

Tracey Emin at Lehmann Maupin
By Sarah Valdez

Anyone thinking about Tracey Emin's work can't help but take her tumultuous life into consideration, because to date it's been her main subject matter. We know about her childhood in the small, British seaside town of Margate; that she was raped and robbed of her childhood at the age of 13; the reasons why she never became a dancer; two traumatic abortions; persistent self-loathing; substance abuse in the extreme; lots of messy sexual exploits; and the list goes on. In the course of the past decade, however, Emin, a very attractive woman, as evidenced in both her art and British society pages - has become a high-profile celebrity, these days sober, fraternizing with London's A-list and appearing in Vivienne Westwood ads. Her latest and third show in New York contained three excellent sculptures as well as a number of beautiful and sometimes poetic, but disappointing, text-based works that fall into her usual confessional genre. Through them, we learn not of specific events but of a lot of free-floating loneliness, angst and yearning for a character Emin refers to as "you."

One work with pencil on white paper bears the words "You ~~here we go again~~ fuck I miss you"; another piece, with white embroidery on white fabric, reads "oh ~~wy~~ WHY did you stop me from loving you"; another small white-on-white embroidered piece shows a woman on her knees alongside the words "want to be with u." Emin isn't as believable here as she has been in the past, putting her history and inner life, no matter how embarrassing, on display for all to see. Compared, for instance, to Sophie Calle's "Exquisite Pain," in which the artist documents in elaborate detail the excruciating prelude and aftermath of a breakup of her own, Emin delivers little to convince us of her suffering in this show, attractive though the expressions of it might be. The entire series of work is quite elegant in its exploration of neutral tones, fabric and thread textures.

A curious trolley with slats of weathered timber stacked on it sat near the gallery's entrance. Titled *Looking for Fire*, the not especially labor-intensive piece forced examination of everyday materials, which, worn and battered, possessed a delicate, understated beauty. Across the room in a corner sat the mysteriously titled *Sleeping With You*, a small heap of found wooden spirals with a white neon light hung above it in a downward-sloping, squiggly line, making for a visually tasteful contrast between grit and glamour (which seems fitting for Emin, given her current state of affairs). This optically enchanting dichotomy becomes yet more spectacular in the exhibition's largest work, *Salem*, a rough-hewn, latticed, spiraling tower bearing resemblance to Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International*, but made of weathered wood, with a floor-to-ceiling white neon tube spiking gorgeously through its middle. It would seem Emin wants to explore conceptual terrain, but she refuses to go there. And that's part of the beauty of her art: she

continues to insist that her work be visceral, immediate and nothing other than what it is.

Now that Emin has moved beyond the brash, difficult, revelatory years of her 30s, she demonstrated here that she has much more going for her than her big mouth, rough past and insistent sexuality. She has a truly exceptional formal sensibility.