

Flaunt Issue 107

Tracey Emin

By Maxwell Williams

Photographed by Shane McCauley

Tracey Emin looks at home in the quiet, upstairs office of Lehmann Maupin Gallery's homey, wood-floored, yet capacious Chrystie Street space on the morning before her first solo show since her career retrospective, "20 Years," and her second show at the gallery since opening her dedicated room at the Tate Britain museum, a room filled with some of her best work only to later be archived into the gallery's collection, comparable to being kept by the Upper East Side's regal art institutions. That said, nervousness seems appropriate before meeting with an artist who has been confronted with - and has struck back against - the high art of navigating success, media, and truly invasive fame. Her work in neon lights, embroidery, and sculpture is legendary - almost fetishized - by a fawning and sometimes spiteful British audience. And it doesn't help that she's falling ill at the beginning of the interview, a result of a night out. "I've got to get up; I'm going to be sick," she says on her way out the door.

Rest assured, Emin is actually *not* the mess she's being made out to be, despite the results of what she describes as a "wild" night out in New York's hotel party scene. "As I get older," she says when she comes back, looking refreshed, "what I really need is a passiveness in my life without all of the frenetic, frenzied excitement. Since I've been in New York, I've felt like I'm in a snowball. And that isn't good. That's why sleep is so important."

Emin is completely numb to the whole digging journalist conceit. It's much more important to talk about her work first, a piece of information much of the journalists (and even some art critics) tend to neglect. Which is fine because since her relationship with the British press began, she is a bit more restrained, quite some wiser and a whole hell of a lot more convivial than one might imagine her to be. She doesn't need meddlesome and exacting journalists to elevate her work, especially with her recent concentration on her life's sorrow. "This show's based on dreams and fear and loss," she says, leaning in with furtive intimation. "So when you put all those things together, if you were to read that as being really positive, you'd have to be a moron, wouldn't you?"

It's apparent: Emin's current work reflects the difficulty of aging. Yet Emin, 46, takes it on with Achillean determination: "Rudi Fuchs is a Dutch art historian," she says as hushed as the Chinatown gallery necessitates, "and I did a show with him at the Stedelijk Museum, a mid-retrospective. It was called 'Ten Years' - my newest retrospective was '20 Years' - and Rudi knows my work really well. He knows that I've been suffering and fighting with my work over the last few years, and he said to me, 'Why don't you concentrate on the bleakness because that's what you're really good at. People look at your shows and it's pretty, but it's bleak behind all that. Why don't you just really pull that bleakness out?'"

Emin's recent works are about, in a word, sadness, and, if one were to use two *words failure*. "It's not failure," she retorts gently. "I'm getting towards 50. And I *have* failed, massively enough. I have no children. And it doesn't matter, I have to regret it because I'd make a really good mom." So, if not failure, then the work definitely expresses a certain amount of remorse.

One of Emin's more demonstrative pieces, for example - one of her new, large scale embroidered blankets - is a sketchy scene of a man atop a woman in missionary position. The woman is saying, "Is this a joke." It's almost pitiful. Based on a dream or not, pieces like this one, or the white neon light hanging above the main space which simply says, "Only God Knows I'm Good," suggest a simple change in direction for Emin's work - a trend towards mortality and facing one's self in the morning.

Emin's earlier works were full of bravura and venom. For example, on a recent visit to big shot Mexican art patron Eugenio Lopez's Beverly Hills home, a substantiated Emin piece in his foyer, "People Like You Need to Fuck People Like Me" (2002) welcomed guests with a neon punch to the face, which she says, "...is really funny." This air of arrogance worked so well in pieces like "People Like You...", "My Bed" (1998) - Emin's bed of menstrual blood, condoms, and all, which she lay in for days after a bad break-up-and "Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-1995" (1995), a tent with the names of all who satisfied the piece's title (though not necessarily with a sexual connotation) appliqued onto the insides. Like the names on her tent, the Young British Artist label was applied to her. With this YBA label came the fame, fortune, and subsequent derision. The press made her out to be a wine-guzzling social time bomb. "I know, I am a lot different, aren't I?" she muses. "Especially in England, I get so misquoted. It's really bad."

Fortunately, she has a powerful supporter in Peter Blake, who invited her participation in a show at the Royal Academy in 2001. Emin made a video about the institutionalized sexism in art. From there, it snowballed until 2007, when she was voted into the prestigious group of 80 artists who essentially own the Academy. "The Royal Academecian thing is really brilliant," she says. "It's charming and it's fun. Seventy percent of the Royal Academicians are over 60, so it's really interesting for me to be with these really old men in a room chatting and talking about art. Some of them are really lovely. Some of them were furious that I got voted in, but now they've met me, they think it's all right."

Despite the lark of hoity-toity interactions with old masters, Emin prefers to make art aimed at the rest of us. Which may be why she has such a vast and loyal fan base. "[I have a] massive following of young people. My first show I had in New York, my gallery couldn't believe how many skateboarders had come and seen my work." But like she said, that was her first show in New York. It seems this show, with its implications of death and self-destruction is perhaps more for audiences who can access and connect with these fears more readily than a group of skateboarders. In defiance of her dark subject matter, she seems to be having fun now - she "really loved" curating a show at the Royal Academy in the Summer of 2008. But Emin will someday break ties with the art world. "I have a house in France," she says wistfully, "and I would like to spend a lot of time there gardening. This summer, when I hung my washing up on the line, I thought, if I got as much pleasure in the studio as I did doing my washing and hanging it up, I'd be a really good artist."