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Tracey Emin

By Sarah Douglas

NEW YORK— Arguably, there are few stones left unturned, Tracey Emin-wise. After all, much of her work is rooted in autobiography — beginning with her "Sensation"al tent *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963–1995* — and she's already issued her memoirs, titled *Strangeland*, in 2005. Two years ago she shot to further art world fame when she represented Great Britain at the **Venice Biennale**, and she's also been inducted as a Royal Academician. And over the summer Rizzoli published the hefty, brick-like volume *One Thousand Drawings by Tracey Emin*.

Last week Emin was in New York for the opening of her latest exhibition, at Lehmann Maupin Gallery, "Only God Knows I'm Good," which consists of a wide variety of new drawings, embroidered pieces, and a video animation, almost all focused on the female figure and Emin's favored topics: dreams, love, and sex. There are also two somewhat enigmatic, seemingly abstract sculptures, and all of this work is arrayed beneath the radiant glow of a white neon work spelling out the show's rather charged title. Emin spoke with ARTINFO about feminism, nightmares, and why people shouldn't judge her.

What's it like to show in New York, as opposed to in London, where you're a full-fledged celebrity?

When I do a show in London, you get like a thousand people a day going to the gallery, and the opening is on the news. It's a massive happening. Whereas in New York it's kind of like just having an art exhibition.

Two years ago, around the time of your pavilion in the Venice Biennale, you said you were making the "most feminine" work you'd ever done. From the looks of this show, you've continued in that mode.

Yeah. Actually, I think if this show was done 25 or 30 years ago, people would put me down as a hard-core feminist.

So by feminine you meant feminist?

Well, the work is so predominantly female that it smells of a woman. It can't be made by a man. In the art world, that's still frowned upon. It's still not considered to be of equal merit. If my embroideries were oil paintings they'd be three times the price. And if they were made by a man, they'd be four or five times the price.

Do you think of yourself as a feminist?

When I had my interview for art school in 1983 and they said to me "What do you think about feminism?" I said, "I don't." But now I do. I have to think about it to continue what I'm doing in a man's world. The older and more successful I become,

the more I realize how much of a man's world the art world is.

All of this touches on something you said in an interview around the time of the Venice Biennale, about coming to terms with being a "midcareer artist."

My show at the Biennale was a midcareer show. I said to the curator, Andrea Rose, "What should I do? I want to show what I'm working on now, but I also know I should show 'the best of Tracey Emin.'" She said, "Darling, show whatever you want that will take you through to the future. Don't think you have to do what other people expect you to do."

Your sculptures may be the least understood part of your output. There are two in the current show.

A Norwegian film crew said to me, "Is there anything in your work that's really private?" I should have said, "Yeah, my sculptures." Because no one fucking gets them.

Ok. Well, they are very different from the rest of your work.

All my sculptures are. I'm having a show at the Hayward Gallery in London in two years and I'm going to show lots of my sculptures, and I know when people see all my of them together, they'll get it. People don't understand how I can go from this sort of abstract sculpture thing to this narrative drawing thing. They can't make the link between them.

What is the link between them?

The sculptures are extremely personal. And I dislike the use of walls to divide up the space in galleries. The sculptures are a device to break up the space, so you can look at the drawings, or whatever else I'm showing, in relation to the sculptures.

One of the sculptures in this show has a basket-like object on top. What does it represent?

A tidemark from where I grew up in Margate. I've always said that if I could own any sculpture in the whole world I would own one of these tidemarks, so I thought, why don't I make one? Lots of the things in this show are about my dreams. And the fear of dreams. In Margate there are these big cliffs. In a dream, I'd hear this roaring noise and I'd turn, and there would be a giant tidal wave coming in. And there was nowhere for me to go. These basket tidemarks are there so the ships can see the level of the water. In my dream when the tidal wave goes out, the tidemark comes back. So for me it's a symbol of both fragility and strength.

Speaking of dreams, there's a pretty enigmatic drawing in this show, with a pair of figures, one of them seeming to crouch, and the phrase, "Just sat there like nothing was happening and all the time I was screaming and you can't help me." What's the story there?

When I was pregnant, I didn't know I was pregnant, and I went to bed, and I woke up, and St. Paul is sitting on the edge of my bed, waking me up, touching my hand.

He said to me, "You must go to Rome." Can you imagine waking up and St. Paul is fucking sitting on your bed telling you to go to Rome? What the hell does that mean? You know when you have a nightmare and you're screaming and there's someone lying there next to you and they can't hear you because you're screaming in your head, in your dream, but nothing's coming out of your mouth?

Yes. Let's talk about the title of the show, "Only God Knows I'm Good," a phrase that is also spelled out in one of the neon pieces here. It sounds a little defensive. Or is it about feeling guilty?

No, it's about, I'm nearly 50, and I'm so fucking pissed about people judging me. How dare they? They don't know me, they don't know what my soul is like, they don't know my level of integrity, my level of honesty. Judge my work, that's fine. It's here, it's on the wall. But don't judge my soul. So even though it sounds a little tongue-in-cheek, it isn't. And in terms of God — not religion, but in terms of God — I have a vast amount of faith, and belief.

You had a book of poetry released recently — your work as poet-in-residence for *GQ* magazine, where you used to review hotels, and were formerly Feng Shui editor. You must have a good relationship with the magazine!

I've written for *GQ* for ten years. But for two years [the editor] Dylan Jones didn't speak to me because I got drunk at the *GQ* awards [in 2003] when I was giving the Clash the lifetime achievement award. I got onstage and it was like they were waiting for every advertiser to pull out of the magazine. So horrific. Honestly, it was like watching pornography with your grandparents.

Poetry usually gets a bad rap along the lines of: no one reads it. But here you are putting poems in a glossy magazine.

And GQ gets loads of emails from people enjoying them. When I wrote for the magazine before Dylan was always saying, "You can't write about bloody condoms and it's the safest time to have sex, sorry, you can't do it, we can't have that, men don't want to know, it's a male magazine." Like that. But men do like to know how women think, and a poem gives them the chance to look into a woman's mind.

Which do you think has been your best-received poem?

The one I read at the Serpentine last month [as part of the Poetry Marathon]. The one that ends, "And sometimes I think, Christ, your penis is big."

Oh yes, I remember that. After reading it you said, "Lucky girl."

I got a really big laugh.

How did the poet-in-residence gig come about, anyhow?

Because Dylan went to see my show in L.A. [at Gagosian Gallery in 2007], and loved the tiny embroideries, and said they were like poems.

How did you like showing in L.A.?

Gagosian's gallery is beautiful. But the thing about L.A. is you do a fantastic show and no one sees it! It's like the end of America. Also, in L.A., it seemed like when I said, "Oh, yes, thank you I would like sugar," people thought I said, "You're a fucking cunt and I'm gonna kill your mum."

Why was that?

When I opened my mouth, they misinterpreted everything I said. Everywhere. And the reason for this, I think, is that my face actually moves when I speak. I smile, and I wrinkle. They couldn't cope with that.

Ah, so the problem was Botox.

Yeah. Also, I chose the wrong hotel. The Beverly Hills. I should have chosen a hotel who knew who I was, who knew they were going to get maximum really good positive energy and publicity. I used to stay at the Mondrian, with the rap bands. And they would sit around the pool with all their gold, and when I look back on it, I fit in well, in that rap scene.

What's the next step for you?

Redo my studio in London. And I have a beautiful house in France. So I'm building a studio there. I'll be 47 next birthday. So for the next three years I'm going to streamline everything. Just be totally focused for the rest of my life.

One of the best interviews with you was done by British journalist Lynn Barber**, years ago. Of course now Barber's own memoirs have been made into a film, *An Education*, about a teenager in England in the 1960s who nearly gets sidetracked from her dream of going to Oxford by her affair with an older man. What did you think of it?**

I loved it. And I said, and this was quoted, "Fuck the men, and get the education. This is a strike for feminism." It's really good for young girls to see that film. It'll make them want to go to university and not just have a glamorous lifestyle. Well, they can have both.