

Tracey Emin

WHITE CUBE | BERMONDSEY

Tracey Emin's first-ever solo exhibition, in White Cube's tiny original gallery, was titled "My Major Retrospective 1963–1993." Two years later, still a relative unknown, she opened the Tracey Emin Museum (1995–98) in a south London storefront. Emin has always thought big and scaled up, a tactic abundantly observed in this giant solo exhibition, "A Fortnight of Tears." Sketchy, nude self-portrait drawings enlarged into some thirty big canvases; intimate handwritten notes magnified into the wall-size neon *I Longed for You*, 2019; tabletop clay figurines swelled into three room-size bronzes; and cell-phone selfies multiplied into fifty double-hung, poster-size portraits in the "The Insomnia Room" series, 2016–, with Emin bravely looking like 4 am hell. Meanwhile, her heightened emotional pitch—whether of rage or tenderness—had grown to swallow the gallery whole. Emin's subject remains unchanged: the passionate highs and terrifying lows of being Tracey Emin, survivor of teenage rape, violent boyfriends, tumultuous love, and enduring solitude.

Emin's turn to figurative painting at the 2007 Venice Biennale failed to convince, but she assured audiences that her canvases would improve. They have. Her drawing is better, her mark tougher. Missing in Venice were her hard-hitting early autobiographical films, which go a long way toward explaining the paintings' bleeding, shaking, broken women with mangled crotches and scratched-out faces. On view here was the powerful *How It Feels*, 1996, where Emin narrates in gruesome detail her botched abortion and the moralizing carelessness of a doctor who nearly killed her. No spoilers, but the tale's blood-drenched denouement comes like a punch to the gut you won't soon forget. Emin says it took her years afterward to return to an artmaking that's meaningful to her—not just painting "a fucking picture" but attempting to get at the emotional core behind art.

Taking that as her artistic mission, “Fortnight” was a triumph: an uncompromising one-woman presentation and perhaps the most coherent exhibition ever staged in White Cube’s difficult array of massive galleries. One problematic, windowless space was here renamed “The Ashes Room” and filled with paintings, drawings, vitrines, ephemera, and a film dedicated to the artist’s late, beloved mother. Persistently driving Emin is an unflinching, lifelong investigation into the parallel emotional scars indelibly left on the body by great acts of cruelty and by great acts of love. You may not buy it, you may find it corny, but Emin’s is not banal subject matter. And she’s never changed her story, never drifted into small talk, never backed down and mellowed into somebody else.

“With your attitude, you’ll never show in this country,” the American curator Richard Flood once told her, and non-Brits can be baffled by Emin’s UK popularity. As a working-class child of immigrants (her parents were British-Romany and Turkish-Cypriot), and a sexually outspoken, London-bound runaway hailing from England’s fading seaside, Emin is exactly the sort of woman once slated for poverty and silence in British society. Yet, by sheer talent and verve, the irrepressible Emin rose to become the country’s least likely national treasure and stands as a unique public figure relatable to many (mostly female, often young) who are otherwise barely represented here. Detractors—American or otherwise—could dismiss this exhibition as literal and self-indulgent; her dripping expressionistic paintings as anachronistic at best, maudlin at worst; and Emin as oblivious to any discourse beyond her darkened bedroom. But “Fortnight” wholly succeeded on its own terms—on Emin’s terms, the only ones she’s ever lived by.

Curiously, Emin shares something with late Andy Warhol. Both self-made workaholic second-generation immigrants devoted to Mom, expert self-publicists, outsiders equally blessed and damned. Both steadfastly committed to their idiosyncratic, lucrative art-making—however mistrusted, however unfashionable—alongside crammed social calendars which, ultimately, fail to dispel the loneliness. I always thought Warhol’s European critics struggled to “get” his quintessentially American art, often imagining a political depth that wasn’t really there. Similarly, audiences abroad regularly fail to “get” Emin’s very British art, forever suspecting a shallowness that, it turns out, isn’t really there.

— *Gilda Williams*