

TRACEY EMIN

CAN'T DRAW

By Jenny Smith

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“I don’t go for likeness anymore, I’m satisfied with reality” – Henry Miller, *Stand Still Like the Hummingbird*

Tracey Emin’s mouth is asymmetrical. This is your first indication you’re not encountering a prosaic idea of beauty. On Instagram, she has posted a page from her notebook, “I’m going to the edge of the world” it starts. I think she means that she’s going to put a limb off the edge of her bed.

Emin was recently diagnosed with bladder cancer. The doctors showed her an image of the malignant lump which looked exactly the same as an abstract painting she had finished before her symptoms started. Over a year earlier she had told Harry Weller, “When you go to a fortune-teller, you don’t go there to learn something about yourself that you already know, you go to learn something about yourself that you didn’t know”. Emin’s medium is her medium.

Emin’s work is both a continuation of her and an expression of the cosmic language of art. She was raped as a young teenager, and when I look at the splashes and scribbles that have come through her, I cannot help but think of Cy Twombly’s ‘Leda and the Swan’, which depicts the myth of Zeus, in the form of a swan, raping Leda (mother of Helen of Troy). Emin’s paintings are also somewhat Trojan, she doesn’t know what they are until they have entered her physical domain. She has said, “the title of the painting always comes after the painting is done”.

In my effort to learn more about Emin, I typed her name into YouTube, which auto-filled “Tracey Emin *can’t draw*”. It’s a video of a technical craftsmen essentially dictating what art is, by telling us what he believes

art isn't. Spoiler – he says her work isn't. I always get a little embarrassed for people who subscribe to a belief system where they confuse a narrow view of beauty paired with technical skill, as art. It's mostly embarrassing because the joke is on those who don't consider her work art, because the argument over what art is, gives Emin's work power.

To appreciate "My Bed", you have to realize what a bed and a canvas have in common. A bed is a rectangle on the ground. You crawl into it and dream, and sweat out reality. The carpet beside "My Bed" is a second canvas. It is the work between slumber and wake. It is Prussian blue (her favourite colour), like the ocean. It is littered with flotsam and jetsam. In the gallery, there is the perimeter around the entire work, so that the guest cannot touch it, they can only be touched by it.

As an adult, after all the shame endured - to brave sharing your most intimate space; to not be restrained by those who tell you what is and what is not; to express raw unbridled emotion – For the people who say she can't draw, or "my kid could do that". The answer is yes, of course they could, but could you?



Tracey Emin. **My Bed**, 1998. *Mixed media. Dimensions variable. Tate, loan from the Duerckheim Collection. All images © 2016 Tracey Emin. All rights reserved, DACS, London / Artists Rights Society, New York.*