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Tracey Emin: The artist on being the toast of Miami



By Peter Aspden

As her first big US show creates a stir in Miami, the British artist talks about meritocracy, middle England – and the place with ‘the most beautiful sunsets in the world’



Tracey Emin: 'missives from the emotional abyss'

Miami Beach's Fontainebleau hotel was the hard-talking, fast-living centre of American celebrity in its 1960s heyday. It was where the ratpackers crooned, joshed and gambled their way to notoriety. It was a man's world, or a man's man's world. This is where Frank Sinatra welcomed Elvis back from the army with a thump on the back and a corny duet. The dames didn't do so well. It was in a room at the Fontainebleau that one of the shortest-lived Bond girls, Jill Masterson, met her blingy, brutal end, her skin smothered in deadly gold paint, in *Goldfinger*.

Today, after a spectacular and overdue renovation in 2008, the hotel is once more a focus of glamour and easy living. But the vibe has irrefutably changed. We are in the opening days of Art Basel Miami Beach, the art fair that has done more than anything to reconcile the once-solemn business of collecting art with the hedonistic lifestyle of hyper-wealthy baby-boomers. To coincide with the fair, the city's Museum of Contemporary Art is housing an exhibition of Tracey Emin neon works, *Angel Without You*, which is her first major American show.

Emin has chosen the Fontainebleau to sign copies of the exhibition catalogue, and the queues have taken everyone by surprise. Among Emin's devotees in the lobby are Elle Macpherson and Nancy Dell'Olio, dressed in minidress and diaphanous white linen respectively, and whose brisk, purposeful air gives the impression that they have just eaten Sammy Davis Jr for breakfast.

You are the toast of Miami, I tell Emin as she finally gets to the end of her book-signing, which she seems to enjoy immensely. She pauses for a response, but it is not humility of tone for which she is groping. "During one of the most important events in the art world," she finally says. "So it is not just Miami. It is global." This is exclaimed more in wonderment than arrogance, but there is no mistaking an exuberant confidence in her voice that I haven't heard before.

The exhibition looks great, I say. "I've done an exceptional show. And also, it's very feminine," she replies. Feminine? "It's soft. A lot of art work which is successful is overstated, over-realised. It's all about the production." Working with neon also has its technical complications, she adds, but the message decidedly trumps the medium here. Emin's neon scrawls, in her own, distinctive

handwriting, are missives from various kinds of emotional abyss: “Trust me.” “When I go to sleep, I dream of you inside of me.” “It’s not me that’s crying it’s my soul.”

Emin has been working with neon for nearly 20 years now, but it has been a prominent influence for her entire life. “I grew up with it in Margate. It’s not suburban. You never see neon in the suburbs. You only find it in night clubs, casinos. It’s the feelgood factor.”

So the feel-bad messages are an ironic counterpoint to the medium?

“I’ve got no agenda like that. I’ve never been cynical,” she says a little defensively. “It’s all in my handwriting. It’s like when someone leaves you – there is no right way to leave somebody. Some people just leave a note on the kitchen table. That’s what this is.”

The kitchen notes, rendered in the dusty pinks and boyish blues of an already bygone era, are helping to make Emin the talk of the town: her drawings at White Cube’s space at the fair sold out within minutes of its opening. She says she loves Miami, and the US in general: she has bought property here and in New York. The Floridian resort instantly gets her neon work, she explains.

“I don’t have to tell people it’s art. They grew up with it, like me. I’d love to start a campaign to bring back the neon. Some of the signs are 40 or 50 years old now. They are so beautiful.”

I ask if she has been influenced by American art. “No, my biggest influence is German expressionism, and my favourite painter is Edvard Munch. But what I love here is the meritocracy. I am a workaholic so I feel energised. America is easy for me because they appreciate that. I said to my mum, when I got my place in New York, I’m 50 now, most people are thinking about grandchildren, and I am living like a teenager!”

New York, she says, is also a great place for a woman artist to make her name. Better than London, I ask?

“Things are changing in London. But Europe is steeped in history, which is predominantly a male history. America is too, but a few more women pop up.” Did she still feel a sense of oppression, then, at all those Royal Academy meetings (she became an Academician in 2007 and is currently the RA’s professor of drawing)?

“The Royal Academy loves me. And all those people who were my major detractors, we get on really well now. We talk about art. And the great thing about the Royal Academy is that it is so organic: people come, people go, and sadly some people die.

“There might be a grumpy old person in the corner that really irritates you, and then you get a letter that says they have died, and you miss them deeply, you miss their opinions, you miss their grumpiness. And they’ll miss me too, when I die. They will miss my ... whatever it is. It is a great place because of that mix. It isn’t about forward thinking, necessarily.”



Emin may have made her name, in the Young British Artist era of the 1990s, for the occasionally shocking nature of her confessional work, but few things countered expectations more than her appearance in the advertising campaign, photographed by Annie Leibovitz, for Marks & Spencer earlier this year.

Far from being embarrassed by what might have been seen as a sellout, she talks enthusiastically about the experience. “I have been going to Marks & Spencer ever since I was a little girl. And anyone who says they have never shopped there is either lying, or very, very stupid.” The Daily Mail was less than impressed (“Are these REALLY the women to save M&S?” it frothed of Emin and her fellow brand ambassadors.) Was it not remarkable that middle England was embracing her so warmly?

“But who owns middle England? Certain people think they have the right to represent middle England. But middle England doesn’t have a rightwing point of view.” The days of her being trashed as a “bad girl” seem a long way behind her, I say. “People say I have become part of the establishment. But I’ve always been part of the establishment, it is just that it is beginning to catch up with me.”

Of her past, she simply says: “When you are young, you say some stupid things. I can’t believe how much I winged it, and how unfocused I was.” Now, her commitment to her

vocation is total. "Art is my passion, art is my lover, art is my children. Without art I wouldn't be sitting here."

I ask how she copes with the flashiness of Miami during the art fair. "It's not flashy," she instantly replies. Yes it is, I say. Flashy and blingy. She must have noticed.

"I see a lot of people here who have worked in art all their lives. Maybe you see the bling over anything else. It's like people who see sex, but they don't see love. They don't see God. Because they are too lazy to go to a different level.

"I'm not saying you are lazy. But there are always different layers of meaning [to these things]. It is art and beauty that make the world go round."

I hear the ghosts of Sinatra and his chums chuckling at the ingenuousness of it all. But Emin has their number. She is off to her home town for some rest. "Miami to Margate. Why not? It has the most beautiful sunsets in the world." That's telling them.

Tracey Emin: Angel Without You', Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami, until March 9, mocanomi.org



Emin on the beach in Miami