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Quite Big in Britain, Not Quite in the U.S.

By Eric Konigsberg

That the artist Tracey Emin had asked to be interviewed at her hotel swimming pool and showed up in a bathing suit would probably mean more to readers in her native England, where her self-revelatory and at times exhibitionist tendencies are well known. They have helped make her an object of public fascination there — a national celebrity, in fact — for more than a decade.

Ms. Emin first gained notoriety in 1997 for her contribution to the famous "Sensation" show at the Royal Academy of Arts: a tent embroidered with the names of everybody with whom she had ever shared a bed. Soon after came an installation consisting of her bed itself, littered with blood-stained underwear, condoms and lubricant, which was shown at the Tate Gallery in 1999 and got her on the short list for the Turner Prize.

Recent years have brought a strong run of museum exhibitions, with major retrospectives at the Stedlijk in Amsterdam and the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, along with regular appearances in British party pages and fashion magazines. In 2007 she was chosen to represent Britain at the Venice Biennale. She is quite possibly the most famous living artist in England after Damien Hirst.

"And Damien's not recognized like I am everywhere I go," she said. "In London I'm in the papers every time I blow my nose, essentially. I'll be followed by paparazzi. I'm taught in the school curriculum in Britain. It's actually kind of nice when I come to New York and I don't have that recognized thing."

What brought Ms. Emin, 46, over from London was a new exhibition of her work at the Lehmann Maupin Gallery on Chrystie Street on the Lower East Side, titled "Only God Knows I'm Good." While it was hardly a dull week — Madonna and Kevin Spacey, both friends who collect Ms. Emin, came by to see her new output, and a crowd she put at around 1,000 came to her opening on Nov. 5 — she couldn't refrain from comparing it with her openings at the White Cube Gallery in London.

"There, it's 5,000, 6,000 people spilling into the square outside," she said. "It's like a rock concert."

The difference between her receptions on the two sides of the Atlantic may be due partly to her nationality, as Ms. Emin pointed out — after all, "Jeff Koons isn't famous" in Britain, she said. Even so, given that the New York art world has become much bigger and more international in scope in recent years, it is notable that an artist who has achieved Ms. Emin's level of stardom in Europe should struggle to make inroads here.

This is Ms. Emin's fourth solo show in New York. So far it has not received much attention from reviewers, and Rachel Lehmann, an owner of the gallery, said that 10 of the 53 works there —

which include many single-edition prints and embroidered cloths, along with a handful of sculptures and a short animated film — have sold so far.

By contrast, when the White Cube held an exhibition of similar pieces by Ms. Emin six months ago, about three-quarters of them were sold within a week, according to Tim Marlow, a director of that gallery (who cautioned against reading too much into the comparison).

That opening was a major event in the British art world and generated a great deal of press. Rachel Campbell-Johnston, the chief art critic for The Times of London, wrote, “This new show should have been the one she presented at the biennale” in Venice. The Evening Standard’s review raved about the animation piece in particular and declared that “no museum exhibition about feminist art, art about the body or sexual identity in art will be complete without this work.”

Ms. Emin’s new prints and embroideries are rendered in the spare and sketchlike style she has taken to calling “my salty Egon Schiele line.” (“Imagine if you would there’s salt poured on the paper, and you draw right over it,” she said poolside, drawing an imaginary line with her finger on the arm of her chaise longue.) The works explore perennial themes of Ms. Emin’s: sex and loneliness, sex and self-reproach. One print depicts a dog and a woman having sex, with the scrawled text: “No You Were A Dog But Thing Is I Was Less.”

Ms. Emin said that the longer critical and commercial discrepancies exist between her status in Europe and America, the more puzzled she is. For years she attributed it to uneasiness over several autobiographical video pieces and essays in which she discussed being raped as a teenager and having two abortions, though now she doubts it is that simple.

“I’m not mourning it,” she said, adding, “Over here, I’ve never really shown in museums at all.”

She noted: “The Guggenheim hasn’t bought my work, but I think they received a donated piece. The Tate last year bought and displayed a whole room of my work.”

The Walker Art Center in Minneapolis exhibited her tent, which was not yet famous, in a group show in 1995 — but she did not want it sharing a room “with all these little pieces by everybody else,” she said, and tried to pull it from the exhibition. “They stopped me when I was dragging it down the escalator. Richard Flood, the curator, said, ‘With your attitude, you’ll never show in this country.’ I told him with that attitude I didn’t want to, although actually for the time being he was right.”

Ms. Emin’s art is so closely bound up in her persona that detractors are wont to say that the artist herself, or at least her endless capacity for self-reference, is the turnoff. She has produced works and shows titled “The Tracey Files,” “The Tracey Emin Museum” and “CV,” which stands for two words — the second of them is “vernacular” and the first is unprintable. She has made hundreds of nude self-portraits, including “I’ve Got It All,” a photograph in which her loins are obscured only by piles of money, which she is either giving birth to or forcing inside her vagina.

Mr. Marlow said her approach has been viewed as “perhaps a bit confrontational” for the American market. Ms. Lehmann suggested that sexism was a cause: “The male museum directors and curators were extremely hostile, which didn’t help Tracey get the right attention,” she said.

Nancy Spector, the chief curator of the Guggenheim Museum, pointed out the degree to which

Ms. Emin's appeal as both an artist and a personality had its roots in contemporary British culture. "So much of her public persona is about the appearances, the tabloids following her, the confessional nature of her work," Ms. Spector said. "I think of Tracey's work as having a lot in common with the sort of reality television that came out of Great Britain."

But even Ms. Emin appears to have reached a point of saturation — and, finally, the capacity to be embarrassed — with her own oversharing. Last Saturday, at a public reading at the University Settlement on Eldridge Street from her collection of personal essays, "Strangeland," that was part of the performance art festival Performa, Ms. Emin prefaced one of several passages about her promiscuous youth with the declaration, "I'm afraid this one's going to be quite stupid," and then refused to read the last few paragraphs.

Ms. Emin acknowledged that there is a downside to making such an open book of herself. "People see me in the street and cuddle me," she said, scrunching her face into the asymmetrical squint that has long been a trademark, at least in Britain. "It's difficult, because I don't like being touched."