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Emin Explores Reality and Dreams

By Claire Prentice

New York's movers and shakers turned out in force for the opening of Tracey Emin's new exhibition, Only God Knows I'm Good.

Emin's celebrity friends Madonna and Kevin Spacey avoided the crowds, popping in for private viewings ahead of the official reception.

The exhibition at the Lehmann Maupin Gallery on New York's fashionable Lower East Side features 53 works including never-before-seen neons and sculptures, a collection of embroideries and monoprints and a large-scale film projection.

Emin, who was born in Margate, Kent and grew up in London, is well known for her deeply personal, revealing works.

"The show is about the space between reality, dreams and fear. There are times when a dream is so real and vivid that you treat it as reality," says Emin.

After a period of using colour, Emin, 46, says she is consciously returning to darker territory in her work.

"Life isn't straightforward, it can be really complicated. I'm on a constant search for clarity."

Discussing the title of the show, Emin says: "It references David Bowie's lyrics: 'God knows I'm good, God knows I'm good, surely God will look the other way today'."

One piece in the show, *Why Be Afraid*, features a dog carrying a person on its back. It was inspired by a dream Emin had as a child in which a dog was carrying her upstairs.

"I was always terrified of dogs," she says, adding "I'm more of a cat person." Her cat, Docket, has become a regular in the UK press and has featured in her art.

Another work, *Nothing Touches*, is one of the artist's favourites. It features a figure in a voluminous dress surrounded by flowers. Though brightly coloured, on closer inspection the work is darker than it initially appears.

Emin made her name with controversial works such as a tent embroidered with the names of all the people she had ever slept with and her 1999 Turner Prize-nominated *My Bed*, featuring her unmade bed, covered with her dirty underwear, vodka bottles and used condoms.

Does she ever feel she exposes too much of herself? "You have to, otherwise the work isn't honest," she says.

Taking stock

In 2007 Emin represented Britain at the Venice Biennale, was made a Royal Academician and received three honorary doctorates.

The following year she had her first major retrospective at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art which drew record crowds. The exhibition went on to Spain and Switzerland.

"I did the Biennale and got slagged off and then there was the retrospective which everyone praised.

"It really made me think about the direction I was going in with my art and what I'd achieved," says Emin.

Reflecting on the pieces in her new exhibition, most of which haven't been shown before in public, Emin says: "I'm really happy with it. If you do good work and have a collection like this that you feel happy with, there's no better feeling of satisfaction in the world."

Emin has donated 197 artworks to charity in recent years, with an estimated combined value of £10m. She has raised more than £1m for charities including the NSPCC and the Terrence Higgins Trust.

She recently bought some run-down buildings in east London to convert into studios for young artists and has set up a library for children in Uganda.

"The papers never report on my charity work or my becoming an Academician. They just write about the partying," she says.

Earlier this week Emin was photographed attending a party thrown by Madonna for the designer Valentino at New York hotspot the Boom Boom Room. Other guests included actors Hugh Jackman and Adrien Brody and designers Marc Jacobs and Diane von Furstenberg.

On Saturday, Emin is reading from her autobiography and her new book of poems, *Those Who Suffer Love*, as part of the Performa Biennial in New York. Afterwards, the artist plans to invite the audience to ask her anything they like about her life and art.

"They can ask me absolutely anything and I will answer it as honestly as possible.

"That's quite a scary thing to do in New York. It wouldn't be in London because everyone knows everything about me there."

Emin has been an outspoken critic of Britain's Labour government for not giving more tax breaks and financial support to artists.

An article in the Times recently reported she was thinking of quitting the UK and moving to France, where she has a home. Emin dismisses the story as false. She says: "I love Britain. I love my country. I'm really patriotic."

Only God Knows I'm Good is on until 19 December.