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New Sensation

Tracey Emin, British art superstar, brings her brand of sexually charged ambition to New York City.

By Linda Yablonsky

For Tracey Emin, sex always seems at the top of the agenda. "I don't like this microphone," she said, trying to get settled at the start of her reading on Sunday at the Performance Project @University Settlement. "It feels like I'm giving someone a really weird blow job."

During the hour-long performance, the British art star, in town for the opening of her fourth solo show at Lehmann Maupin Gallery, read searing and tender stories from her memoir *Strangeland*, which details her adolescent adventures with the randy boys who slagged her in Margate, the seaside town where she grew up. "Sex was something you did after fish and chips," she explained. "And it was free."

Sex, lust, and longing are recurring subjects in Emin's provocative art as well, and she has never been shy about putting herself in it. (As one of her more memorable neon signs puts it, "People like you need to fuck people like me.")

Yet on Sunday, the forthright Emin, who is famous for putting a debauched bed stained with unidentified effluents in a museum and surrounding it with bloody underwear and used condoms, was too embarrassed by the inebriated sensations of an old New York diary entry to get through it in public. "See how much I've changed?" she said, laughing. "I just wrote the book. I didn't read it."

At 46, the holy terror of Brit Art is every inch a gracious (if slightly foul-mouthed) lady who neatly makes her own bed every day and wears low-cut Vivienne Westwood frocks to sophisticated advantage. Often vilified in the English press for both her drunken tantrums and her autobiographical needleworks, frank line drawings, and neons, she nonetheless has a following at home akin to that of a sports hero in America. In this country, contemporary artists rarely become regular guests on television talk shows and are never asked to contribute weekly columns to the op-ed pages of leading newspapers. (Emin wrote one for the *Independent* for four years.)

"I am newsworthy," she admitted when I visited her in London last month, when she and her six assistants were preparing to ship the work in her current show, "Only God Knows I'm Good," to New York. "It's a zeitgeist thing. My timing has been fantastic."

Emin is referring to the appearance of her appliquéd pup tent, *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With, 1963-1995*, in the epochal "Sensation" exhibition of 1997, which created the Young British Artist phenomenon led by Damien Hirst. With it, and her discovery

by the art dealer Jay Jopling, Emin caught the crest of a wave of anti-Thatcherite British art and has exploited every ripple of her notoriety since. “At the height of Thatcherism,” she told me, “if you were an outsider you were perceived as being a loser. Now if you are an outsider, you’re perceived as being interesting.”

But timing isn't the reason that both abortion advocates and their enemies seek out Emin to speak to their groups. (“Abortion really hurts. It hurts a lot,” she said when we spoke, recounting the two abortions she had in her 20s, and highlighting the ambivalence of her position. “No woman wants one.”) And she didn’t get to the top of the heap just by spelling out the names of everyone who had shared her bed since infancy. What took her there were ambition and self-regard born of shame. The daughter of a Turkish-Cypriot father and English mother, she left school at 13 after an impoverished childhood and rape, moved to London at 15, and later put herself through the Royal Academy of Art. She is the author of two affecting memoirs (one of which is on the reading list in English high schools), now holds three honorary Ph.D.s, and in 2007 represented her country at the Venice Biennale.

On these shores, however, her drawings, appliquéd text blankets festooned with daisies, low-tech videos, and object installations are known mainly to art-world cognoscenti, where competition is stiff and personal stakes are high.

"I've never had a solo show in an American museum," she said as we toured the eighteenth-century brick townhouse she shares part-time with photographer Scott Douglas in London's East End. Even if Emin's short fuse and ego have made her a curator’s nightmare, her career makes a telling commentary on an art scene that can be forgiving of artists who cross over into popular culture. There are exceptions, of course. Keith Haring was one. Damien Hirst, Richard Prince, and Takashi Murakami are others. And in the boys' club that still characterizes the art market, their brands command stratospheric prices that Emin's can't touch. Yet her entrepreneurial instincts have been unerring from the start.

In 1992, broke and desperate, she wrote letters to everyone she knew inviting them to invest £10 in her "creative potential." For the £80 she received in the first week - a small fortune at the time - she would write personal letters and sign them. Some of these missives were merely thank-you notes. Others went on for ten pages of confessional prose.

One respondent was the sculptor Sarah Lucas, with whom Emin opened the Shop, a storefront studio in which the two held all-night parties every Saturday for the eight months they stayed in business, and sold objects that they'd made there by hand. "Our idea of being professional," she says, "was twenty-four hours' *fun*."

Today her work carries handsome six-figure price tags and has made her wealthy enough to own not just the townhouse but a three-story, 8,000-square-foot building nearby that she is remaking into a four-story studio complex with a built-in pool. (She claims to swim ten miles a day.) She also has a second home in the south of France and a portfolio of real-estate investments. "I've never taken drugs," she volunteered, comparing herself to friends who put their money up their noses. "I bought property. I've even been lucky in this recession," she added. "I had the best January in sales

I've ever had."

So she isn't suffering and she isn't dumb, but she has been criticized for the commercial instincts that earn admiration for her male counterparts. Perhaps it's the discomfort that her unabashed blend of sex and sentiment can generate. Like her life, her art is not a conceptualist puzzle that is difficult to parse - it's accessible to anyone, and that can make her seem less than serious. Take "Those Who Suffer Love," a rapid-fire video animation projected in a back room at Lehmann-Maupin: Produced from dozens of drawings (some exhibited on the gallery walls), it shows a faceless woman in a masturbatory frenzy. But the piece is less about sex than about the terrors of isolation, and is more hypnotizing than it is titillating.

Emin says she used a model for the work. "I wish it was me!" she allowed at the reading. "I rarely ever masturbate anymore and it pisses me off." But the piece still seems to refer to her own experience. On Sunday, she gave unflinching answers to written questions probing her attitude toward feminism, sex addiction, the afterlife, and the difference between men and women. "Women having sex come all the time," she said. "Men have one big ejaculation and it's over. It's the same in art. Male artists peak at 40 to 45. For women, it's about longevity."

Good thing her timing is perfect.