## Tracey Emin

‘A lot of my friends knew Leigh Bowery,’ Tracey Emin tells me. ‘He was really well respected and a big influence on a lot of people.’ We are sitting at the edge of a swimming pool in the Woollahra house in Sydney where Emin is living, and flicking through the catalogue of the Museum of Contemporary Art exhibition about the life and work of the outrageous performer who hailed from the Melbourne suburb of Sunshine.

Emin is preparing for her exhibition at Roslyn Oxley 9 Gallery. What, I ask, will be the difference between this show and the one she had in the project space of the Art Gallery of New South Wales?

‘Totally different,’ she tells me. ‘It was like a mini-survey of my whole career. It’s a small space, but by building a room to show my videos and films I created two extra walls and could hang more work. So there were the embroidered blankets, the drawings and prints, and even the Concorde sculpture.’

Emin is still jetlagged and for a while we talk about not so much the tyranny of distance as the slowness of speed. ‘I wish we still had Concordes and that they flew to Australia. When I was last here I was broken-hearted. I’d just split up with my partner. Now I live alone in a big house with my cat Docket. I gave up smoking six months ago. I don’t have sex, or masturbate, or drink spirits any more.’ She pours us both a cup of strong tea. ‘But I do drink white wine. That’s the next thing that has to go. I fell and banged my head the other night. So wine’s got to go.’

How the world changes. Last year Emin’s contemporary Damien Hirst gave up drugs and embraced the heavy duty Catholic end of Christianity in a blood spattered tribute to the twelve Apostles and their painful deaths. Now Tracey appears to be giving up the pleasures of the flesh and the bottle. ‘What do you do for fun?’ I wonder aloud.

‘I always fly First Class,’ she answers, with a twinkle in her eye that seems to light up the garden like the sun appearing from behind a cloud. And if all this seems a bit ephemeral, a bit quotidian in terms of the English love of the everyday and the current crop of ageing young British artists who have made the mundane matter, then that is the whole point. Emin’s work has always been autobiographical to the extent that sometimes you don’t want to hear any more. Like sitting on a tube next to a stranger ranting about their personal tragedies. You try not to listen. You listen. You get sucked in, and somehow it changes you.

There was the abortion. There was the multi-coloured igloo tent as artwork filled with the names of all the people she’d ever slept with (and these of course included her twin brother and her mother). There was the film of her riding a horse, like a cross between Pancho Villa and Frida Kahlo, on the beach of her childhood home of Margate – and there is the statement she makes to me today that ‘I like Sydney because it reminds me of a seaside town. I could live here.’ Watch out Bondi!

And for this new exhibition at Roslyn Oxley’s there are works influenced by big international events and small personal discoveries. Like the day she found a leaflet in the street advertising gas masks for sale. ‘It’s like after September 11 and the Iraq War and SARS there’s all these people trying to exploit our fears. I mean like a gas mask for fifty quid and people on the tube are panicking because of ideas other people are putting in to their head.’ Plenty other people think the same way, get angry about it, and whinge about it down the pub. But Emin makes art out of it. Thus this exhibition is called Fear, War and the Scream. ‘I’ve always really liked Eduard Munch, way back when I was a student,’ she explains. And if you have seen Mathew Colling’s documentary about Emin you will know that *The Scream* has long featured as a recurring motif. ‘I did this really bad painting of *The Scream* and had myself photographed in front of it wearing a gas mask. Other works include a video called *Homage to Eduard Munch and all the Dead Children*, some paintings about war, a set of black and red drawings, some pink and yellow Polaroid self-portraits based on my favourite Rothko in the Tate alongside some writing about that painting. Three Polaroids of me crying when I left Sydney last year. And two blanket works. One says “THERE IS NO FUCKING PEACE – 2003 IS THE YEAR FOR HATE” and another blanket that says “DRUNK TO THE BOTTOM OF MY SOUL” which is about drinking. The only sculpture is a chair with a gas mask hanging from it and then there’s some watercolours about jealousy.’

The list of works tumble out through jet-lagged memory like the list of upcoming shows, ‘One at Saatchi, one at the Tate, then there’s Istanbul, Rome and this amazing new restaurant in London that shows videos during the day and turns into a restaurant at night. I’ll be able to show all my films there simultaneously on ten video projectors.’

Earlier, Emin had told me that she didn’t feel she had much in common with Leigh Bowery. I pressed her on this because I felt the confessional, performative aspects of her work had certain parallels with his. Perhaps if Lucien Freud ever paints her we will at least see their flesh united through the transformative qualities of pigment.

It was a real coup for the MCA to secure such a major Freud canvas as *Leigh Under the Skylight* (1994). It is a pity it does not have a permanent home in the National Portrait Gallery in Canberra. But there are plenty of other Freud paintings of Bowery out there. He was one of the artist’s favourite models. Three etchings of the larger than life performance artist, all lent from private Australian collections or dealers, feature in the show. And the rest is pure Bowery. Bowery hanging upside down with clothes pegs arcing around his scrotum. Bowery in pumpkin dresses and buttock-flashing cat-suits. Bowery wearing a nazi helmet and almost whale-sized costume at the opening of Lucien Freud’s retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum in New York.

‘Working for Lucien changed his whole life really,’ Sue Tilley says in the gorgeous catalogue that accompanies this show. ‘He really got accepted on a much higher level than just being a club kid. He was written about in the quality press instead of the *News of the World*. It gave him credibility.’ Tilley wrote Bowery’s biography and herself modelled for Freud. She is probably best placed to give us insights into the man, into the phenomenon.

‘He changed when he was diagnosed with AIDS,’ she says in an interview with film maker Cerith Wyn Evans who cast Bowery in a number of his films. ‘It made him work so much harder, because before he knew he had it he would spend at least one day a week doing nothing, just lying about watching TV and chatting on the phone. I was probably the only one who noticed as I was the only one that knew, but I could tell, that huge great capacity for laughter slightly went and also he filled every day.

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