

Tracey Emin and William Blake in Focus. Tate Liverpool, 16 September 2016–3 September 2017.

Reviewed by Sibylle Erle

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- 1 IN Liverpool, as part of Tate Liverpool's In Focus series, Tracey Emin (b. 1963) and William Blake (1757–1827), two London-based artists, shared exhibition space for almost a year. The intention, according to Tate Liverpool's web site, was to show “a shared concern with birth, death and spirituality in both artists' work.” The highlights of the exhibition, it says, included *My Bed* (1998) and drawings by Emin, Blake's large color print *Pity* (c. 1795, Butlin #310), presented to the Tate in 1939 by W. Graham Robertson, and the ink and watercolor painting *The Crucifixion: “Behold Thy Mother”* (c. 1805, Butlin #497), originally part of a series done for Thomas Butts illustrating Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. The painting was given to the Tate in 1949, a year after Robertson's death. To link Emin and her art to that of Blake is not new: “To say that Emin is like Blake, as has often been done, is not to claim that she is his equal. But it is true that she, like him, is a romantic who, although admired by many, has also disturbed people to the point of fear. ... Both artists, in their search for poeticised truth, manifest a strong disregard of opinion” (Brown 10).
- 2 The first information board inside the gallery reiterated the proposed thematic connections between Emin and Blake, “birth, death and spirituality,” but there was also something

inherently material or matter of fact about the juxtaposition. Emin, who grew up in Margate and eventually moved to London to study at the Royal College of Art, is a successful artist—her art sells and is very expensive. She is one of the Young British Artists, who include Damien Hirst and the Chapman brothers, a group that first attracted attention in the 1980s. In the 1990s she worked with Sarah Lucas, producing a pop-up shop. A member of the Royal Academy since 2007, she was professor of drawing from 2011 to 2013, and has also lectured there. This is quite different from Blake, who enrolled as a student at the Royal Academy but was never a member; years later he scribbled on the title page of Joshua Reynolds's *Works*, “This Man was Hired to Depress Art This is the opinion of Will Blake my Proofs of this Opinion are given in the following Notes” (E 635), directing readers to the annotations in the margins of his copy (some annotations to Reynolds are from 1808–09, when Blake was preparing his own exhibition above his brother's shop). About the same time he finally turned his back on the academy, having first exhibited there in 1780 and last in 1808. When *My Bed* was exhibited at Tate Britain in 1999, it was as one of the works shortlisted for the Turner Prize. It didn't win, and Emin attracted more media attention than her work. Blake, by comparison, was almost unknown in his lifetime, and the only time he attracted public attention was when he confronted a soldier who had entered his garden without his permission. He was accused of high treason; there was a trial and testimonies were given, but Blake, supported by his friends and good character references, was acquitted. What do these two people have in common? Can this kind of exhibition be more than a mere exercise in creative meaning-making, while paying tribute to the vast richness of the Tate's growing collection?

- 3 To show works by one of Britain's most important living female artists in the context of those of a dead but by now canonical male artist creates a dialogue. Darren Pih, the curator of the show, explained that Emin was exploring the wider historical framework of her work. *My Bed* had already been shown alongside works by Francis Bacon at Tate Britain and, by the time this review is published, it will have appeared with those of J. M. W. Turner at the *Turner Contemporary* in Margate. Emin's unmade bed, with its abundant and provocative symbolism, was the star of the exhibition in Liverpool. In fact, the idea of this bed is bigger than the bed itself, and the bed, to be honest, was a lot smaller than I thought it would be. While it may have shocked audiences in the late 1990s, in Liverpool it evoked relief. It has become so familiar through reproductions and accounts of its history that seeing it in the flesh meant that I could finally tick this work of art off my list.
- 4 What happens to Blake when exhibited alongside Emin? My impression was that he was overshadowed, because, at

least during my visit at the end of August 2017, most of the gallery's visitors gathered around the bed and had only a few seconds for Blake. The exhibition consisted of three rooms, one red (room 1) and two dark blue (rooms 2 and 3).

### Room 1

5 As I entered I immediately came upon *My Bed*, first bought by Charles Saatchi and now on indefinite loan from the Duerckheim Collection. On a plinth and guarded by a member of staff, it attracted attention from all visitors, which is not something we could say about Blake. The bed, on a blue piece of carpet, stood out against the red of the walls as well as the Blakes. The suitcases were positioned to its left and a few meters away. The noose, normally hanging above, was wrapped as ropes around the cases, as it would probably have detracted attention from the bed. There was a lot of empty space surrounding the bed; room 1, the biggest of the three, created a very particular viewing experience, so that it was almost an effort to walk all the way to Blake.

6 The bed has been interpreted as a self-portrait and a private performance of a particularly traumatic time in Emin's life. She had had two abortions and her relationship with Billy Childish had failed. Her work is autobiographical and confessional, but we should accept that we know only what she tells us; there is (as in Blake) an element of myth-making. Emin has described herself as an anorexic, heavy-drinking woman—as a person living on the edge. In her autobiography, *Strangeland*, she writes: "When I was twenty, I went to Margate by train. I left my flat in Rochester, drunk and crying. ... I said, 'Goodbye' and threw myself off the harbour wall, fully clothed, the note in my pocket. I sank beneath the water and, like a cork, popped back up. The sea became my bed as I floated for a while, a tiny part of this great world and more alive than ever" (53-54). *My Bed* can also be interpreted as an ever-changing reflection on an experience; it exists in versions because Emin sets it up (as she did in Liverpool) differently each time—there is nothing spontaneous about it anymore. The suggestive rip in one of the pillows was not wear and tear, but a deliberate act of textile violence (for symbolism's sake, so I heard someone say next to me). The sheets are no longer soaked with fluids; they are



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still there—in the unwashed bedding—but the site of physical excess dried long ago. Thinking of the bodily fluids in terms of color and imprints of the body, we might—at a stretch of our imagination—associate them with Blake’s printing technique and three-pull production process employed with the large color prints in room 3. Perhaps including examples of Blake’s illuminated books and color printing was an attempt by Emin to historicize her work. There were Polaroid prints (very personal snapshots, depicting private moments in her life) on the bedside table, but, again, we can only imagine what they might show. The array of bottles (Vodka and Orangina, which, the guide told me, could only be had abroad in the 1990s) told something about Emin’s drinking habits. The Marlboro Lights (a woman’s cigarette) projected another self-image chosen by Emin: a toned-down version of the Marlboro Man. The guide, who was happy to share stories about the objects, said that one of the toys was a present from a lover from a visit to Prague. Except for the ashtray, which ironically dated the bed to a pre-e-cigarette age, most of the objects were everyday. The bed has a narrative, but it changed yet again, as we will see, in the context of the exhibition. Blake became part of the bed’s newly updated narrative, which engineered a historical framework. What did this narrative bring into focus?

- 7 Behind the bed were the seven engravings (c. 1826–27) from Blake’s illustrations to Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, reprinted in 1968 on Japanese paper. Each print is inscribed in pencil, “A restrike from the copper plate in my collection. August 1968 Lessing J. Rosenwald.” These prints, presented by Rosenwald to the Tate in 1975, are from the original plates in the Rosenwald Collection at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC. Blake had been commissioned by John Linnell in 1824 and worked intermittently on 102 watercolor illustrations until his death. He managed to engrave only seven plates, which remain unfinished. The choice to include them was a poignant gesture, as they evoke Blake’s visionary art as well as his death. In comparison with the watercolors, which make the figures transparent, the engravings, normally associated with determinate outlines, render the bodies equally intangible for those who know that work on them was not completed. Rather than the stories from Dante’s *Inferno*, these plates added loss of physical substance to the ideas projected by Emin’s empty bed.
- 8 To the right, on the walls leading to room 2, were *Pity* and *The Crucifixion: “Behold Thy Mother.”* *Pity*, to the left of the passage, was inspired by lines spoken by Macbeth before his murder of King Duncan (*Macbeth* act 1, scene 7).





Blake's response is both literal and visionary, because the face of the baby, held by the female figure on horseback above the prostrate figure at the bottom, bears a resemblance to Blake's adult profile. The title, moreover, gestures toward "The Divine Image" (*Songs of Innocence*), where pity gets associated with the human face ("For Mercy has a human heart / Pity, a human face," lines 9-10, E 12). Another connection is to the story in *The [First] Book of Urizen* ("Pity began, / In anguish dividing & dividing / For pity divides the soul," 13.51-53, E 77) and the figure of Enitharmon, the first female to be created ("They call'd her Pity, and fled," 19.1, E 78). Pity is a powerful and disruptive force in Blake's creation myth. However, in the context of the exhibition, the trail led not to the two plates from *Urizen* in room 2, but to the themes of death and dying. Hope was introduced through *The Crucifixion: "Behold Thy Mother,"* which triangulates the gazes of Jesus, Mary, and John. The title suggests an abstract notion of motherhood and the moment embodied in the painting relates to the emotion prevailing in the figures after Jesus has spoken those words. This emotion is not divisive pity but unconditional and all-embracing love. Jesus says that the relationship he has had with his mother should be extended to include another person.

## Room 2

- 9 Upon entering room 2 I saw Blake's *The Body of Abel Found by Adam and Eve* (c. 1826, Butlin #806) to the right and, to the left, *A Vision: The Inspiration of the Poet (Elisha in the Chamber on the Wall)* (c. 1819-20?, Butlin #756). The stark contrast between these works was accentuated by their positioning on either side of the passage. In *A Vision*, a delicate pencil and wash drawing that originates from the time of Blake's collaboration with John Varley, a seated figure appears to be writing what the standing figure to its right dictates. The drawing's rendering of space as a container of the visionary brought the careful nesting of an evolving narrative inside the exhibition space into focus. *The Body of Abel* shows Cain discovered by his parents as he is burying his brother. This highly charged emotional scene of despair and shock led to another, similar representation of death and dying, but this time a much more serene one. On the wall to the right was the pencil drawing *The Soul Hovering over the Body Reluctantly Parting with Life* (c. 1805, Butlin #625), from Blake's sketches for Robert H. Cromek's edition of *Blair's Grave* (1808). This image resonated with *Pity* from the previous room and reinforced the themes of death and dying, its prostrate figure serving as a reminder of Emin's bed.



10 Behind, on the walls of the passage from room 1, were *Satan Smiting Job with Sore Boils* (c. 1826, Butlin #807) and two *Urizen* plates from *A Small Book of Designs* copy B (1796, c. 1818): plate 15 shows Los giving birth to Enitharmon, who flows as a “globe of life blood” (18.1, E 78) out of Los’s head, and plate 21 shows how Urizen “explor’d his dens / ... With a globe of fire lighting his journey” (20.46, 48, E 81). The red globes in these plates, which were purchased by the Tate in 2009, resonated with the painting diagonally opposite, *The Body of Abel*. Because of the visual connections created in this exhibition, the stories of both works were decontextualized and thus the historical framing of *My Bed* continued. The combination magnified shock and horror (because Urizen is not happy with what he sees and nobody in *Urizen* is delighted to meet Enithar-

mon) rather than physical pain. This also applied to *Satan Smiting Job*, another image with a prostrate (male) figure. In this visionary representation of the cause of Job’s illness we see Satan precariously balanced on Job’s body. Because of the tempera’s proximity to *The Soul Hovering over the Body*, this scene turned into a death scene. In the context of the biblical story, this is the moment Job falls ill, but what we saw—in the context of the exhibition—was more than just a loss of good health. The small female figure (Job’s wife) crouching at Job’s feet reminded me of the figures in *Death of the Strong Wicked Man*, another of the sketches for Blair’s *Grave*. Room 2, perhaps the most powerful (at least for this reviewer), brought the experiences of death and dying into focus and thus challenged habitual interpretations of Blake’s works.



### Room 3

11 In room 3 were Emin’s six drawings (gouache on paper) from 2014, with the exit to the right. Their positioning on the back wall suggested that these posing nudes were the culmination of the exhibition: *All for You, I Could Feel You, Just Waiting, On Her Side, Stay Up, and Total Reverse*. The connecting theme is female sexuality; here the exhibition

came full circle because these bodies all too easily link back to *My Bed*. How did Blake fit in?

12 To the right, to either side of the exit, were the frontispiece to *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* from *A Large Book of Designs* copy B (c. 1795, Butlin #264) and the watercolor *The Death of the Virgin* (1803, Butlin #512). To the left were four of the large color prints: *Elohim Creating Adam* (1795–



c. 1805, Butlin #289), *Nebuchadnezzar* (1795–c. 1805, Butlin #301), *The Night of Enitharmon's Joy* (c. 1795, Butlin #316), and *The House of Death* (1795–c. 1805, Butlin #320). All these color prints, with the exception of *The Night of Enitharmon's Joy*, include horizontal figures. Room 3 ap-

peared to be a female space, and the figure in *Enitharmon's Joy* chimes with Emin's drawings, which means that the theme of sexuality was introduced to the viewing experience of this color print. Emin is a twin and she lost two children. Would she identify with this figure or connect



with the faceless youngsters behind it? In *Strangeland* we find: “As a baby, I tried to die a couple of times. My most successful attempt was suffocation by pressing my mouth against the side of a carrycot. But Paul saved me—saved me with his constant screaming. It seemed that he would always be there, looking out for me” (4). The experience Emin describes resonates, of course, with the frontispiece to *Visions* and the story of Oothoon, her rape, and her potential pregnancy (“Now thou maist marry Bromions harlot, and protect the child / Of Bromions rage, that Oothoon shall put forth in nine moons time” [2.1-2, E 46]). Emin writes: “When my mum was pregnant with me and Paul, people used to spit at her in the street and call her a nigger-lover. Friends tried to persuade her to have an abortion because she wasn’t married to our father. Even worse, there might be a throwback: we might come out black” (*Strangeland* 13). Alongside this strand of the exhibition’s narrative ran the absence of *Newton* (recalled through the rainbow in *The Death of the Virgin*), which alluded to a spiritual void—a feeling of emptiness that the exhibition had been toying with. Emin’s bed is empty, yet full of meaning.

- 13 In this exhibition, Blake’s works stood in for the absent presence of Emin. A board in room 3 finally gave information about Blake and a timeline. The last point, the text below the year 1827, was particularly relevant: “Blake falls ill. On his deathbed he draws a picture of Catherine, his loyal wife and artistic assistant. He dies on 12 August at the age of sixty-nine and is buried in an unmarked grave in the dissenters’ graveyard at Bunhill Fields, London.” This passage, read within the context of the exhibition, brought to mind Frederic Shields’s *Blake’s Work-Room and Death-Room*. The drawing depicts Blake’s bed in the room he worked and died in; like Emin’s, Blake’s bed is empty. The bed in Shields’s drawing is the artist’s imagining. This association helps to counterpoint the idea that Emin’s *My Bed* is her real bed, a bed that she left not so long ago—at least this was public opinion in the late 1990s, when the bed was exhibited at Tate Britain. Talking about the relations of male and female figures in paintings, John Berger writes that “the social presence of a woman is different in kind from that of a man. A man’s presence is dependent upon the promise of power which he embodies. If the promise is large and credible his presence is striking. If it is small or incredible, he is found to have little presence” (45). Blake’s presence in this exhibition was enormous, even though most visitors appeared to ignore him. In reverse, Emin brought out Blake’s preoccupation with death and dying. The potential for narrative intervention was huge, and the Tate did well to have guided tours, one of which I was lucky enough to join on the day I visited. The objects in the exhibition were powerful, but their stories needed to be told.

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- Tate Liverpool. “Join us for Tracey Emin and William Blake In Focus and discover surprising links between the two artists.” <<http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-liverpool/exhibition/tracey-emin-and-william-blake-focus>>.