

An Eminent Talent?

LAURA-JANE FOLEY TALKS TO MARGATE'S MOST FAMOUS EXPORT, THE BRITISH ARTIST TRACEY EMIN

Tracey Emin, one of the *enfants terribles* of the Brit Art movement, has established herself in recent years as a media-savvy celeb. She regularly appears on television programmes such as *Have I Got News For You*, has fronted a Vivienne Westwood collection and is a fixture in many gossip columns for her party antics. Is *Celebrity Big Brother* next?

Think of Tracey Emin and more than likely the image of her bed and her tent will pop into your mind. Tracey Emin came to fame, like many of her YBA (Young British Artists) contemporaries, in the mid 1990s. Her profile was significantly raised when she was nominated for the Turner Prize in 1999. Her collection included mono-prints, various video works and the now infamous *My Bed*

installation, which consisted of dirty sheets, vodka bottles, bloody knickers and used condoms. Emin did not win and felt that she had been selected merely to gain publicity for the prize.

Last year, three of her pieces, including her tent, were destroyed in the Momart warehouse fire in which many pieces of modern art by artists such as Jake and Dinos Chapman, Damian Hirst and Chris Ofili went up in flames. It is estimated that more than £50 million of art was destroyed. What pained Emin more than losing her tent (for which Saatchi is rumoured to have paid £40,000) was the public reaction to the blaze. "The majority of the British public have no regard or no respect for what me and my peers do, to the

point that they laugh at a disaster like a fire. We really don't need to laugh at the culture in our own country." She insists: "You don't laugh at people's loss on that kind of level and it's really lucky that no-one was hurt. It is just not fair and it's not funny and it's not polite and it's bad manners. I would never laugh at a disaster like that. I just have some empathy and sympathy with people's loss."

The tent called *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-95*, which first brought her to public attention was emblazoned with the names of everyone she had shared her bed with in that period including her two unborn foetuses which she had aborted. Emin explains that this piece and all her pieces are irreplaceable as they represent a particular emotion she was feeling when she made them. "I had the inclination and inspiration ten years ago to make that, I don't have that inspiration and inclination now. My work is very personal, which people know, so I can't create that emotion again - it's impossible."

It is slightly disconcerting to know so much about Emin's private life but this is the crux of her art. It is hard to separate work from life from personality with Tracey. Her autobiography lies scattered in galleries and private collections around the world. For Emin art has a very particular purpose. "There are all different reasons why art exists. For me it's a means of communication".

In the Autumn of 2004 Emin was inaugurated into the Pantheon of Great Artists, at least in the eyes of the powers that be at the Tate which bulk bought eight of her pieces. The pieces went on immediate display in an Emin-only room at the Tate. She joins a distinguished list of artists to be given their own room - Constable and Turner number amongst the other artists deemed worthy. At the time the Tate commented that the purchase was "an acknowledgement that the Tate takes the view that she is a very





important artist." As does Tracey herself who famously once declared: "If you've made a seminal work, you never know when the next one is coming or where it's coming from. Most artists never make a seminal piece of art in their lives, and if you've made two, which I have, then I've done all right."

But do the public share her view? When I ask Emin if she thinks that the general public understand her work, she replies succinctly. "Yes." Oh dear. I can see I'm going to have my work cut out with this YBA. Before our interview I read several interviews with Emin and was struck by the bad relationship she seems to develop with the people interviewing her. I put this to her and asked why she thought it was that journalists have been harsh and hostile towards her in their write-ups. "I think it's jealousy sometimes and also a lack of understanding. Also some journalists make a living by just sticking the knife in." But Emin makes no effort to endear herself to me. She remains an unhelpful interviewee when I ask her for her views on Charles Saatchi. She replies "I think he's an art collector who really loves art." She does not give me much to get my teeth into but then she knows that if she gives too much rope she will hang herself. After several bad media experiences in the past perhaps you can't blame her.

Emin has recently branched into designing handbags for the posh retailer Longchamps. I ask her whether they are works of art or "just" handbags. "They're a multiple. I think they are far more like art than bags. I think they would be equally at home in art museum

shops as well as in boutiques." Where does she believe the line is drawn between designer, maker and artist? She replies forcefully, "I'm not a designer, I'm not a textile maker full stop. I'm an artist and have been for the last

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twenty years. I've been making a living for the past ten years. My strength is making art that communicates an idea. Some art is beautiful images. I deal with the essence of the subject." Her forcefulness brings to mind an interview I did with the popular artist Jack Vettriano (who incidentally Emin claims never to have heard of). Vettriano spoke of Emin's art being "like the Emperor's New Clothes. It's Art because Tracey says it is." I cannot think of a better way of summing up her attitude and her success.

At the same time as producing bags for the well-heeled, Emin has produced a film called *Top Spot*. The film documents teenage life in Margate and follows a group of girls who most certainly could not afford a Tracey Emin Longchamps handbag.

Emin was born in Margate in 1963 and lived a relatively charmed existence until the age of seven when the family business crashed and her parents separated. At the age of 13 she was raped and within a year, she was sleeping around and had become, in her own words, "a slag." Her teenage years are the inspiration for the film.

Once again her stubborn streak rears its head. She informs me: "You can't see it in cinemas. I've stopped its release." This, she explains, is due to it being given an 18 certificate. "I made it for teenagers and the audience I made it for can't go and see it." The cast is made up entirely of females. She explains, "I wanted it to be from a female perspective. I thought men might ruin that."

Emin does appear to be terribly self-absorbed. I ask her a playful question about meeting someone from the past, present or future but she refuses to take the bait and play along, choosing to take the question literally, "I have some dead friends and family that I wish I could speak to sometimes, especially my nan."

Finally I ask her how she would like to be remembered. Her short answer reveals Tracey Emin, the person behind the artist and the media celebrity. Something I've been trying to get at throughout our interview. Interestingly, not for great art or for changing attitudes does she wish to be remembered but purely and simply, "for being generous." In that answer one gets the feeling that the weight and riches of fame are sometimes too much for our Tracey from Margate.