

THE MESSINESS IS THE MESSAGE

Sally Clegg

Once, in a dinner conversation with another printmaker I had just met at a prominent craft school, he started joking about monotypes. He was a woodcut artist, and I had told him that while my art practice is multi-disciplinary, copper plate etching is the medium that I return to most faithfully. We compared notes about our print practices, and when the subject of monotypes arose, with playful contemptuousness, my new friend referred to these as “squished paintings.” This broke the ice, and we both laughed. For the rest of the meal, we continued to bond over the pleasing arduousness of our relative preferred printmaking processes, the potential messiness and apparently unsettling immediacy of monoprinting, and the general viewing public’s overall indifference to the differences between, say, a woodcut, an etching, and a monotype.

Considering my apparent unease with the medium, ironically, the work of art that has most consumed my thoughts in recent years is a 1997 trace monotype by the ultra-famous Tracey Emin, a 59 x 73 cm print depicting a relaxed female figure sitting on a sofa. Her eyes are shut and her legs are open; she appears to be masturbating. Above and to the left of the figure floats an indiscernible object. Below the image are the words “I USED TO HAVE SUCH A GOOD IMAGINATION,” which is also the title of the piece. Both Ns in “Imagination” are backward, an indication that Emin drew this through the back of the paper, and perhaps quite quickly.

I first encountered this piece during my recent MFA research. While Emin had been an important figure to me as a younger person, paving the way in part for women like me who wanted to make work dealing with sexuality, I was not specifically familiar with her prints until I read Jennifer Doyle’s 2006 book *Sex Objects: Art and the Dialectics of Desire*. Doyle writes at length about Emin’s unique treatment of sex in her oeuvre and what makes this particularly resonant with her viewers (or “fans,” as Doyle terms us) (2006, p. 118). Doyle credits Emin with “deconstructing the opposition of

naive-deployment-of-formula and theoretically-savvy-self-referentiality,” and writes that “Her aesthetics of intimacy...gives her audience a melodramatic contact high” (pp. 117-118). Doyle’s argument, and even more so the print itself, called to my mind Jacques Derrida’s deconstructions of auto-affection: a category of experience that includes everything from thought to sexual self-touch. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida (1976, p. 165) defines auto-affection as “giving-oneself-a-presence or a pleasure,” and attempts to demonstrate that within its general structure, an alterity always exists between one and oneself. For example, if I touch my left hand with my right, I am both touching and touched, self and other. This slightest alterity reveals a gap; the existence

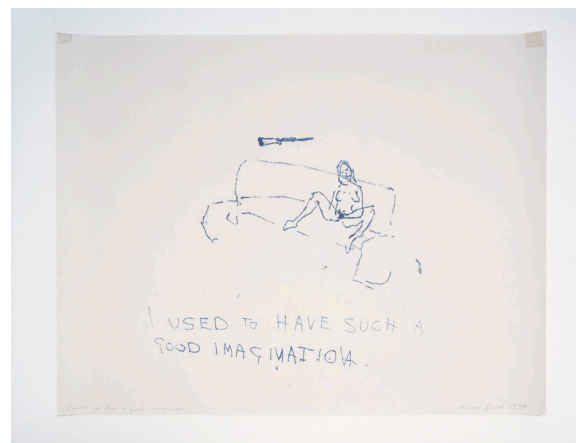


Figure 1



Figure 2

Figure Titles and information

Figure 1: I Used to Have Such a Good Imagination, 1997. Monoprint, 59 x 73 cm. © 2022 Tracey Emin. All rights reserved, DACS/Artimage, London / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Image courtesy White Cube. Photo: Stephen White & Co.

Figure 2: Test proofs for an à la poupée workshop

of the gap suggests that nothing that we do, including our most private experiences, is entirely closed off from the outside world.

Reading Doyle and Derrida and studying *I Used to Have Such a Good Imagination* through my lens as a printmaker, I sensed that this piece might be important in supporting a conceit that I have been thinking through in my work: one that asks how theory can help to problematise the prevailing notion and negative view of so-called “masturbatory art”: work considered tediously self-indulgent and useless. I wondered if the concept of masturbatory art could be subverted or at least refreshed, explored, and visualised in my work and applied in valuable ways to my relationship with printmaking. I imagined this as a designation that could be newly meaningful and theoretically rich, not to mention imbued with the type of humor and mild eroticism I tend to aim for in my work. I also viewed this as a chance to answer Kathryn Reeves’ call to action in her thoughtful 1999 IMPACT conference essay *The Re-Vision of Printmaking*, which challenges print artists to consider more carefully the embodied and gendered feminine innate aspects and marginalised positioning of what we do, using theory’s capacity to “make art and practice more interesting, to empower artists, to open spaces, and to deepen experience” rather than seeking and forming “new hierarchy, hegemony, and a grand narrative” for our sometimes underappreciated field (Reeves, 1999, p. 79).

To communicate what Emin’s *I Used to Have Such a Good Imagination* has meant to me in this effort, I will first return to the print itself, which might be placed in a general category of artworks that link creativity and sex. Emin here reminds us that the word “imagination” is connected both to artmaking and erotic fantasy. The seated figure’s experience of impotence, whether creative, sexual, or both, is clearly happening internally: Her eyes are closed, she touches herself, and she *thinks* (fantasises or imagines, perhaps). Outside the figure is that ambiguous object to the left, which Doyle (2006, p. 104) interprets as some form of threat: “...a rifle? A broom? (either way, it signals an impending punishment: a shot to the head, or housework).” We cannot quite make out what the object is, which makes it most interesting to me. The item floats near the figure’s head like a thought bubble in a cartoon. It is not an abstraction or a scribble but a clear attempt to render some *thing*. I suspect that we might be looking at whatever the figure here tries to conjure in her mind for her pleasure: an act of visualisation that is failing. The casual messiness in Emin’s portrayal of failure to draw, to climax, to perform as well as she alludes to having once done at either task seems well matched to the way the artist wields the medium of monotype.

The specific name for this type of quick-and-dirty printmaking is, conveniently, “trace monotype.” In this process, a surface (a plate, or a sheet of paper) is coated with a thin layer of ink. The artist then lays the printing paper over the inked surface and makes a drawing through the back with any preferred tool, for example, a toothpick, a pencil, or a finger. Where pressure is applied, ink lifts off the substrate and creates a mark. A trace monotype line is recognisable by its noise: a fuzz of ink

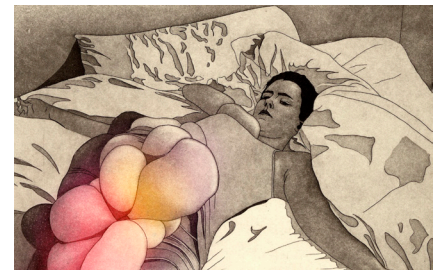


Figure 3



Figure 4

picked up by the paper adjacent to where it was touched. Monotypes are by virtue single prints that cannot be editioned; in this sense, they shirk the reproductive aspect of printmaking, and with it, some of Reeves' construction of print matrix-as-womb (1999, p. 75). They share much of the immediacy of conventional drawing, though they come into being at the slight remove implicit to all printmaking processes. This minuscule distance between the hand and the artwork reflects the slight alterity of self-touch, drawing another delicate parallel to Derrida's auto-affection, calling to mind Doyle's "contact high" (2006, p. 118), leading me to think of the surrealist's semi-sexual interest in frottage (rubblings) and perhaps more generally the diffused sensation of a body being touched through clothing. As such, *I Used to Have Such a Good Imagination* could be considered as intimate and limited as masturbation itself: centred on touch, thought, and image, a little shallow, casual, and maybe a bit messy.

Like all of Emin's many prints, this piece exists outside her seminal works in sculptural installation, lending it a supplemental position in her life's work. This is a familiar position for prints and printmaking. Reeves (1999, p. 75) reminds us that "old art surveys have described printmaking as one of the minor arts and even as the 'handmaiden of the fine arts...'" Masturbation, though no longer widely considered dangerous or taboo, also holds a historically supplemental position to interpersonal sex. As I see it, the supplement can be considered a distinctly complex and interesting category of experiences, processes, and works. Referring to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's book *Confessions*, Derrida (1976, p. 145) explains the concept of the "dangerous supplement", that which both augments and threatens something apparently natural and complete, using two primary examples: writing as a supplement to speech, and masturbation as a supplement to sexual intercourse. He writes of the two:

In both cases, the possibility of auto-affection manifests itself as such: it leaves a trace of itself in the world. The worldly residence of a signifier becomes impregnable. That which is written remains, and the experience of touching-touched admits the world as a third party. The exteriority of space is irreducible there. Within the general structure of auto-affection, within the giving-oneself-a-presence or a pleasure, the operation of touching-touched receives the other within the narrow gulf that separates doing from suffering (1976, p. 165).

While Emin and her figure in *I Used to Have Such a Good Imagination* may have failed to conjure a clear image of a specific object, her use of both writing and masturbation in this print makes it a strong visualisation of this morsel of theory. Her choice to use a fast and loose process in an arguably marginalised medium drives the point home.

What, though, is the point? Reeves (1999, p. 79) concludes her essay in part by stating that "heterogeneity, mutability, and provisionality must become part of our theoretical and visual vocabularies." To me, that means thinking back to that silly dinner conversation and

asking why my former self and a stranger sought to elevate our work by diminishing monotypes and how my thinking and artwork might benefit from eliminating such biases. The idea of monoprinting from a copper plate has gained a certain lustre since I gave up the idea that my etchings derive integrity by being both reproductive (as in, editioned) and original (as in, limited edition, struck plate). This slight shift in my thinking precipitated a recent workshop I taught on *à la poupée*, wherein I encouraged my students to explore what is possible when a longer amount of time is spent inking a single copper plate in multiple colours to achieve a single impression, rather than habitually inking in black alone and spending that additional time to print many identical multiples. By shifting the time spent in an already time-consuming medium and applying most of that time to the parts of that process that centre touch (inking and wiping) rather than reproduction (editioning 25-plus prints), I wonder, with pleasure, if this type of exploration in the studio might be considered one way for me to re-vision printmaking as a bit more “masturbatory” and a bit less procreative.

When I first learned etching in Glasgow, I fell in love with the way it reigned in my freewheeling, scattered creative energy and messiness. Unlike in painting and drawing, adding a colour to an etching was a big investment that required additional time, material, and consideration (such as a second or third plate). The technical nature of the process and the meticulously coordinated shared setting of the printmaking studio matched with the permanence of the etched plate were of tremendous significance to me in developing care and rigour in my work. These habits that I cultivated over time as an intaglio printmaker are largely positive, but they also sometimes precluded experimentation. My meditations on *I Used to Have Such a Good Imagination* now remind me that producing a print can be as straightforward as rolling up some ink on a piece of newsprint and getting down an image that captures the casual dramatics of the idea in the artist’s mind. As printmakers, many of us are probably somewhat averse to messiness. However, while “messiness” can of course mean sloppiness or chaos, in its vernacular usage, it can also mean “out of control in a good way” (Beenie, 2003).

My exploration of Emin through theory, my reflections and experiments, and my meandering masturbatory art conceit have also helped me to situate my identity as a printmaker more comfortably within my broader studio practice. Looking for opportunities to draw connections between a previous career as an adult toy designer and my recent MFA thesis project, I started working in mouldmaking and casting to create a series of objects that took my inquiry to what I considered its logical conclusion: a series of cast silicone dildo sculptures that are also scale models of my own body. I notice that I enjoy the mouldmaking and casting process for some of the same reasons that drew me to intaglio: the option of neat, identical multiples makes variance all the more exciting. Similar to the way I view Emin’s artwork and Reeves’s scholarship, the appearance that the work is ‘about sex’ serves as both an entry point for the viewer and a veil over the work’s intention to theorise. Invoking the motif of sex, and more

specifically masturbation, as Rousseau and Derrida also demonstrate, is indeed one way to tether a theoretical conversation to the body, which is something we constantly and naturally seem to need.

I recently attended a reception for a show that included my piece *Eternal Feminine: Self Portrait as 121 Dildos*, which had just received a national sculpture award. I was happy for the recognition and the company of a new-to-me audience of sculptors. When asked to speak impromptu at the event about 'what being a sculptor means to me,' I noticed that as soon as I had the microphone, I immediately said "I actually identify first as a printmaker." Afterwards, I was teased by friends and colleagues for saying so, as if I had risked diminishing the honour of my acceptance into a community of 3D artists. This idea that, even in a joking way, a commitment to one discipline might threaten another led me to think once again of Derrida's "dangerous supplement." Toying with the idea of holding my print practice in that irresistible category, I feel all the happier to have it, as Emin does, as a vital piece of a multifaceted and ever-messier personal creative practice.

REFERENCE LIST

- Beenie. (2003) "Messy Definition & Meaning." Urban Dictionary, Urban Dictionary. <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=messy>.
- Derrida, J. (1976) *Of Grammatology*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Doyle, J. (2006) *Sex Objects: Art and the Dialectics of Desire*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Reeves, K. (1999) "The Re-Vision of Printmaking," In: Parraman, Carinna and Brewer, Emmeline (eds), *IMPACT International Multi-disciplinary Printmaking Conference Proceedings*. Bristol: Impact Press.
- "Masturbatory Definition & Meaning." Merriam-Webster, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/masturbatory>.

IMAGE GALLERY

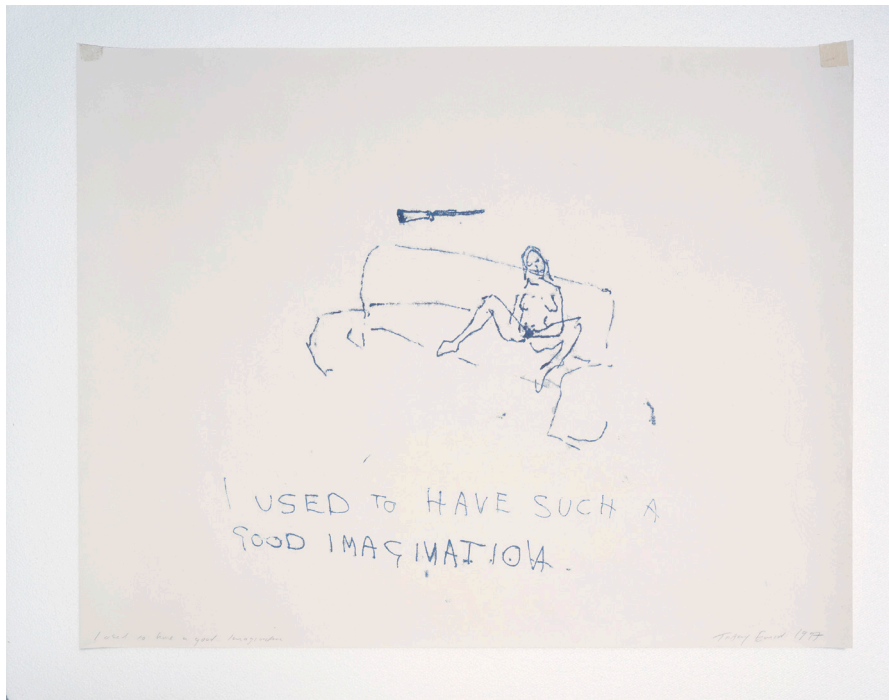


Figure 1: I Used to Have Such a Good Imagination, 1997. Monoprint, 59 x 73 cm. © 2022 Tracey Emin. All rights reserved, DACS/Artimage, London / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Image courtesy White Cube. Photo: Stephen White & Co.
Figure 2: Test proofs for an à la poupée workshop

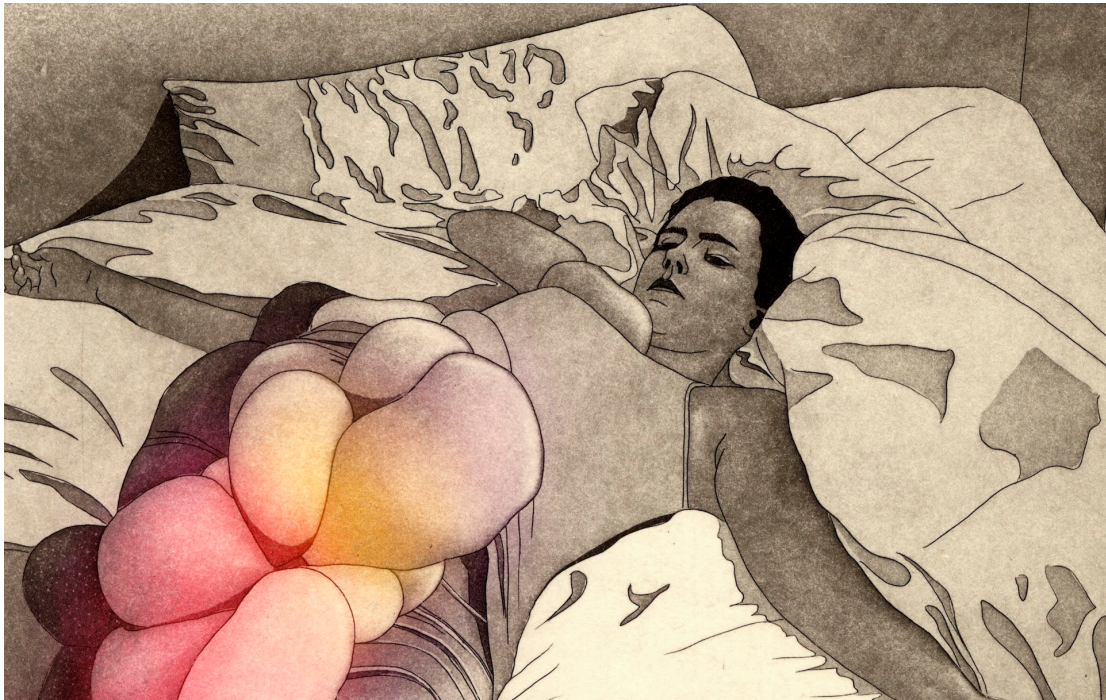


Figure 3: Bundle 1

Figure 4: Eternal Feminine: Self Portrait as 121 Dildos