



ART

# "Don't Sell Your Work, Swap Your Work": Tracey Emin Shares Her Perspective-Shifting Advice for Young Artists

Tracey Emin describes "Lovers Grave," her current solo show inaugurating White Cube's New York space, as the most important exhibition of her career, with the works on view reflecting hard-won insights gleaned over 30-plus years. Now, Emin is imparting that wisdom on young artists through TEAR, the residency program that she runs out of her Margate home on Britain's eastern coast.

WORDS

**Gabé Braunstein**

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For Tracey Emin, "Lovers Grave" represents a number of milestones. The show, a testament to the artist's more than 30-year friendship with gallerist Jay Jopling, is the inaugural solo exhibition at White Cube's recently opened New York location, featuring an extraordinary selection of 26 new works distributed across the gallery's three floors of Madison Avenue space. It also marks Emin's return to the city after nearly eight years.

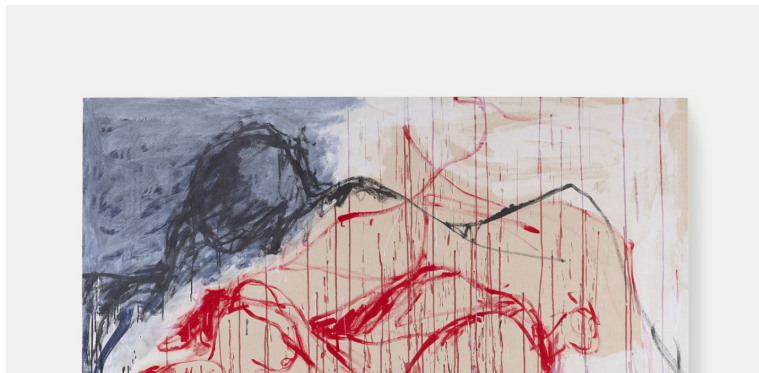
While the exhibition—as its title suggests—seems to meditate on endings, it is ultimately a celebration of new beginnings, weaving an intricate tapestry of human emotion and experience. [Emin](#), who came to this series of paintings following her recovery from a life-altering illness, is feeling vibrantly alive, engaging in her relationships and her artistic practice with a renewed intensity. Consequently, the work meditates on themes of rebirth and hope even as it reckons with timeless narratives of love and loss.

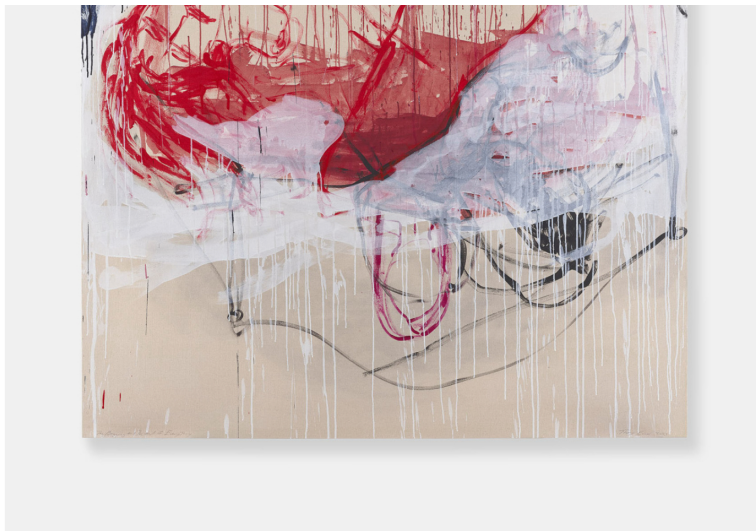
A further testament to Emin's new perspective is TEAR, her artist [residency program](#) which she runs out of her own Margate, U.K. home and has funded using proceeds from a £2.3 million sale at Christie's. The program offers artists a chance to work alongside Emin in the coastal British town where she grew up—a town that shaped her own creative ambitions. On the occasion of her opening at White Cube, Emin joined in a wide-ranging conversation with Susan May, Global Artistic Director, White Cube, reflecting on her artistic evolution from those beginnings, the personal significance of "Lovers Grave," and her role in shaping the landscape of contemporary British art.

**Tracey Emin on the origin of the "Lovers Grave" theme:** Just before the pandemic, I did a big, crazy [painting](#) in the middle of the night. I did it really fast; it was a couple entwined in a large coffin shape with a lot of black around it. I thought, *Wow it looks like a lover's grave*. I thought about how amazing it would be to just love, love, love, love, love that much. At that time, I hadn't been in a relationship for nearly 10 years. I was thinking, *Maybe when I go to heaven I'll meet someone*. In the end, the painting irritated me so much that I painted over it. Then, I fell madly in love with someone and the "Lovers Grave" theme became very positive in my mind—this idea of *forever together*.



At the same time, I was diagnosed with terminal cancer—I had six months to live unless I faced this sort of radical surgery which I wasn't sure I would recover from. It was like love had actually pulled me out of the grave. The thought that I could be loved, saved, cherished, and pulled up onto this earth is really important to me. Physical touch is also so important to me, and that's what this show is about.





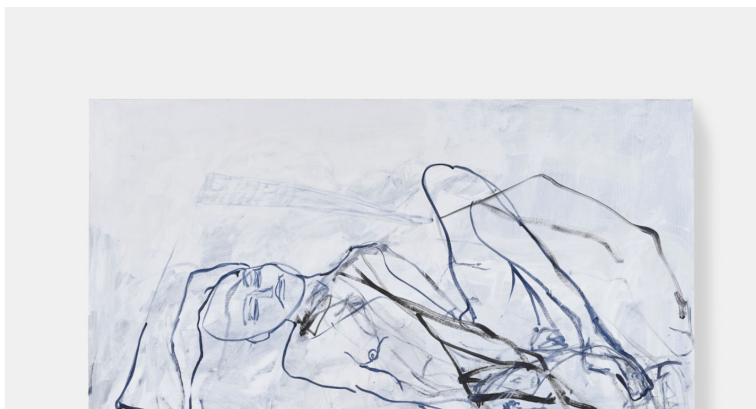
Tracey Emin, *The Begging and The end of Everything*, 2023. Photography by Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd.

**On her process, and whether she does preparatory sketches:** I start right on the canvas. Sometimes I do [have a specific image in mind], sometimes I feel a painting. In a situation where I feel the painting, I might think I'm going to draw [one thing] and it comes out really different. I do a lot of drawing, but I made a rule in 2015 that I couldn't do a work on canvas from a sketch; it has to be completely fresh. The drawing has its own sovereignty and so does the painting.

**On the autobiographical details making appearances in this show, such as her Persian rug and bust of Nefertiti:** I've got this brilliant Nefertiti head; it's 100 years old and it's a Hollywood prop. It's life-size and it stands on my chest of drawers in my bedroom. It appears a lot [in the work] because it's in my bedroom and it looks very nice. A lot of my paintings have carpets in them ... because I was brought up with them and I have a lot in my house—Persian rugs and Turkish rugs. The next show I'm doing, which is in Brussels, has a lot of carpets in it.



It sounds so pretentious, but when I was a little girl I used to meditate and I'd see these amazing patterns, these brilliant geometric crystal shapes. As an artist—especially when you put a lot of emotion into painting—you can't [make art] all the time. I also can't physically stand up a lot anymore, so I'm completely obsessed with pattern making; it's a big relief to make everything clear again somehow.





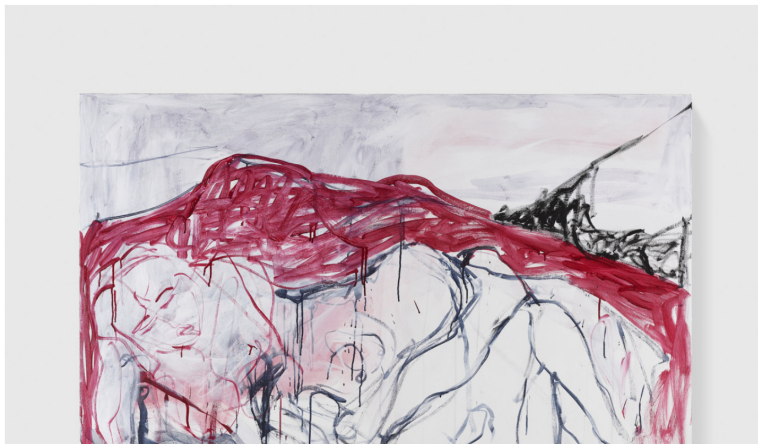
Tracey Emin, *And I said Eat me - Bring me back to Life*, 2023. Photography by Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd.

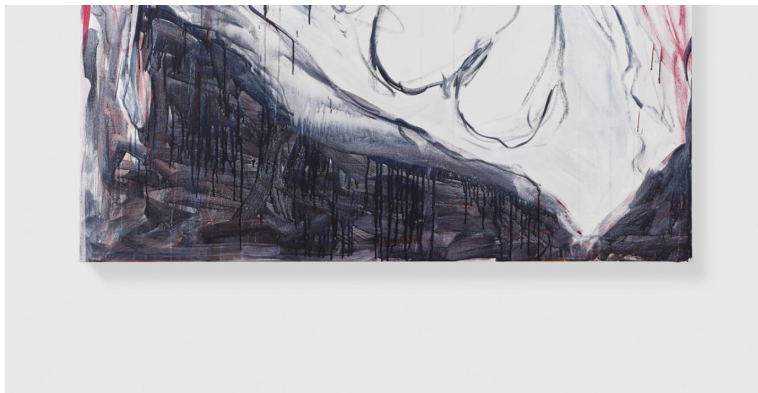
**On her first solo exhibition in New York in eight years:** I'd like to keep a poker face, but it's not my strong point. I am so thrilled to be doing this show, because everybody said to me, "You can't show with [Jay \[Jopling\]](#) in New York, you've got to show with another gallery." There were other galleries that were interested, and it went on for ages. Then Jay said, "I got the space, and I've got it for you." We've worked together for 30 years—this is pretty rare, and people don't understand that Jay and I were so young. We were 29 when we met. We're around 60 now and so this show isn't just for me, it's for Jay as well.

I'm so lucky to work with a gallery that's put up with me for so long. At times I've been pretty unbearable, and we're still together, understanding each other, loving each other, working at something. I got sort of melancholy the other day. I thought, *In 30 years, we'll be dead*. And then I thought, *No we won't, we'll be 90!* I mean, I think about [Louise Bourgeois](#) and how inspiring she was for me.



**On her friendship with Louise Bourgeois:** What I loved about Louise is that she made really tiny beautiful delicate things, and she made really big, giant, colossal things. Scale was unimportant to her. She just did whatever she felt like doing. I met Louise when she was about 89, which was really inspiring for me—that you can still be doing these things at her age, and have that level of ambition *within* your work. I don't mean ambition to have a show or earn money or whatever, but just for the work. So, this show for me is the most important show I've ever had.





Tracey Emin, *So much Love - So Much Kissing, That I Love Myself*, 2023. Photography by Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd.

**On her artist residency program in Margate, Britain:** I don't have any children and I don't have a partner, and I was thinking, *What happens with it all? What is my life about?* When I went under for my surgery, the last thing that I thought was, *I really do not want to be remembered for being an interesting artist in the '90s. If I come out the other side, I'm going to do the things I've thought about all my life.* And now I am.

Imagine going all around the world, doing all these things. When you go home, you say, "Wow this feels really good. I really love Margate. I'm in the right place. And the reason I'm in the right place is because I'm doing something important." We've got the artist residency, which is like an MA course but much better. What I guarantee is that by the time the [residents] leave, they will be living as an artist and they will be paying their bills with their work. I keep saying to them, "You don't *sell* your work, you *swap* your work." They say, "What do you mean?" I say, "You want a TV? Don't go sell your paintings to get the money to buy a TV. Swap your painting for the TV." That's all you have to do in life to be successful: Just make your work and believe in what you do.

*"Lovers Grave" runs through January 13, 2024 at White Cube in New York.*

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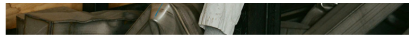




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