

Tracey Emin's HOMECOMING

Amid a pandemic, a slate of upcoming shows and cancer recovery, the British artist, who has lived in London for three decades, is making her way back to Margate.

BY JAY CHESHES
PHOTOGRAPHY BY THURSTAN REDDING

WHEN COVID-19 brought the art world to a standstill in the spring, shutting down galleries and museums worldwide, Tracey Emin, one of Britain's most famous living artists, was already upending her life. As lockdowns spread across Europe, Emin was preparing to move from her home in East London, where she's lived for the past 22 years, into a big new place in the center of the city, a neoclassical spread with plenty of room to make art. And she was building a second home outside the city, a residential studio complex in a vast industrial space in her hometown, Margate, on Britain's southeast coast.

I met Emin at her new place in Margate last year, before the pandemic hit, when construction was still in full swing. "I might be working on 30 big canvases all at once here, really large ones," she says, imagining the possibilities for her new painting studio as we toured the dust-filled construction site. "I'd be really free, almost like a conductor, to just go crazy like a banshee or something."

Emin is best known for her intense autobiographical work across many mediums, baring her soul in

fabric, film, photography, wood, found objects and her own handwriting in bright neon. She's shifted her focus in recent years to more classical painting on canvas and hands-on clay sculpture. "She's making less of a variety of kind of artwork, but she's becoming more and more who she is—which is a painter and sculptor where everything is made by her, where there's no foil between her and the work," says art dealer Lorcan O'Neill, a friend since the 1990s who represents Emin in Rome through his gallery there.

Emin's acrylic paintings, in feral drips and streaks, often layer one image onto another. Spectral figures hide under whitewashes or violent bursts of dark color, often with poetic, sometimes raging language scrawled on top. "I'll start off with one idea and then as I go along, I'll go, 'Oh, my God,' and something else comes out," she says of her process.

Her more recent body of work is a major departure for this former "bad girl" of the British art world, who burst onto the scene with the Young British Artists of the '90s with confrontational pieces like her appliquéd tent listing *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963–1995*, and her Turner Prize-nominated *My Bed*,



WAKE-UP CALL
"I didn't really want to tell anybody at the beginning because I didn't know if I was going to die or not," says Tracey Emin (photographed in her new residential studio complex in Margate) of her cancer diagnosis.



BODY OF WORK
Right: The beach in Margate; canvases in her new painting studio; the main studio within the 30,000-square-foot complex, a former printing press.



reproducing her unmade bed after a four-day bender, with crumpled sheets, spent condoms, empty vodka bottles and a pregnancy test.

Emin, now 57, started considering her legacy long before the coronavirus brought our collective mortality in focus. In January 2017, she bought her 30,000-square-foot stretch of the derelict Thanet Press building in Margate, ravaged by looters, pigeons and long, salty winters. “It looked like the set of some apocalyptic film when I found it,” she says. The site, she hoped, would become her final residence and, eventually, the posthumous home of her personal museum and archive.

This summer, that long-range thinking began to look tragically prescient. In June, a few months into her lockdown in London, Emin learned that advanced bladder cancer—“really bad cancer,” she calls it—had begun to spread to her internal organs. “I didn’t really want to tell anybody at the beginning because I didn’t know if I was going to die or not,” she says, reached by phone in late September.

Emin had an operation in July that left her cancer-free and, for weeks afterward, too rundown to make art. She was still recovering in September when she returned to Margate, to look in on the work there, for the first time in months.

Though construction on her new home and studio there has continued throughout the pandemic, progress has been slow as plans for the complex kept sprawling. An indoor swimming pool facing a glass-enclosed winter garden was added to the project last year, around the time she acquired four Georgian buildings next door to the original site.

(She intends to install her archive, a library, lecture rooms and a garden cafe there.)

Emin has been hands-on, evolving her design brief en route. “Tracey’s ideas are fluid,” says her original design consultant on the project, Gabriel Chipperfield, a property developer and the son of architect David Chipperfield, chasing Emin in a hard hat and yellow vest while touring the site last year.

Chipperfield eventually stepped away from the project to preserve their friendship, says Emin. Now she oversees every design detail herself in consultation with an architectural engineer. “You don’t want to wreck your friendship because you disagree on whether something should be clad or the steel should go here or there or whether the concrete should be raised or lowered,” she says.

When I visited the site with Emin, her twin brother, Paul, a carpenter-joiner in Margate, was working on her new sculpture studio, the first part of the complex completed. “The light here is unbelievable,” she says, marveling at the sunlight streaming into the space from skylights overhead. “In the summer it stays light until 10 o’clock, but strange light, really weird and sharp.” The white walls were bathed in the same golden glow that infuses J.M.W. Turner’s romantic seascapes, painted in Margate in the early 19th century.

The quality of that light is one reason Emin has been plotting her return to the coast of Kent after more than 30 years living mainly in London. But there are more conflicted reasons she’s coming home, too, tied up in painful memories. Her confessional six-and-a-half-minute Super-8 film, *Why I Never*

Became a Dancer, shot in Margate in the mid-’90s, chronicles the complex motivations that drove her to drop out of school and begin experimenting with sex at 13, and the escape that dancing once promised. So much of her artistic output draws from her childhood traumas. “Margate was always in her, always in the work even when she kind of left Margate far behind,” says Emin’s longtime London gallerist, Jay Jopling, founder of White Cube.

Emin’s raw, emotional work, grappling with the fallout from being raped as a teenager and having a pair of abortions, broke new ground when she first exploded in the art world, exploring boundary-pushing themes for the time. “I’ve been dealing with these issues all my life,” she says. “And I think now, with #MeToo and all of this stuff, it suddenly becomes acceptable for women to start talking about these things. The language has opened up for everybody to understand.”

Emin, who went on to represent Britain at the Venice Biennale in 2007 and join the Royal Academy of Arts that year, has mellowed over the years and firmly entered the establishment. She has collaborated with Louise Bourgeois, and her work, which has been shown alongside Francis Bacon’s, is now in the permanent collection of the country’s National Portrait Gallery and on a British postage stamp, introduced in 2018. Before London went on lockdown again this fall, a major show pairing her work with Edvard Munch’s was preparing to open at the Royal Academy of Arts.

Despite her dark subject matter she can be charming in person, an easy, open raconteur prone to

infectious fits of laughter—which may help explain why she’s been such coveted company over the years on the London social circuit and steady fodder for British tabloids with friends like Madonna, David Bowie, Elton John and George Michael, whose estate art sale at Christie’s last year featured a trove of Emin’s work.

Her return to Margate marks the culmination of a period of deep introspection, a reordering of priorities that began shortly before her mom’s death from cancer in fall 2016. That summer she announced a radical retreat from public life.

Plans to expand her East London studio were shelved, following a bitter fight with neighborhood preservationists over her proposal to add a modern five-story extension. She pared down her team there instead, including shutting down her embroidery practice. She had stopped making her signature quilted blankets years earlier, back in 2007, after the colorful pieces stitched with provocative sayings (like “Come Unto Me” and “I Do Not Expect to Be a Mother But I Do Expect to Die Alone”) had become too in demand, she says. She severed ties with her U.S. gallery, Lehmann Maupin, after 17 years working together, shut up her apartment near New York’s Gramercy Park and swore off long-haul travel for the immediate future. “I was unhappy; I was burned out; I was doing too much,” she says.

After her mom died, Emin secluded herself on her property in the South of France, working out of her small studio there, cooking from her own produce patch and laying the groundwork for her return home to Margate. “A lot of things really changed

for me mentally, physically, emotionally,” she says. “That year I did no interviews, no photographs, no shows, no charity—didn’t go out hardly at all. I was in France most of the time painting and thinking.”

FOR EMIN AND her brother, born into a fractured family in 1963, Margate was a Dickensian place to grow up. “My mom and dad had an affair, and then they sort of split up and decided it wasn’t going to work,” Emin says. “And then my mom found out she was four months pregnant—with twins.” Though their father, Enver Emin, a Turkish Cypriot immigrant who died of cancer in 2010, already had a wife and three kids, he spoiled his new progeny for a while, moving them into the Hotel International, which he owned, off the beachfront.

After their dad’s business went belly-up in 1972, their mother, Pam Cashin, turned to squatting in the hotel’s staff cottage, with the kids left to fend for themselves while she worked every job she could find. “Being in the hotel, being left alone, made us very vulnerable as children,” says Emin. “And this was quite difficult for my mom when she got older, and she felt terrible about this. And my dad was mortified.... There were all these people that came into our lives constantly—through a door, out the back door, this lodger, that person.... It wasn’t my dad’s fault. It wasn’t my mom’s fault either. It was like this sort of f—ed up, dysfunctional train of events.”

Emin grew up fast. She fled to London as soon as she could, sleeping in a squat starting at 14, and soon

running with an “uber-cool” crowd, as she describes them, that included Boy George when he was just starting out. She finally got out of Margate for good in 1987, enrolling that year in the Royal College of Art.

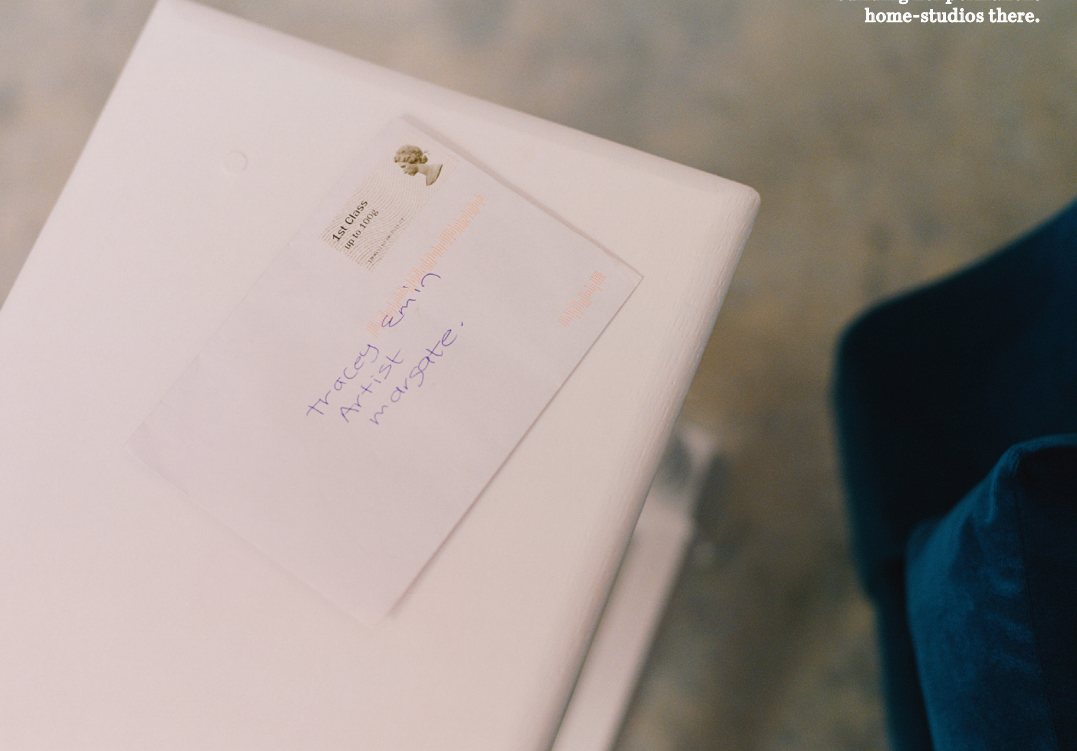
Nearly three decades later, in summer 2016, friends in the art world who’d discovered a resurgent Margate—drawing creative transplants from London—began needling her about laying down roots there again. Emin toured the block-long Thanet Press building with art dealer Carl Freedman, an ex-boyfriend from the ’90s with whom she’s still close. He was considering buying his own piece of the building, which he eventually did, moving his East London gallery and art editions business to Margate in 2019. “She came down, looked over the whole place,” recalls Freedman. “‘This is fantastic,’ she said, ‘but the idea of going back to Margate, I just can’t face it.’”

One day that fall, learning that her mother was on her deathbed, Emin visited her in Margate. Emin’s feelings about her hometown started to change. “I was thinking, When my mom dies there’s no reason for me to come here, no reason for me to be here anymore,” she says. “I didn’t feel happy with that idea. This place is in my psyche. It’s part of me.”

Four years later Emin is emotionally preparing to move back home. “I need the true memory,” she says. “I don’t want to romanticize. I want to try and remember how it really felt, and then I want to put that in my work. I find if I’m painting stuff that really means something to me, the closer I am to it the more inspired I’m going to be.”

Though Emin moved from Margate decades ago, the city is a living museum of its most famous native

HOMETOWN HERO
A letter addressed to Emin, who grew up in Margate and is now building her permanent home-studios there.



daughter. Turner may have his name attached to its marquee art institution, the Turner Contemporary, which opened in 2011, but it was Emin's notoriety that helped lure the David Chipperfield-designed building to the waterfront. The museum organized a major show of her work a year after opening, in conjunction with the London Olympics, with Emin carrying the Olympic torch into its galleries. Her tribute to Margate, *I Never Stopped Loving You*, in pink neon handwriting, hangs on the facade of the Droit House, a customs building turned visitor's center next door to the museum. Other, less official homages to Emin, including a portrait mural in the old town by a local street artist, can be found across the city. The ramshackle Walpole Bay Hotel hosts a collection of Emin memorabilia recalling her early breakout years, back when she used to throw all-night parties there with friends down from London.

And the Margate of Emin's youth persists on the rougher edges of this once-thriving blue-collar resort town. One evening last year, sipping white wine at sunset on the porch of the newly refurbished Sands Hotel, Emin scanned the horizon, considering the vanished world in which she grew up. A wooden pier from her childhood was destroyed in a big storm in the late '70s. The Dreamland Margate amusement park she haunted back when it was "full of punks, mods and rockers" reopened three years ago following a \$30 million investment. Emin was there to, symbolically, turn its art deco neon lights back on.

Margate's beachfront "Golden Mile," once bustling

with cafes, sweet shops and amusements, has seen better days. The city, known by some as Shoreditch on Sea, is undergoing other changes in other areas and has welcomed new craft coffee shops, home design stores and vintage clothing boutiques along with new transplants from London, just a 90-minute fast-train ride away—an urban exodus that's continued through the pandemic.

In the summer of 2019, Pete Doherty and his bandmates in the Libertines opened a bar, the Waste Land, named for T.S. Eliot's apocalyptic poem, partially written in Margate while Eliot was recovering from a breakdown there in 1921. A new hotel from Doherty and his band opened this fall. At Emin's urging that he buy into Margate, Gabriel Chipperfield is also building his own Margate hotel, in partnership with Matthew Slotover, co-founder of the Frieze art fairs, gut renovating an old inn once frequented by Turner. "It's the last remaining building on the seafront that Turner would recognize if he came back to Margate today," says Chipperfield.

IN LATE 2017, Emin returned from her sabbatical energized, entering a wildly productive period. She was back in the spotlight the following spring with a series of monumental public commissions, 67 bronze birds installed across Sydney and an enormous neon piece, *I Want My Time With You*, her response to Brexit, hung inside London's St. Pancras station. "Every day thousands of people are getting off the Eurostar," she says. "I want them to know that not everybody is against Europe."

Early last year a huge show of cathartic new work, *A Fortnight of Tears*, her first solo show in London in five years, which drew blockbuster attendance, debuted at White Cube south of the Thames, displaying Emin's grief over her mother's death channeled into paintings and sculptures. "When my mom died, I cried so much," she says. "But after a couple of weeks there wasn't any more to come out. You have to get up and get on."

Though she was physically and emotionally drained coming out of the White Cube show, she says, she spent the next year buried in work. "Everyone said to me, 'Why are you working so hard?'" she says. "I was going, 'Because you never know when you won't be able to work hard.'"

Emin was burnt out and considering another sabbatical last fall when she decided once and for all to leave East London behind, eventually putting both her home and nearby studio up for sale. "Chapters close in your life," she says, "and you have to let them close."

She was preparing to return to Provence when Covid-19 shut down borders last spring. She spent the first weeks of lockdown happily working while isolating in East London, shuttling between her home and studio. "I'm used to isolation—it's where I thrive," she says of the time alone. "I had a fridge full of food, it was cozy, the weather was amazing. And I was painting about four days a week. I'd go to the studio on a Monday and stay there through Thursday, sleep on the sofa. I was working all night sometimes and sleeping on the sofa all day and not getting dressed and just swimming. I just loved this experience of being in this bubble, me on my own."

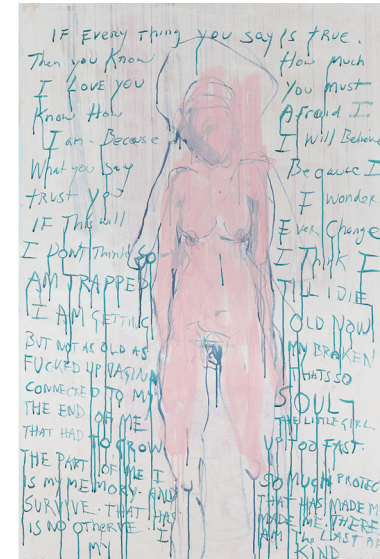
In June, before her cancer diagnosis, White Cube opened an online show of Emin's early pandemic work, *I Thrive on Solitude*, featuring miniature interior paintings of the home she'd soon be leaving behind. Instead of an opening party, Emin welcomed VIP guests to a virtual reception on Zoom. "I loved the intimacy of it all," she says.

By fall, her fight with cancer still largely under wraps, Emin had a full slate of shows in the pipeline once again, her galleries in London, Brussels and Rome all planning to exhibit her work after delays due to Europe's lockdowns.

This month a major museum show delayed by the pandemic, pairing Emin's work with an idol's—Norwegian painter Edvard Munch, on whom she wrote a thesis at art school in 1985—might finally open at London's Royal Academy of Arts. "Since I was 18 he's been my favorite artist," she says. The presentation, originally scheduled to run through February, will move to Oslo next year, for the opening of the new Edvard Munch museum. Emin's 23-foot bronze sculpture, *The Mother*, will be a permanent fixture on Oslo's Museum Island, opposite the Munch museum.

Work continues, meanwhile, on Emin's new home-studios in central London and Margate. She hopes to be living between them by the start of the year. "I'll spend one last Christmas in [East London] and then change my life for good in 2021," she says. "Margate is perfect for a museum. I don't have to worry about my legacy: I've created a place for my work that will work perfectly." ●

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *THE MOTHER*, 2007, BRONZE, 206 X 177 X 235 CM (104.72 X 69.69 X 92.52 INCHES), EDITION OF 3, WITH 2 APs © TRACEY EMIN/PHOTO © WHITE CUBE (OLLIE HAMMICK); *MY BED*, 1998, MIXED MEDIA, DIMENSIONS VARIABLE © TRACEY EMIN/PHOTO © WHITE CUBE; *THE SAATCHI GALLERY, LONDON*, PHOTO: PRUDENCE CUMING ASSOCIATES LTD.; *IT'S NOT ME THAT'S CRYING ITS MY SOUL*, 2001, NEON (WARM WHITE), 86.26 X 122.9 CM (34 X 48.39 INCHES), EDITION OF 3, WITH 2 APs © TRACEY EMIN/PHOTO © WHITE CUBE; *GOUGHIE ON PARK*, 2000, GOUACHE ON PAPER, 38 X 36 CM (15 X 14.17 INCHES) © TRACEY EMIN/PHOTO © WHITE CUBE; *DETAIL OF I AM THE LAST OF MY KIND*, 2019, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 122.3 X 122.3 X 3.9 CM (48.1 X 48.1 X 1.54 INCHES), EDITION OF 3, WITH 2 APs © TRACEY EMIN/PHOTO © WHITE CUBE; *IT COMING*, 2009, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 122.3 X 122.3 X 3.9 CM (48.1 X 48.1 X 1.54 INCHES), EDITION OF 3, WITH 2 APs © TRACEY EMIN/PHOTO © WHITE CUBE; *I AM THE LAST OF MY KIND*, 2019, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 122.3 X 122.3 X 3.9 CM (48.1 X 48.1 X 1.54 INCHES), EDITION OF 3, WITH 2 APs © TRACEY EMIN/PHOTO © WHITE CUBE; *PRUDENCE CUMING ASSOCIATES LTD.*



ARTIST'S STATEMENT
Right: A selection of artworks by Emin, including *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-1995* (1995); *Passing of time with and without you* (2020); *Detail of Love* (2020).

ON DISPLAY
A range of Emin's artworks, including (clockwise from left) *My Bed* (1998); *It's not me That's Crying It's my Soul* (2011); *I am The Last of my Kind* (2019); *You kept it coming* (2019); *The Mother* (2017).