

Discover Aberdeen Art Gallery Tour

Sculpture Court

For You by Tracey Emin, 2008

Spoken by Jessica Barrie, Curator

Glowing bright pink and blue, the words 'I Felt You and I Knew You Loved Me' sit on the wall of Aberdeen Art Gallery's Sculpture Court. This piece is made by Tracey Emin, one of Britain's most acclaimed and successful contemporary artists. She started life in Croydon and grew up in Margate, Kent. It was here at the age of 13, Emin was sexually assaulted. Not one to shy away from hurtful or personal topics, Emin shines light onto many areas of her life that people shy away from.

Emin studied firstly fashion at Medway College of Design however she didn't finish this degree as in her own words "I was rubbish at it". It was at Medway where she met painter Billy Childish who inspired her to paint and become interested in art. Emin became involved with the project 'The Medway Poets' and also in the printing of Childish's confessional poems on his small press, Hangman Books. She then went on to study printing at Maidstone Art College.

In 1987 Emin moved to London to begin studying at the Royal College of Art to pursue an MA in painting. She tells "I wanted to learn to oil paint. Ken Kiff was a tutor there, and I liked his work." All her work from this period, bar one painting named 'Friendship', was destroyed by Emin. The painting that survived was not meant to. The RCA Collection had selected a painting of Emin's of her grandmother, she describes what happens next: "One evening Stan the caretaker was on his break and I took the keys from his office. I went to the store and I swapped the paintings over. The painting was six foot by six foot - the same size as the one I put back in so that no one would notice. I scrawled a note on the back of the painting to the effect, 'I am not ready to give you my grandmother' and an apology. It is with the deepest regret that I ever swapped those paintings over, and there's definitely a lesson to be learnt. It was years before anyone noticed, but for me it was too late."

During the 1990s Emin became part of the group known as the 'Young British Artists' or YBA's. This begun for her when she worked with fellow YBA Sarah Lucas on an artist project called 'The Shop' on Bethnal Green. The shop sold works of both artists and included t-shirts and ash trays with Damien Hirst's picture on the bottom. The YBAs are known for their non art materials and their openness to alternative and sometimes shocking processes. Damien Hirst himself is a well-known YBA who has

exhibited preserved dead animals such as sharks cut up in different tanks, but also bronze statues of Mickey Mouse. Sarah Lucas is known for her sculpture of furniture and tights and her self-portraits, sometimes posing with fresh food like chicken and fish. During this time Emin also had her first solo show at The White Cube gallery in London, where she exhibited autobiographical and personal photographs. This show also featured objects from her life, including a pack of cigarettes that her uncle was holding when he was decapitated in a car crash.

In 1999 Emin was short-listed for the Turner Prize where she exhibited the confessional self portrait of objects called 'My Bed'. It was an installation of the artist's unmade bed complete with empty Vodka bottles, cigarette butts and used condoms. It gave an uncompromised and controversial look into the artist's life. At the time she was going through a traumatic relationship break up, and the bed was a portrait laid bare of her emotional state. As an installation, every time the work is exhibited, the objects must be meticulously placed. Made more than twenty years ago, 'My Bed' still brings back this time to Emin, but she grows further away from that tumultuous period of her life. She talks about its recent display at the Turner Contemporary "It changes every time I install it. It gets older, and I get older, and all the objects and the bed get further and further away from me, from how I am now... I'm a different person. Of course, I'm still partly the same but lots of things have changed. In my bed, in my sleeping partners, in my sleeping habits, and what I take to bed with me as well. I take a book to bed with me now, and a telephone. Not all that stuff."

Always a controversial and high-profile personality, she affirmed her position as a highly regarded and established artist by accepting election to the Royal Academy in March 2007. A year later, Emin created the artwork 'For You'. These neon confessional texts she regards as love poems. Scrawled in notebooks, Emin works with neon specialists to bring her handwritten poems to life. Other poems of Emin's in neon include 'She lay down Deep Beneath the Sea' in turquoise and a newer installation at St Pancras 'I Want My Time With You' was unveiled with a passionate pro-European speech by Emin.

'For You' can be seen as love mutterings, a prayer or an exploration of a moment's emotion frozen in time. The words are scrawled in three separated lines; their arrangement and the kiss at the end of the message create a strange mixture of anonymity and immediacy that is reminiscent of graffiti, text messages or Post-it Notes. This particular text could have different meanings: universal and layered, the 'you' which Emin refers to in the text becomes open, a God, a lover, a protector, a friend, a stranger, everyone or no-one. The colour of the neon heart is pink, traditionally associated with love, which is in contrast with the blue coolness of the words inside. As she explains: "Poetry can be one line, a sentence. When you read the words, you imagine what you're seeing, you're given a sense of vision by the words".