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REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS

Tracey Emin at Lehmann Maupin

By Cathy Lebowitz

In this large show that inaugurated Lehmann Maupin's new Chelsea space, Tracey Emin offered up the brash provocations that brought her fame, but she also extended the character of her frank musings to incorporate new insight and a gentle vulnerability. Almost all the works were made within the last two years; quilts, neon signs, embroidered drawings, paintings, monoprints and mixed-medium objects filled the gallery's main space and two side areas.

In the center of the gallery, Emin's latest bed piece differed notably from her notorious bedroom installation that appeared in Tokyo, New York and London. Instead of the soiled knickers, dirty sheets and used condoms (and, in some iterations, a noose, which suggested a suicidal despair underlying the rebellious persona) of the earlier piece (1998), she displayed a four-poster bed bedecked with flower-printed curtains. Sewn words and drawings covered every available surface—the bed skirt, the quilt the sheets and pillowcases—creating, in effect, a bed that speaks the intimate thoughts of its owner. Applied on the quilt in large block letters were the words "I AM NOT AFRAID," at the top, and "TO MEET MY PAST," at the bottom. Between the posts at the head of the bed hung salmon-colored fabric with a girl in a cemetery sitting on a gravestone embroidered in black thread.

Emin's quilts and bedsheet drawings that were displayed on the walls are formally and poetically engaging. The profusion of words on the quilts counterpoints the simple linear sewing on the sheets. Near the entrance of the show, an embroidered sheet depicts a bird and the words "this is my favorite little bird." Seeming equal parts optimism and irony, the bird sits on sprouting branches with flower patches arrayed in a semicircle above. This impossibly sweet mood becomes more complex in another work, suggesting an innocence stolen from childhood and reclaimed through experience. Framed by an old blue blanket, a piece of canvas displays applied block letters which read: "Why when I was a little girl, why did I not see the world like this, innocent." In the middle of the sheet are two sewn sparrows that stand for this hard-won innocence.

In a pink and blue neon piece that utilizes Emin's recognizable handwriting, she crosses out the last word of an unfinished phrase that reads "I think it's over," and revises the thought on the line below to say "I think it's all in my head," which is also the name of the show. The words suggest a confrontation with despair and a willful choice to go on. A pedestal nearby presented a bronze self-portrait, titled *Death Mask*. The bronze is exquisitely patinated with delicate gold highlights. Emin has cast her distinctive visage with eyes shut, beautiful and peaceful. Dignity and grace seem to prevail over anger.

In one of the quilts, titled *I Don't Think So*, current events take center stage. Emin comments on the fear caused not only by terrorism itself, but also on the attempts to profit from the hysteria. Appliqued over an American flag were the words "As if I'm not afraid enough"; the lower portion contains a replica of an ad that reads "Gas Masks and Biological suits/complete sets £49.99", a London telephone number is followed by the embroidered cry "don't sell me your fucking fear."

What brought Emin to prominence was shock value, but what keeps her work powerful as she continues is the strength and nuance of its form and content.