



'IT'S A NEW MARGATE, AND I'M A NEW TRACEY'

Writer
Twinkle Troughton

Artwork courtesy of
Tracey Emin and
Carl Freedman Gallery

Tracey Emin, who has been in recovery since being diagnosed with bladder cancer in 2020, is loving life in Margate, where she is in the process of opening up an art school. It was what she calls her “journey to death” during and after her serious illness that has inspired both the creation of an art school and her latest exhibition at Carl Freedman Gallery, also entitled *A Journey to Death*.

For almost two years Tracey Emin had been unable to make work on a large scale. Major surgery had left her without the mental or physical strength. But in *A Journey to Death* Emin is showing an intensely visceral series of large monotypes which, measuring eight feet by five, are in themselves a monumental landmark in the artist’s recovery.

The making of these large pieces is physically demanding, and for each one Emin has just half an hour to cover a screen with ink before it is transferred to the paper. “I haven’t had that kind of energy or strength since I’ve been ill,” she says. “It was a real big surge of emotion going into it, and a lot of anger too.”

Making these works has been key to her healing, but they weren’t easy for Emin to begin. She kept putting it off even though the new show was nearing: “It was a physical fear of moving, of being responsible for the movements on the paper. I still wasn’t strong.”

She continues: “But it’s psychological as well. All I’ve been doing with my willpower is using it to get better and to stay better. And I was frightened that if I opened myself up to the art, the cancer could find a hole and come back in. So I had to know that I felt really well and strong enough to be able to get on with both.”

However, once in the studio, the physical process got her adrenaline going: “It really smashed a lot of negativity out of me and made me feel really charged up, it made me feel quite sexy and brought my libido back. It made me feel good about myself.” ▶

◀ *Tracey on Margate Main Sands, by Robert Diamant*



Crying - Shooting - Screaming - Was not going to help me live

Tracy Emond $\frac{31}{50}$ 2021

◀ "Crying - Shouting - Screaming - Was Not going to help me Live", self-portrait 2021

▼ "Awake", bronze bust 2013

The smaller self-portraits in *A Journey to Death* are also significant; they have not only enabled Emin to keep drawing throughout her recovery, but have also been an exploration of the pain and trauma she has experienced since her diagnosis.

It was at the start of lockdown in March 2020, at a time in her life when Emin was deeply happy and in love, that her life was knocked sideways. She was told that she had squamous cell cancer, the most aggressive kind of cancer, and given six months to live. To give herself a chance of survival, she opted for surgery to remove everything in her body the cancer could spread to, including her bladder and vagina.

When she first came out of hospital in July 2020, she could hardly walk. She came to Margate, and she started drawing what she describes as "really mad self-portraits". All the faces are distorted in some way. "It's my face," she says, "but it's more than that; it's my mind and the process of what I was going through when

I was making it. I think recovering from cancer, your mind is distorted."

Carl Freedman Gallery has also been instrumental in her recovery. Emin has been working with master printer Andrew Curtis in the Counter Editions studio, situated above the gallery next to her home, where she was provided with a chaise long and some slippers so she could rest when she felt tired, and had unrelenting support from Freedman himself and gallery director Robert Diament: "It was so nice because I was working just with my hands, but they were spoiling me, nurturing me and making sure it was all cosy. I've got my friends, I've got art, I've got printmaking."

And it's because Emin and Freeman are so close that he didn't want the title of the show to be *A Journey to Death*; he wanted it to be *A Journey from Death* "because it was too morbid". Emin explains: "But then, of course, it's not morbid. We're all on a journey to death. All of us are on the same journey. There is nothing to be afraid of."

FAMILY AND FRIENDSHIP

It's these close friendships that have helped make Margate home again for Emin. She decided to move back here when her mum died six years ago. She recalls: "I didn't live in Margate, but my mum was here so I had this total attachment, and I knew that with my mum not being here, I couldn't stand the thought of not having part of Margate in me."

And is she happy here? "I'm very happy with Margate," she says. "I never imagined in a million years that I could come back and feel the way that I do. I just never thought it would be possible. I didn't even think about it to be honest with you, because it was never going to happen."

Growing up in Margate, life was difficult: "My family was quite dysfunctional, kind of fucked up and it wasn't simple. My mum and dad were never married and didn't really live together. My dad lived with his wife, so my mum looked after me and my brother, and then she had to work in the guesthouses here. I think people don't understand how tough it is unless it's happening to them. We didn't have enough money to live on whatsoever. We had the Salvation Army helping."

Emin's dad owned a hotel here, but when she was seven years old he lost it. "My dad lost everything," she remembers. "And then we went and squatted in a cottage on Trinity Square where we lived for seven years, squatting, me, my mum and my brother."

Although her childhood here in Margate was not happy, she says her time "with the sea, with the beach, with the air, with the sun, with crab fishing, that was really positive". Then adds: "I think what's brilliant is that I've come back to this new Margate, and I'm a new Tracey as well. It's all really positive and brilliant, there's a whole future here."

MARGATE DREAMS

And that positivity is rubbing off; she's dreaming big for the town. She wants tree-lined streets, a beautiful renovated library, a cinema, and even another art centre. She's excited about the Town Deal, and in particular the plans for a skate park and the Walpole Bay Lift being brought back into use.

She hopes that by 2030 Margate could even be nominated to host a town version

of the City of Culture. "Why not?" she asks. "Why can't we have Margate city-town of culture? I know we can't be a City of Culture, but some towns have got more going for them than some cities, yet can't be part of it. But we could have Town of Culture for 2030."

She's delighted that others can see what the town has to offer too: "When the international newspapers interview me, it's not about my work, but about Margate. It's really exciting." She talks about Sam Mendes filming here, and the festoon lighting along the beach front which he has now donated to the town. "It is so amazing," she says. "I just think now is the time for individuals who are creative, people like myself or Sam Mendes or Carl, people who have got a little bit of money who can do things for Margate that will make a massive difference to everybody, the whole community."

Margate Caves and Shell Grotto are some of Emin's top recommendations, especially the Grotto gift shop where you'll "buy something brilliant". And Scotts too, who she's known since she was a little girl: "You can go on a Saturday and it's like half of fucking Hampstead is in there, I'm surprised there isn't queues outside!" She loves to see all the independent shops and restaurants who have set up in town too, but says: "I love all the vintage shops and cottage industries, but I love the bakers too. We need a greengrocer which charges Kent prices. So this isn't just for us, it's for everybody."

Emin has her frustrations - the rundown buildings, neglected streets - and has even had a run-in with the council over wanting to paint her property white: "They wrote to me and said I couldn't use the incorrect colours. So I said to them why don't you go around to the slum landlords and get them to put proper bathrooms in and make things better for the people living there. And why don't you make them do up the front of their houses to make Margate look nice? Why don't you deal with the real problems, the causes of poverty here, instead of picking on people like me trying to make things better?" Although she's keen to add she doesn't want to shame the council, she wants to work with them to get things done.

She believes a sense of civic pride is a way to help everybody's mental health, and would love for everyone to care for the town in their own small way. "To be walking down a street covered in dogshit is fucking horrible," she points out. "To be walking down a street that's got clean pavements is a much better feeling."

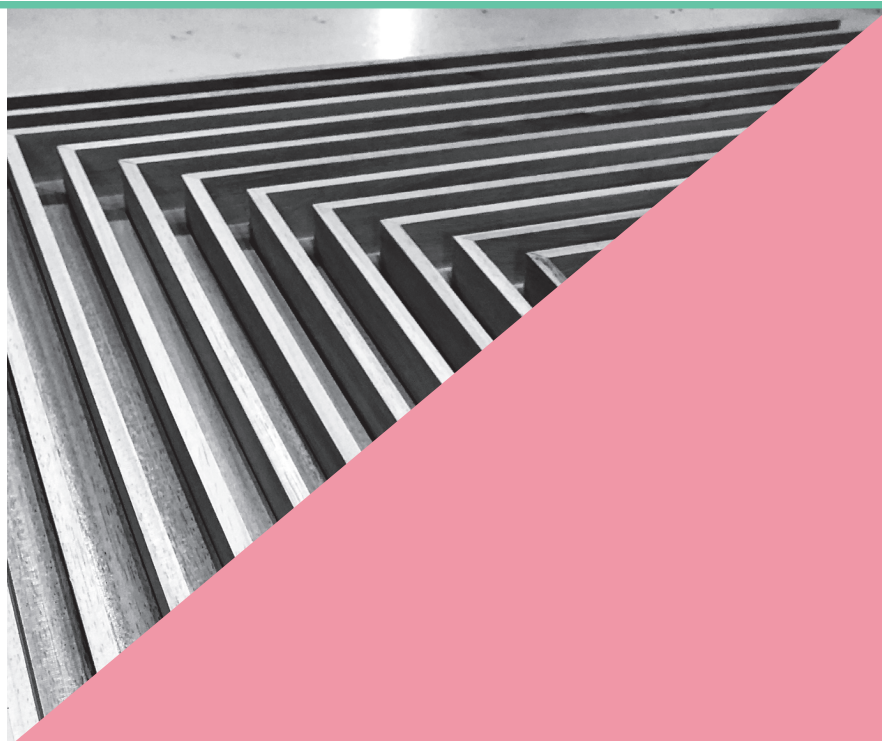
She is aware of the divides here too. "A lot of the younger people can't buy houses, there's not enough places to ▶



FRAMING & PRINTING SERVICES

- Contemporary & classic styles
- Large format Dibond mounting
- Archival standards
- Custom colour spraying
- Frame & artwork restoration
- Traditional water gilding
- Delivery service available

- NEW Canon large format printer with fluorescent graphic capabilities
- Up to 1200dpi digital scanning
- Highest quality Giclee
- Museum grade papers
- Archival inks



BLUESWIFT

Custom Picture Framers & Printers

1 High St (lower ground floor) St Lawrence, Ramsgate CT11 0QH
01843 585 760 / info@blueswift.co.uk / www.blueswift.co.uk / @blueswiftframers
Off street parking available / appointments advisable please call or email / 9-5pm Mon - Sat

JOYFUL
ECO-CONSCIOUS
ILLUSTRATION
STUDIO +
ONLINE SHOP

WWW.MELANIEJOHNSON.COM
@MELANIE.JOHNSON

A+C
EST. 2007

15

We are celebrating
15 years of Animation
and Production
in our Margate studio.

We're always looking for the
best creative, production and
digital talent locally.
Fancy joining us? Get in touch.

Follow us     /apluscstudios



▲ 'The Sea Came In, The Sea Went Out - It Left Me', monoprint 2022

rent," she says. "I understand how people could be pissed off with the idea that people come here and push people out. I totally get that. But the people who are coming here are actually investing in Margate, they're not being selfish." And on the DFL label? "They wouldn't ever say that to me because I grew up in Margate. But I also think Margatonians' attitudes are changing towards the DFLs, because they can see a vast improvement in this town and in the surrounding areas."

She also believes Margate is far more than it's not-so-distant reputation as being racist and homophobic: "Back when Margate was National Front and BNP, they'd do these little fucking parades along Margate beach every first Sunday, doing stupid little goosestep marches. And also with fucking UKIP too..."

"But I've never been anywhere so LGBTQI in my fucking life. It's unbelievable. Do you know, Margate has not one but two gay bookshops? And if people know the size of Margate, how tiny it is, that means there are people who buy those books and who want those books. There are young people that need those books. Margate is completely open. It's the pioneering spirit. There's a lot of freedom now, you can actually feel it."

Emin says that openness and understanding comes especially from

Margatonians: "This was known as the knuckle of England, the last resort. This is where Danny la Rue ended up, this is where all the Carry On stars ended up, performing at the Winter Gardens. They had massive audiences and anything went. And also after here is France and there's Europe. And it's a horizon that is so big, and the sun is so massive and it's warm and glowing. That is what Margate is."

ART SCHOOL

When Emin was 17 years old, she lived in a DHSS room on Athelstan Rd in a house "filled with men and the bathroom wasn't very nice". She wanted to go to art school, and went to a careers advice meeting where she was told she couldn't because she didn't have any O Levels or A Levels. "I told them, 'But I'm good at art,' and they said, 'Well it doesn't matter.' So they sent me off to Butlins and I got a job washing up." Through sheer determination, she made it to art school in the end, but not before repeated rejections and being told 'no.'

Emin asked herself: "If I could go back and help me, what could I do?" It was on an Instagram post that she wrote: "I really want to make a difference in this world (even if it's a small way). I want

to invest in what I love... I want to show the 17-year-old Tracey that there is a way forward... That she wasn't alone."

Emin wants her art school to provide opportunities for people who want to be artists no matter their age or circumstances. As long as you show talent and you're motivated, then you could be in with a chance of a place at Emin's art school. "I want to provide a place where people can learn about art, not feel like an outsider," she says. "I'm going to be giving twenty studios to people for free; there'll be a lecture series, drawing classes, painting classes, there'll be people visiting. And there'll be another twenty spaces for semi-professional or professional artists who need to rent studios too."

She continues: "It's the best thing in the whole world to help more artists make more art. It's a beautiful thing."

There has been some online hate directed at Emin in response to news of the school, accusing her of having an "ulterior motive". Her response? "Yeah, of course I have! Because I don't have children. I don't have a partner. I am alone. I'm nearly 60. I just nearly died. And that journey to death made me think about what is important to me. What do I love? What did I never have? And in Margate I feel much more family-orientated. It feels warm here and family-based. And wouldn't it be lovely if,

when I'm 80, and I'm walking down the road, someone says, 'Tracey, let me help you with your shopping.' That is all my ulterior motive is. Just to be looked after in a community and to be old and feel safe because I'll be alone."

Emin's plans of helping to build a long-term community here don't stop at the art school either; she is also opening a catering school next to the art school: "Lee from Dory's is going to be running it. It's going to be completely subsidised and it's going to essentially be for people without qualifications who want to go into hospitality and catering. There's going to be about 24 places a year. Lee wants to call it 'The Perfect place to Grow' after one of my works."

With all these plans to help others with their futures, where does Emin see hers going? "All I want to do is make my work and be happy. I've had this incredible sort of career, but not like other artists have. It's been a bit leftfield because I've always been a bit on the outside of everything. And now I'm really on the outside. But I'm also right in the centre of it. On the farthest flung corner of Britain, we're right in the centre."

In Margate?
"Yeah."

A Journey to Death runs until 19 June. Go to @carlfreedmangallery to find out more