



MAY 15 2013

Artist Tracey Emin: Critics Are Harsher Because I'm a Woman

by Lauren Christensen



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She is not known for subtlety—in either her work or her personality—but the prominent, often brow-raising British artist Tracey Emin's latest sculpture, a single bronze bird perched atop a 13-foot pole in New York City's SoHo neighborhood, is just that: unassuming. The Lehmann Maupin gallery, which launched the installation this past Friday in collaboration with the Art Production Fund and White Cube, also opened a contemporaneous exhibition, "Tracey Emin: I Followed You to the Sun," earlier this month, and her first solo museum exhibition in the U.S. will open at Miami's Museum of Contemporary Art in December. She is one of Britain's most famous living artists and ranks among the most successful female artists in history, serving as one of just two women on the faculty of London's Royal Academy of Arts. Emin gained celebrity in the 90s for such bold and scandalous works as "Everyone I Have Ever Slept with 1963–1995" at the Royal Academy in London in 1997 (a tent that she appliquéd with individuals' names), and *My Bed* (she exhibited her own unmade bed, strewn with used condoms and dirty undergarments) at the Tate Gallery in 1999, which shortlisted her for the prestigious Turner Prize. As she is about to turn 50, Emin now takes a breath to reflect on a brilliant, at times notorious, high-profile career.

VF Daily: Do you consider works made out of your own personal belongings—*My Bed*, for instance—autobiographical?

Tracey Emin: It's not autobiographical. It's more about how I express my feelings. I'm always trying to find out more about myself—how I think, what makes me do thing.

Sometimes it's not about my own life necessarily but about witnessing something that makes me feel a certain way.

Is that what you were doing when you created *Roman Standard*, then?

Yes. I've been drawing birds for probably 20 years now. The reason I started drawing them was because I had taken a hiatus from art for a few years, and when I started drawing again, I didn't want to draw myself or what was going on in my head because at the time what was going on in my head was such a disaster. I wanted some relief from that, so I started drawing birds because I liked them and because they're pretty.

Surely you must attach some more significance to the bird than that, to make it such a recurring motif throughout your work for so many years.

Of course. They represent something to me which is heavenly, because they fly. It's like ascension. That was a time in my life when I really needed to rise above the situation I was in, and birds seemed the perfect metaphor for me. Sometimes when I'm in a strange mood or maybe a bit low, I try to take myself out of it by drawing a bird. The *Roman Standard* came through that way of thinking.

A *Roman standard* is an ancient symbol of war and honor. Is your title ironic?

There's nothing ironic about it. It is a Roman standard; there just doesn't happen to be a huge eagle on it, that's all. There is nothing I do that is ironic or cynical or sarcastic. I have a sense of humor, but it's about finding something funny, not ironic.

What I'm saying through the piece is that strength isn't always about being big. To make a proper sculpture that's so tiny was an important thing for me to do because proper sculptures are usually heavy, masculine, and dominant. Things don't always have to be like that.

The sculpture forces the viewer to really pay attention to its details, to scrutinize the piece in order to even determine what it is, in comparison to many other statues that are on display in public spaces.

Exactly. And this is a slightly different bird from the first Roman Standard I made for Liverpool, near the cathedral. This one is made out of silver nitrate, and I made it in New York. It's new, and it's definitely brilliant for me doing it in this city.

How do you compare the working environments in New York versus those in London?

I'm more excited when I'm working here because it's all fresh and new to me. It seems like my career's just started in America. I appreciate everything at this age, whereas if I were 35 and all this stuff was happening, maybe I'd just take it all for granted.

Many of the works you've presented over the years have caused quite a stir, and not all of it positive. How do you deal with negative press?

What I usually do now is that with each show, as soon as I finish working at the gallery, I immediately start working on the next show. I always make sure to have the next thing lined up to start working on, so it's easy to forget about the reviews. I'm in my stride; it doesn't stop me.

After Venice [Emin represented the U.K. at the Biennale in 2007, spurring poor reviews back home], I was actually really upset about the British press. I was mortified. I was destroyed by it, actually. The press was cruel, because they didn't just dislike my work; they disliked me, personally—my voice, the way I dress, the way I look, my attitude. I'm sure they wouldn't have carried on that way if I were a man. I'm absolutely convinced of that.

You think that you were reviewed more critically because you're a woman?

Yes. When someone tells me I can't do something, I say, "Yes, I can. Watch me." And I think that can annoy some people. You know that double standard: when men shout, they're "taking charge" or "giving orders," but when women shout, they're "screaming." It's that kind of cliché.

Do you feel that your gender has gotten in the way of your success? You're one of only two female professors at the Royal Academy since its founding. You were appointed Commander of the Order of the British Empire this year.

Things have really changed for me. Now that I've been around, making this kind of art for 20 years, I think people have started to realize I'm not going away. Also, younger people respond to what I do quite differently, and now that generation is starting to take up greater positions of power. The old-timers are going and the new blood is coming in, so it's quite healthy.