

A SUCCESS OF NERVE: ARTIST TRACEY EMIN



SIGN OF LIFE Tracey Emin's 'You Loved me like a distant Star' (2012) will be on view in Miami.

Neon Confidential

BY MARY M. LANE

IT SEEMS FITTING that the first American museum exhibition of Tracey Emin is a display of neon. After all, she made her name in England with brassy artworks such as a tent listing all the names of her bedmates, platonic or romantic.

But the British artist points out that most of the works in her Miami show, which opens Wednesday, confront more spiritual topics that the casual viewer often overlooks.

"Because sex sells, they actually filter out the ones about love or God," says the 50-year-old Ms. Emin of casual onlookers who linger longer at the lurid works than at those that discuss uncomfortable topics such as depression. One such neon sign spells out "Its not me Thats Crying Its my Soul." The fourth neon she ever made, Ms. Emin says it reflects the pervasive, inherent depression she has felt her entire life.

The exhibition, running through March 9 at Miami's Museum of Contemporary Art and called "Angel without You," is also Ms. Emin's first show of neons. It is the result of a nearly two-decade collaboration with neon-sign maker Kerry Ryan.

Ms. Emin became a household name in her home country as the brashest female member of the Young British Artists. She pulled antics like showing up drunk for TV interviews and openly discussing her sexual exploits. Around the same time, Ms. Emin turned to a childhood fascination with neon. "People who grow up in the woods understand trees. I grew up with neons," says Ms. Emin, who was reared by a Turkish-Cypriot father and British mother in the coastal English town of Margate. Its "Golden Mile" is a seaside stretch bathed in the neon lights of fun fairs and gambling arcades.

She came to Mr. Ryan's shop in 1995 and asked him to make a pink neon entrance sign for "The Tracey Emin Museum." "She was so bolsterous and bouncy. We thought she was a bit nuts," says Mr. Ryan of his

colleagues' reaction when the feisty 32-year-old asked not to pay the deposit on her \$650 sign.

But Mr. Ryan soon realized that behind the quirks was a dedicated artist. ("I spent a lot of my time when I was younger mucking around, not realizing the seriousness of the vocation," says Ms. Emin.) The two struck up a lasting friendship as Mr. Ryan turned her sentences and sketches into handblown neon glass signs that replicate Ms. Emin's sweeping, spindly cursive. That first sign, along with over 60 other neon artworks—mostly phrases culled from her writings and thoughts during relationships gone awry—shows up in "Angel without You."

Many of the neons Ms. Emin is famous for and that are present in the Miami show are highly sexually explicit, either pictures or phrases, and reflect her early struggle with her sexuality after being raped as a young teenager.

"If I'd have had a choice of not being born, I wouldn't have been born," says Ms. Emin, who believes her existence is an accidental result of the birth of her twin brother, Paul. "I think I got tangled up in his soul and pulled down," she says.

Ms. Emin is quite open about her decision to not marry and eschew children for a high-powered career. Though she doesn't regret her choice, she is angry that she "felt used" by some men who viewed her as practice for future relationships, she says, a feeling reflected in the 2011 sign "I said Dont Practise ON ME."

The odd capital letters in the sign are cosmetic touches; certain letters such as "I" and "s" look better capitalized, Ms. Emin says. She perfected her process early on through trial and error, on the paper templates she gives Mr. Ryan to read before each neon is created.

Ms. Emin says that while many of her neons may come across to critics as "crass and corny," these qualities also make them honest. "Most people don't have profound philosophical thoughts all the time, they think like pop songs," she says. "That's how they get on in the world."

Lehmann Maughn