a man--if you're really serious about being an artist, then you don't have time to have a relationship because you're too busy finding this thing Inside yourself that you have to deal with. So there's always this sacrifice. Maybe later you become mature enough after you've handled whatever you needed to do as an artist to be with someone. How do you feel about being a successful artist?

TE: Here in England--and I suspect it's the same in New York--I was considered a very late developer. I didn't have an exhibition until I was 30. But I do feel my last show in New York was different from the other shows I've had--people were nicer to me. Not that you have to listen to what people say, but it is nice when they get it.

JS: It's good when people treat you well instead of slamming a door in your face.

TE: Yeah. Though I don't really mind that much because that's when you're the freest.

Julian Schnabel Is an artist living in New York City.