Exhibition Review: Love is What You Want

Tracey Emin, Hayward Gallery
London 18 May-29 August 2011
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Reviewer Nicholas Houghton

Tracey Emin is many people's idea of what an artist should be: a tortured soul, mining her difficult background and numerous psychodramas as subject-matter for her work – or perhaps as subject-matter for her public image because many people outside the art world know her life story better than they know her art. She shot to fame (or infamy) when she appeared on television very drunk. The ensuing notoriety went very well with a bad girl image she'd been projecting through her work, where she liked to mix a post-Duchampian shock with a decidedly pre-Duchampian self-expression and lack of irony. The art world cognoscenti could take this in its stride, but readers of popular newspapers were more easily jolted out of their complacency.

In her large retrospective exhibition at the Hayward Gallery, London, there were three main kinds of work. The first was a series of blankets. These were large, each one covering a good sized chunk of the wall. On them were appliquéd an assortment of words and phrases in different colours and sizes. These blankets have often been compared to the tradition of women's embroidery, quilts and, in particular, samplers. That would be a very superficial comparison. In fact they look more like banners made by amateurs and held aloft during marches. The more recent ones must have been made together with assistants; these look slicker, taking away the naivety that was just about all they had going for them in the first place.

The words appliquéd onto these blankets are all about Tracey: what she was thinking and in particular how she was feeling. She is dyslexic and so there are misspellings, poor grammar and punctuation. They look for all the world like the notebook of a tortured adolescent blown up to wall size. They describe her anguished state, but never analyse, never reflect. They do enough to let you know that she was feeling deep thoughts, as adolescents often do (and somehow imagine this experience is unique to them). And, like adolescent poetry, it gets stuck there. There is a mismatch between these deep, un-reflected emotions and the formal means to express them. It is this, together with the adolescent's inability to put these emotions into a broader context, which can make them appear embarrassing.

The second kind of work was a series of Tracey's phrases or aphorisms, in her handwriting (and still with the spelling errors), but made out of coloured neon. These proclaimed such things as: 'Those who suffer love'; 'People like you need to fuck people like me'; 'When I go to sleep I dream of you inside of me'; 'You forgot to kiss my soul'. This is similar to what's written on the blankets, but much more curt. Again, they have the brashness and lack of profundity of the ruminations of a

16-year-old who is having boyfriend trouble. In this case, they lack the small amount of folksy charm found in the earlier blankets. The medium suggests she is knowing, but the message that she doesn't know very much.

There was a tension throughout the exhibition between her autobiography and her art. We're supposed to be interested in the art, because it's about the lifestory of a great artist. But isn't this the wrong way round? Surely we become interested in the life of an artist because of the work. She seems to be saying: take it on a face value, I am a great artist and therefore every one of my utterances must be meaningful. In the 1970s, the idea of the death of the author was proclaimed by Barthes and the critical theorists and became popular among academics. However, far from seeing the death of the author, we've witnessed the rise of the artist as celebrity, with Tracey one of the best exemplars. As we know, celebrities are famous for being famous and her work leeches off this.

The third kind of work was pictures, most of which were of vaginas, or to be precise one vagina: hers. We saw many representations of it, some with things pouring out of it, as well as with the nearby clitoris being stroked. These referred not only to her periods, but also to her abortion and to her ruminations about never having had any children. To do these, she has taken up drawing, as if she feels that to be taken seriously as an artist, she needs to be using traditional media. The drawings are done with the scratchy, uncertain line of a beginner; unlike the blankets where she produced big, bold works, these are hesitant and tiny, albeit some have been subsequently enlarged by assistants. It's true that it is no longer necessary for artists to be able to draw: they often use all sorts of media. However, when an artist does draw, then a critic feels entitled to point out its combination of timidity and awkwardness. Like the blankets, they reminded me of someone singing karaoke in a pub. To an extent you can appreciate its clumsy charm, but it isn't great singing.

Even worse were the few paintings exhibited. I consistently felt uncomfortable during this exhibition, but never more so than when seeing the results of somebody attempting to learn to paint in public and exhibiting the results. Her tentative daubings might lead one to think she was wanting to be subtle, whereas there seems to be nothing subtle about Tracey Emin. Her dealer ought really to have taken her to one side, but I presume chose to take the money instead. Yet you can't get away from the fact that there is a craft in drawing and painting learned by many hours of practice, no matter how much talent you have to begin with (and in her case it doesn't seem to have been a lot).

It appears her talent is for self promotion and it has to be acknowledged that for any artist this is necessary, but for a female artist even more so. No review of Tracey Emin should ignore the attendant feminist issues. The art world has always not only been very male, but macho to boot. To be accepted by other artists you used to have to be one of the lads, including heavy drinking, smoking, swearing and other forms of boorish behaviour. It is clear that Tracey has been doing this and I'm sure she paid a price. Like most fields of human endeavour, the rules of the art world were made by men, and to succeed in this context, women have not only to play by those rules, but usually try twice as hard as their male peers. Her works sometimes allude to women's art and woman's genitalia are presented from

a woman's, rather than a prurient man's, point of view. All the same, these works seem to draw attention to her instead of to feminist issues.

She takes on important themes: love, disappointment, sexual abuse, abortion, loss. The trouble is, she cannot see the bigger picture. Her work is about Tracey, Tracey, Tracey. There is an extreme narcissism, from which she seems unable to escape. Just as somebody going into psychotherapy has to learn to transcend their narcissism to become effective in practice, so an artist has to relate the self to something broader and universal. This is how their work can resonate with others. The alternative is to be forever stuck in an adolescent trough. A series of drawings of her masturbating have been made into a looped film. It seemed so apt for the work of somebody who was masturbating but not connecting, somebody who has looked at herself so much and yet knows herself so little.