

Hailed in her youth, an artist's work matures with her

HONG KONG

BY JOYCE LAU

Tracey Emin, whose confrontational and confessional works made her one of the most recognizable figures in the world of British contemporary art, opened her first solo exhibit in greater China on Monday. "I Cried Because I Love You" is showing at the White Cube and Lehmann Maupin galleries in Hong Kong until May 21.

Ms. Emin, 52, shared her thoughts (and her breakfast) while lounging in a bathrobe in her Hong Kong hotel suite.

Q. The paintings, embroideries and photos in your new show are based on your marriage to a large stone in your French garden. How did this idea come about?

A. I'm quite superstitious. I found a ring in my house — a little silver thing — and I put it on my wedding finger. Do you know what that means? It means you will never get married unless you throw the ring out. I thought, "I've got to get married." I ran out to the outside to this stone in my garden. I love this stone. It's so beautiful. It has dignity. I made me feel strong and creative.

Q. Why are you wearing a shroud as a

wedding dress?

A. The first time I ran outside to the stone, I wore white pajamas, which my mother gave me. For the photos, I wore a shroud that was meant for my dad. My dad was Muslim, and he needed to be buried in a white gown, so I bought one for him. But it has sleeves, and so it would not do, as it was a garment. As a Muslim, you cannot take anything to heaven with you.

Q. You have never married or had children. Is this work about women and commitment?

A. It is like you said, but it is also not that deliberate. I'm not that kind of artist. I don't sit around, reading lots of boring books, thinking up of projects. I put the ring on and I thought, "I have to get married." When my assistant came over to take the photos, I looked for a white garment, and I found one with sentimental value.

Q. The nudes in this series — often merged with the image of the stone — have full breasts and hips, a small belly. Are these you?

A. A big belly! One day, I thought, "God, I'm still drawing myself like I was 20 years ago." I realized I wasn't a size zero. I have undulating rolls of fat and baggy gray skin. The girl turned in-



RICHARD YOUNG

The British contemporary artist Tracey Emin.

to a woman without my realizing. It seems so simple, but it's such a shock.

Q. The works have light, fluid lines, even the embroideries. Are they created quickly and spontaneously?

A. No. Some of the big paintings are quite old. I paint over and over. I paint one person, then another, then remove one. Some paintings take 10 years and four layers before the argument is finished. Many of the paintings started with another person in them, but I turned that other person into the stone. Even if you have natural talent, draw-

ing takes practice. A few years ago in New York, I took more life drawing classes — and I got much better.

Q. You were the first woman to be appointed a professor at the Royal Academy of Arts in London. How far do female artists still have to go?

A. Name me some great artists. I don't mean good artists, I mean truly great ones — Rembrandt, Picasso. Are there great female artists? There is Frida Kahlo and Georgia O'Keeffe — but I'm asking for a Rembrandt or Picasso. Historically, there are not that many great female artists. In contemporary art, we've seen some balance coming up, although it is still very difficult. Only now are we starting to teach about women artists in art school.

Q. Your earlier art celebrated the depravities of youth — smoking, drinking, sex, not making your bed. How has your art moved on?

A. But the art wasn't entirely like that — it was just seen that way. "Everyone I Have Ever Slept With" included my grandmother, who held my hand while I slept. The work was about rites of passage, not sex.

When I was younger, I was so excited that I could do whatever I wanted to do. Now, I'm back to using traditional me-

dia — painting, drawing, embroidering, bronze. I've gone back to using my hands. It's enough. It's like going home.

Q. You were known as one of the groundbreaking Young British Artists, or Y.B.A.s. Who are the new Young Artists?

A. My generation was a phenomenon — it was a wave. There was Paris in the 1930s, America in the '50s and London in the '90s. Now it's not a wave — it's more like individuals.

Q. How are you finding Hong Kong, which is striving to become Asia's art center?

A. Hong Kong is funny — like ha-ha funny. It's busy. It looks amazing. It's different worlds coming together. And I love cities on the water.

Q. Do you have an opinion on the Chinese art boom?

A. I'm probably not supposed to say this, but the Chinese art scene right now seems like San Francisco during the gold rush.

My greatest fear about China is the forgery. Some of my work, not that much, is copied there. It's not flattering — it's illegal. In America, you'd file a lawsuit. And it's just really, really sad. Art is something close to God. It cannot be copied and commoditized.