



Joseph Connolly

A monthly diary of sundry observations, brief encounters and anecdotes, local and less so, foodie and otherwise

Don't believe your own hype

I used to fairly often bump into Tracey Emin, but this was before she went mad. Ten to fifteen years ago, she knocked around Soho a lot, as did I – Groucho Club, mostly – and in those days she always struck me as rather happy-go-lucky, grinning her lopsided grin, generally smashed and apparently having a whale of a time. Damien Hirst used to be around as well, making Tracey look sober. I think in those days that neither of them could believe their luck – youngish artists, lionised, making a hell of a lot of money, and feted in all the best places. Damien then got wise to the true earning potential of his position: he already had a warehouse full of ‘assistants’ (i.e. the people who actually painted the dots with templates and household emulsion, spun the circular canvases and assembled the butterfly montages) but now he decided to bypass dealers and exhibitions altogether and flog his wares directly to the inexplicably endless queue of wide-eyed, well-heeled and gullible punters at auction.

This either amuses you, or it doesn't. For Tracey, though, things were worse: she came to believe her own publicity. She was, she decided, a fine and highly important artist, and consequently began to take herself very seriously indeed. And with the world clamouring for her work and the recent appointment to Professor of Drawing at the Royal Academy, who could blame her? Have you ever seen her drawings ...? Woeiful. Almost wilfully and



Tracey Emin launches her pop up shop Emin International and signs copies of her book *My Life In A Column*, at Selfridges in London.

Picture: IAN WEST

comically inept – spiky little doodles, usually subtitled with some or other pretentious and utterly meaningless slogan. Her

illuminated ‘sculptures’ are generally a hastily scrawled statement or obscenity, lovingly translated into neon by someone

quite clever, so that they may be sold for hundreds of thousands.

I was reminded of dear Tracey and her tenure at the RA when I went there recently for two exhibitions – *Painting the Garden: Monet to Matisse*, and *The Age of Giorgione*. Both very fine ... and I got to wondering what Monet, Matisse and Giorgione (not to mention Titian) might make of our Tracey. And then I further got to wondering what the 52 year-old Professor of Drawing might be up to these days. Well apart from overseeing a major exhibition in Japan, she has been getting married. Not to a man, not to a woman – not even to someone indefinable, stranded amid the seemingly endless expanse of ocean that is gender fluidity. No – she married a rock. There was a formal ceremony for her to be joined in blessed matrimony to an ancient stone (no Bill Wyman jokes, please). Now a lot of brides fuss about what to wear on their wedding day, and Tracey was no exception, insisting on donning her father's funeral shroud ... which begs all sorts of questions, but never mind. The stone is on a hill next to the sea in France ... though sometimes she says it's in her garden. Maybe there are two: a bigamous relationship between a rock and a hard place. Can the union be expected to bear pebbles? Who can say. Speaking of her marriage, Tracey says ‘some people might think it sounds sad’. And then again, other people might think it sounds just about as mad as a sackful of hysterical baboons.

Many share fond memories of the Flask

I gave up running the Flask Bookshop in Flask Walk more than twenty-five years ago but people still occasionally come up to me in the Village with tales of fond nostalgia, which can only be heartwarming. It is chiefly the memory of the smell that they savour – that inimitable and deeply comforting odour of old books and bindings, augmented by my pipe tobacco (and I haven't smoked a pipe since I left the place): Gold Block, Balkan Sobranie, Dunhill Royal Yacht ... and customers used to constantly smoke fags, of course – it's amazing in retrospect that the whole building didn't end up as cinders. Tourists in particular would walk through the door, inhale appreciatively and say ‘Ah! What a wonderful smell! I love the smell of old bookshops! I could stay here all day!’ Then they left, having failed to actually buy a book, or anything.

But now that ‘inimitable’ smell is yours for the taking. Karl Lagerfeld has a scent called ‘Paper Passion’ – while Demeter, a US perfumery, offers ‘Paperback’ and from elsewhere comes ‘Library’: ‘a whisper of the frayed cloth and the wisp of wood polish from the shelves’, is what they say. Less alluring might be their ‘Dead Writers Perfume’ ... because I harbour the dark suspicion that dead writers might smell quite as bad as dead anyone else



General View of ‘The Dorchester’ in central London.

Picture: Hannah McKay

Work your way through the wine...

One of those RA exhibitions I went to was on a Sunday ... so a proper traditional lunch was required. Actually, on a Sunday, it's quite difficult in a restaurant not to get a roast – but very few indeed do them during the week (Wiltons being an honourable exception: Wednesday is the day for sirloin from the silver-domed trolley). We ended up at the Dorchester Grill. Do you remember the Dorchester Grill in its heyday? Yes well – it's not like that at all any more, matey. It looks like a glitzy café in an American Hilton, with young and puppy-dog eager staff who keep on saying ‘did you enjoy?’ both before and after you have eaten anything. The only reasonably good three course lunch is £48, which of course is too much ...

but here's a tip: for £20 extra, they give you unlimited wine ...! I know. Very good quality sparkling, white and red that just keeps on coming, baby ...! Someone clever and passingly dipsomaniacal could easily work their way through a hundred quidsworth (and I did my modest best).

The Wetherspoon chain caused great commotion and woe recently by discontinuing their much feted Sunday roasts ... but although extraordinarily cheap, they weren't really that good. If you are in Hampstead on a Sunday, your best bet is to put aside all thoughts of a roast and head to the Wells Tavern. There, for a paltry £10.95, you can enjoy a truly good burger with salad and proper chips. Have a bit of grog, and wander in a

The health benefits of a good book...

And talking of books, it is now official, apparently, that reading staves off dementia. I'll just run that by you again just in case you didn't take it in the first time: reading staves off dementia. I meant to put this in my last column, actually, but it completely slipped my mind.

Joseph Connolly's latest novel *STYLE* is now out in paperback (Quercus £8.99). www.josephconnolly.co.uk