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BA Illustration

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How does Tracey Emin's artwork challenge society's palatable idea of feminism?

Art has always been a way in which people can express themselves. From joy, to sadness, to anger, any emotion can be fed into artwork. Art creates outlets for individuals, no matter the skill, quality, or technique. It can be private or public, personal or detached. Some artists create art purely from imagination and fantasy, whilst others draw from fact, and their own lives. Tracey Emin is an artist who draws from her own experiences and trauma. Though her work does sometimes allow her imagination to wander, she draws from her own life when creating her artwork, in its various mediums. (Brown, 2006) Society has its own ideas of feminism- especially from a male perspective. Emin does not tie herself down to these standards or expectations. However, according to the Cambridge Dictionary, "Feminism is defined as the belief that women should be treated in the same way as men, and be allowed the same rights, power and opportunities." (Cambridge Dictionary)

Emin's confessional style of work is something that fascinates audiences. Whilst female art is often assumed to be full of flowers and general pleasantries. Her work is nothing of the sort. This can be seen in her painting 'Not Fuckable'. (Emin, 2024) her use of wild brushstrokes allows viewers to understand the emotions she feeds into her work accurately. By allowing the paint to drip down the canvas, there is a feeling of chaos, desperation. She tries to keep it together to create a clear and coherent image but is prevented. Additionally, by applying Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding theory (Hall, 1973) Emin encodes what audiences then decode- they can see that the fact that the 'other' figure in the painting is painted in red that this person is danger. It creates a sense of unease amongst audiences- it is clear that this is an invasion on the blue figure's body. Blue, can connote sadness, whilst can red connote not only anger but also 'seeing red', seeing danger. (Cherry, 2026) Having had an incredibly difficult upbringing, the resulting anger, sadness, and frustration that is so prevalent in Emin's work is clear. Facing abuse that began at the age of eight, she was then raped at the age of thirteen. This led to acts of promiscuity in her early teenage years and derided as the 'town slag'. (Merck, 2002, p. 119) Emin does the unthinkable through her art. By challenging those who have harmed her in such raw and graphic paintings, such as 'Not Fuckable', she shows she has no shame in discussing her trauma. In fact, often times, she allows said trauma to fuel her artistic outcomes. In an interview with 'Frieze Magazine' she stated that pain is what 'people hook into' within her work, and said she intended to continue mining all her own experiences. (Morgan, 1997)



Figure 1

I'm going to get you, Ya Cunt
Ya Bastard
And when I do, The whole world will
know, That you destroyed my childhood

WEIRD SEX



Figure 2

Emin's embroidered piece, titled 'Weird Sex' is another example of her vulnerable and honest art style. By combining words and drawings within an embroidered piece, she is able to communicate an almost childlike and storybook feeling, emphasising the specific message within this piece- expressing anger and resentment towards those who 'destroyed' her 'childhood' as written in the piece. The layout of the piece is also notable- the main three drawings are separate, with one in the distance, creating a feeling of vulnerability and isolation. The separation between the girl and the background drawings creates further themes and connotations of loneliness and abandonment. By having the two main elements of the piece- the writing and the drawing, in different colours, she allows the audience to understand that whilst these two components are separate, the fact that they are both quite dull colours connotes that neither element outweighs or outshines the other. Textiles often appear in Emin's work, and though her textile work is often quilt like, with colourful patchwork and wordplay (see figure 3) this specific piece of art is eerily simple, almost haunting, connecting back to the trauma it stemmed from. (Freedman, 2006)

The appliqué blanket piece, 'Hate and Power can be a Terrible Thing' by Emin is an example of her more colourful and 'fun' approaches to the topics her artworks discuss. Despite its bright colours and cheerful layout featuring big, bold, capital letters- the messages themselves on the blanket are unwelcoming. Examples of this are 'Rot in Hell' and 'You cruel heartless Bitch'. There is something almost humorous about her choice to combine this church, Sunday school activity style of textile art with rude and provocative language. Her textile works of this nature are similar to banners found in religious, civic or political processions- cathedrals, trade-unions, demonstrations and peace protests. (Brown, 2006) From afar, audiences would never guess the contents of said blanket. Brown writes "feminist art was often autobiographical- women often addressed the feminist motto 'the personal is political' within their work." (Brown, 2006) Her politics within this piece is almost a secret attack on audiences, especially as from afar, the English flag and the Union Jack would still be visible. Once again, just like in her piece 'Weird Sex' she is able to showcase two meanings within her artwork- separating this by design and use of words/text.



Figure 3

When we think about feminist art, there is a generalisation that all art within this category contains flowers, the colour pink, and an overall 'girl power' feeling. Rooted in internalised misogyny, this idea of feminism, despite its initial welcoming and empowering appearance, is harmful to overall feminism and female suffering. By reducing the struggles of women down to pink, aesthetically pleasing, contained pieces, feminism is seen as infantile, gentle and quiet. It is important to note that this art is not invalid or irrelevant- all feminist art has its place within society. If a woman is seen crying- others feel protective, empathetic. If a woman is angry, she is an attention seeking, overdramatic nuisance. Emin is not afraid of being perceived as the latter, in fact, it seems to fuel her.

It feels as though we have reached a point of feminism that men have decided they will allow. Quiet, pink, tied up in a bow- inherently female and not intrusive. Artists like Tracey Emin turn this upside down. She is not afraid to venture into the unspoken. Her work picks apart her experiences of abuse, sexual violence, and general racial and female suffering. Rejecting the public's idea of a victim, (quiet and vulnerable) she refuses to stay quiet about the things that society has instructed women they have no right to vocalise. Her work does not sugarcoat her experiences nor belittle them. Her work centres herself and that is a theme consistent since the beginning of her art. (Brown, 2006) By centering herself within her own artwork, she is able to decanter men within her work despite the fact that a lot of the trauma she is creating art about has been caused by men. She focuses on her own feelings a lot of the time, and when she does not, she turns to making these men question their morals and life choices. Her artwork is both confrontational and confessional- she is not only honest within her art- her art asks others to be honest with her in return.

To conclude, Tracey Emin's artwork challenges society's palatable version feminist and female self expression through raw, sometimes vulgar, depictions of her own trauma. Her artwork varies from colourful and bold to gentle, messy. Every piece feels like a complete outpouring of emotions, allowing her vulnerabilities to surface. Though many of her artworks depict shame within traumatic experiences that many women go through, her work is important to all women, especially young women, as well as men. It creates conversations as well as safe spaces for those who have experienced similar trauma. Whether people dislike or like Tracey Emin's artwork, it is undeniable the positive affect she has had on feminist culture, especially within art, as well as making those taboo topics a little less controversial to bring up, one step at a time. Her work is inspirational, honest and despite being so personal, it is so public.

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