

# Artist Tracey Emin lifts the curtain on first Sydney public artwork



By [Linda Morris](#)

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British artist Tracey Emin understands why public art can polarise opinion: much of it is over designed, commercial and downright “weird”.

“It's not art,” Emin said. “It's not got emotional and spiritual content. It's like a big decorative, strange object whereas I'm talking about something that has a spiritual purpose to make us feel better, which is important in the times we are living in. We need things to make us stop and slow down in our day.”

Sixty-seven delicate handmade bronze birds created by Emin to warm the hearts of Sydneysiders are being placed this month on awnings, streetlights and above doorways along Bridge and Grosvenor Streets' sandstone buildings - the latest in a series of public artworks to be unveiled by the City of Sydney Council.



Tracey Emin's bronze birds *CREDIT: LOUISE KENNERLEY*

An almost one-kilometre-long bird trail ends in a birdbath in Macquarie Place Park, adorned with a solitary bird and inscribed with the work's title, *The Distance of Your Heart*.

The final location was chosen by the artist because it is the site of Francis Greenway's *Obelisk of Distances* from which distances along the colony's earliest roads were first measured, and because it is an Indigenous sacred place. "It's saying I miss you," Emin said. "I love you, you are distant from me." Homesickness characterised Emin's first visit to Sydney in January 2003 for an exhibition of her work at the Art Gallery of NSW and she has been a frequent visitor ever since.

"I was supposed to come here for ten days but I ended up staying two and a half months," Emin said. "It was a combination of different things. I was supposed to have come with my boyfriend but he split up with me just before. So I came on my own. My boyfriend said he wanted to have some distance and I thought, 'Australia, yeah, a lot of distance'."

Emin was selected from 700 artists who pitched for a \$9.3 million public art initiative, intended to bring art into the lives of Sydneysiders and revitalise the city's pedestrian spaces. Two other stand-alone works - a blue pavilion designed as an upturned milk crate in Belmore Park and Junya Ishigami's Cloud Arch - will be installed before the light rail line is opened.

Project curator, Barbara Flynn, regards Emin as a fearless artist. "Her work for Sydney is extraordinary for the way it combines emotion with thought, providing richness for both heart and mind."



Emin has made more than 60 bronze birds sculptures and dotted them down Bridge and Grosvenor streets

While the remodeled *Cloud Arch* stirred controversy around its \$11.3 million price tag, Emin's birds have come in on time and on budget at \$912,000. "It seems like a lot of money for this project, but, Christ, there's all these hidden things which you don't see in a public project, from health and safety, cherry pickers, to fixings and engineering," Emin said. "You think it's just a little bird but it's two tonnes of bronze for the birds."

The project has taken four years to complete, including an entire year to secure permissions from building owners. Most were enthusiastic but Emin was "hurt" she was unable to place one bird in a church garden.

"I thought, 'What's the harm in a bird?' Why would anyone be aggressive to a bird? What's wrong with the association of the bird? I've got a bank, I've got a bus stop and all these places. It would have been lovely to have them accepted by some kind of spiritual religious organisation."

Awarded a CBE for her contribution to the visual arts in 2012, Emin burst onto the London art scene in the 1990s with a pitched tent stitched with the names of all those she had shared a bed with. Her 1998 installation *My Bed*, inspired by a depressive episode during a relationship break-up, was exhibited at the Tate Gallery and shortlisted for the Turner Prize.

"People think my work is all about sex," Emin said. "It is, when it is about sex, but when it's not about sex it's about other things. Sex sells a headline but beautiful birds are something poetic - what are people going to say about that?"

Emin's expressive and conceptual works span painting, drawing, video, photography, sculpture, neon text and sewn appliqué. Often labeled as autobiographical or confessional because of the intimate subject matter, Emin prefers to define the nature of her creative expression as emotional and spiritual.

"Why has emotion got to be confessional? No one called Van Gogh and Edvard Munch confessional artists. People don't say Picasso's works are all about sex, do they?"

In Sydney during the Biennale of Sydney, where Ai Weiwei's monumental artwork *Law of the Journey* - an inflatable boat packed with refugees is on public exhibition at Cockatoo Island - Emin says Ai conveys a clear political message but wonders if it is art.

"I don't know if he is so much as an artist anymore as a protagonist who is like a spike into the consciousness of government and countries."

After the unveiling of Emin's work by Lord Mayor Clover Moore on Wednesday, Emin flies back to London via Hong Kong to launch a vast LED light work at St Pancras Station before flying out again to Dallas where she will be honoured by the MTV Staying Alive Foundation.



Tracey Emin sits on her iconic art installation, My Bed, which was short-listed for the 1999 Turner Prize. *CREDIT: AFP*

Home for Emin is a comfy couch in London with her elderly cat, Docket. The death of her mother 18 months ago, "altered everything". Legacy matters and Emin hopes her Sydney birds will outlive her.

"If someone had said 20 years ago I'd be sitting in the Mayor's parlour and you'd had done this project with nearly 70 birds . . . it sounds like a dream, almost surreal," she said. "I've done big shows, I've done this and I've done that; Venice [Biennale], I've represented Britain. All these things are not as big as this because this is not about me and not for some collector who bought it or some museum who thought it was good."