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Bigmouth Strikes Again
Tracey Emin's a brassy, confessional celebrity in London. Isn't it time for New York to pay attention?

By Luke Crisell

It's a few days before the opening of Tracey Emin's latest New York show, titled "I Can Feel Your Smile," at Chelsea's Lehmann Maupin gallery, and the artist is overseeing the installation of her work. A huge bonfirelike sculpture, rendered in wood salvaged from an English pier and shipped over specifically for the show, is erected in the main room. The man charged with building the structure shows me Emin's sketch; underneath I can see the words, in her handwriting, CAME TO ME IN A DREAM.

"What do you think of this?" asks Emin, gesturing toward some wooden spirals, pale blue paint flaking off them. "There's going to be some neon too, of course"—and she traces a line on the wall with her finger. "But do you think I should get a sink to go there as well?" I consider the amassed wood and try to visualize neon. I guess a sink could work, I shrug. Seemingly reassured, Emin quickly finds one of the gallery's employees and announces that she wants a sink. A Butler-style sink, to be precise. And she wants it now.

This is one version of the visual artist Tracey Emin—a peaceful woman, intuitive, decisive. It is a very different figure from the one I encounter later that day, under deeply awkward circumstances: The digital file on which I recorded our meeting is corrupted, it turns out, and I've requested a second meeting. She declines, understandably; I'd just have to rely on my notes, she snaps.

But the very next morning Emin calls to say she's reconsidered. I should come over immediately to the pool on the 21st floor of the Peninsula hotel. She'll be having her daily swim to relieve stress. When I arrive at the pool's edge, she pulls herself out of the water, wearing a black Speedo one-piece, and glares. "You're starting to destroy my fucking life, Luke, do you know that?" The words echo, and the three other people in the pool stare at us. "I'm being exceptionally nice to you doing this here. Exceptionally nice. I hope you realize that."

This is the Tracy Emin that all London knows: a star, a diva, and a subject of fear and

fascination. In New York, Emin is famous only in the art world and discussed for her art, not her personality. She's best known for her controversial confessional works, such as My Bed, an installation of her slept-in bed—replete with condom wrappers, underwear, and odor—for which she won the Turner Prize; or the embroidered tent titled Everyone I Have Ever Slept With, decorated with appliquéd names, that appeared at the Brooklyn Museum's notorious "Sensation" exhibit.

But in England, the artist is a bona fide celebrity. She writes a weekly column in a national newspaper, The Independent (sample line: "Every time my period's late I pray my level of unconsciousness was alcohol-induced and not Rohypnol"). She's a regular guest on chat shows. She's bosom buddies with Kate Moss. When her latest book, Strangeland—a collection of recycled fragments posturing as an "autobiography"—was published there last month, it quickly sold out of bookstores in central London. An Emin opening in London is "something like a rock concert," she acknowledges—with some 7,000 attendees. When's the last time that happened with any American visual artist?

"In London the artists rule," Emin says, "but in New York the galleries do. Gallerists here seem to be almost patriarchal figures, and the art scene is really male-dominated here. In London it's a lot more open to women. People here don't seem to expect me to have a sense of humor. Or tits, for that matter." Reactions to Emin's art in America have always been, by her own admission, mixed. "I'm a Marmite person: People either love me or absolutely hate me," she says with a wry grin.

Born in London in 1963, Emin has an English mother and a father who is a Turkish Cypriot. She and her twin brother, Paul, grew up in the English seaside town of Margate, in the grand surroundings of her father's hotel and then, following his bankruptcy, in escalating poverty. She hated school and left when she was 13, but went back to study at Maidstone and the Royal College of Art, where she received an M.A. in fine art. This educational background, she points out, is one that critics often ignore—preferring to regard her as rough and unsophisticated, a loud voice without a thought in her head.

But it is Emin's unapologetic willingness to publicize her deepest emotions that divides opinions most radically. Not that the criticism holds her back: "I Can Feel Your Smile" is as explicitly intimate as any of Emin's previous shows, and noticeably more melancholy. In one film in the show, she proclaims, "I love you. I love your soul. To feel your breath I kiss you deep inside of you." Embroidered works include phrases like I COULD HAVE LOVED YOU MORE and I KEEP DREAMING OF YOU. This is art that draws directly on the artist's insecurities—work that may be more sophisticated than the crass culture of blogs and reality confessionals, but which also resonates with that culture, providing an emotional power that derives from similar awkward and eloquent shadings.

"I'm a very, very sad person," she says when I ask her about the tone of the new show. "I can't decide whether I'm unhappy because I make unhappy work or I make unhappy work because I'm unhappy." Asked how she would describe that sadness, she answers immediately and assuredly: "Melancholy. It's a melancholy." As for the name of the show, she told me, "It was originally going to be called 'Everything for Love' because I wanted it to be positive, but then I thought that 'I Can Feel Your Smile' is just really lovely; it makes me want to cry in a way. It comes from a text message that I sent to a friend whose husband had died. I thought I could feel her smiling, and that got me thinking about death and where we go when we die and if the dead are watching us."

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But ultimately, the fulcrum of "I Can Feel Your Smile" is Emin herself—as it was with her bed, the tent, and, indeed, every exhibition she has ever had. She called her first solo show, at London's White Cube Gallery, "My Major Retrospective," "because I didn't think I would ever have another one." And though it's far from rare for artists to use themselves as their primary subject (consider Rembrandt's and Picasso's self-portraits), somehow Emin's version of making the private public seems so much more, well, public than that of other exhibitionists. "It's strange—most collectors will never know what the artist whose work they're buying even looks like," she says, "but with me they all seem to want to meet me and talk to me."

The sunlight pours in through the panoramic glass-walled space, and as Emin reclines in her sun lounger, I've begun to feel like her therapist, and I tell her so. "Yeah, it's getting a bit like that, isn't it?" she replies. "I have come to realize that I'm going to be alone for the foreseeable future," she says, looking out over Central Park. "And that's definitely a bit of a downside, but it's tough shit, that's how it is." She closes her eyes. "I've made a decision. And that's to make my work."