

Tracey Emin Show: Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam

Ten minutes into her own press conference and Tracey Emin still hasn't appeared. 'Check the local bars...' people murmur. A jug of water is put down on the table. 'Vodka,' someone sniggers.

Unfortunately, Emin's reputation as a piss artist does tend to precede her ever since her notorious appearance on Channel 4 debating the 1997 Turner Prize. She was so inebriated that she later said she didn't even realise she'd been on television but at some boring dinner party.

Part of the famous Brit Art group that boasts Damien Hirst, Sarah Lucas and Sam Taylor-Wood, Emin's own work made headlines when she exhibited the infamous *My Bed, 1998*. Complete with dirty sheets, blood-stained knickers, vodka, pills and used condoms, it was nominated for the Turner Prize in 1999. Although it didn't win the pecuniary prize, its worth was in shock value. And, infinitely more importantly, it won the 'public prize': the work and artist everyone was – and still is – talking about.

Suddenly, Emin scurries in and frantically – and shyly – apologises, explaining her lateness is due to not being able to decide which of two skirts to wear. She reveals that she is nervous. For her, this show is big. As a 21-year-old art student, Emin would visit the Stedelijk Museum and is both humbled and in awe that, nearly two decades later, this same 'forward thinking' museum purchased one of her works which now hangs *near an Andy Warhol*. And that Museum Director, Rudi Fuchs, invited *her* to put together a ten-year retrospective of *her* work *here*.

Instantly endearing, open, self-assured, brash and vulnerable all at once, one immediately gets an insight into Emin's world. Her art is her life. Her. That simple. But she reveals more than most of us would feel comfortable doing. And whilst this has often lead to accusations of her shows indulging voyeuristic tendencies, I would argue instead, it hits a nerve. Fundamentally accessible, it's hard not to relate to her work on some level and find some common experience with the privilege of having access to someone's journal (albeit carefully vetted...).

Emin explains her initial excitement and later panic at putting the show together. 'I was worried I would feel like a dead person by showing in a museum,' she jokes. But then explains her immense pride at the result which she sees as intrinsically 'classical'. 'If someone told me the woman who made the artwork is 75,' she muses. 'I would believe it.'

Spanning a decade, two things strike you immediately about the exhibition – the enormous diversity and the undeniable talent of this true multimedia artist. A huge 17ft wooden structure of a helter skelter *Self Portrait, 2001* dominates one room on whose wall is hung an appliquéd blanket *Hellter Fucking Skelter, 2001* – the result of painstaking, detailed needlework. Scrawled writings, sketches and neon works are on other walls. Darkened rooms show her short films, including the marvellous *Why I Never Became a Dancer, 1995*. A cathartic six-minute work shot on Super 8, it gives a sweet two-fingered salute to the boys responsible for humiliating her at a teenage dance competition in her hometown of Margate.

But this is Emin and there is always that attempt to shock. Whether it's neon works from her personal collection *Is Anal Sex Legal?, 1998* and *Is Legal Sex Anal?, 1998*; the crumpled cigarette packet her Uncle Colin was holding when decapitated in a horrendous car crash in 1993; the rather morbid *My Coffin, 1997*; or various 'memorabilia' from an abortion (poignantly exhibited with baby socks bearing the words 'Tiny Emin').

Owing to lack of funding her most integral and famous work (the aforementioned 'bed') has been strangely left out of this retrospective. But Emin is pleased with this explaining how people might have come to the show just to see that: its absence ensures her other, equally valuable achievements aren't overshadowed.

Next year Emin is turning 40 and one senses that this retrospective of work marks a turning point in her life. Future plans include an illustrated book of her writings (to be published by

Hodder & Stoughton) and a feature film, in collaboration with British director Michael Winterbottom (*Butterfly Kiss, Wonderland*).

At a time when Brit Art is still a subject of much debate fuelled by the perpetually controversial Turner Prize which last awarded £20,000 to Martin Creed for his installation *The Lights Going On and Off* (an empty room with er... two flashing lights), it's, understandably perhaps, easy to have preconceived ideas about 'young' contemporary British artists. I know I did. And was pleasantly surprised. Go with an open, curious mind and take your time to explore this Eminent world.

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