

Interview with artist Annette Messenger

By Jane Ure-Smith (November 11, 2016)



Annette Messenger pictured in her studio in Paris © Samuel Kirszenbaum

“I wanted to do something quiet,” Annette Messenger explains, as she talks me through the new works on the walls of her Paris studio. Raised fists, cascading menstrual blood and exploding uteruses may not be everyone’s idea of quiet, but the artist is not referring to the content. “I did a lot of installations,” she continues. “So I wanted to work with just my hands and just paper.”

Next month, this latest body of work from the French artist — acrylic drawings and small wall sculptures wrapped in black tin foil — will go on show (likely title: *A mon seul désir*) at a second space Marian Goodman Gallery is expanding into in Paris.

Femen, the Ukrainian feminist group now based in Paris, provided the initial inspiration for the new works. Back in April, images of Femen demonstrating, their bare breasts emblazoned with slogans, sparked memories of drawings-with-writing Messenger had done in the past — and it wasn’t long before the first work, “Je suis mon propre prophète” (“I am my own prophet”), appeared. “They are very brave, a new kind of feminist, proud to be women and beautiful,” Messenger says of the group.

A second drawing was prompted by a newspaper image of Femen’s intervention at a controversial conference on the role of Muslim women held last year near Paris. Fist raised, the woman proudly bears the message “Personne ne me soumet” (“No one subjugates me”) while a fundamentalist cleric covers stunned in the background.

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As a teenager, Messenger became religious in opposition to her parents' atheism, but it didn't last long. Here, a drawing hailing the 343 prominent French women who in 1971 fought to decriminalize abortion by publicly admitting to having had one, suggests she is no fan of the Catholic church. In fact, like Femen, Messenger is no fan of religion of any type. Peer closely at the assemblage of a bust of Christ in a ballet pump, Barbie legs and the words "No God in my vagina" and you realise she's making the same point in a witty way. Messenger wades into dark waters, but her sense of humour is never far away.

Born in Berck, northern France, Messenger, 72, attended L'École des Arts Décoratifs in Paris in the 1960s when minimalism was fast becoming the orthodoxy. It wasn't, as she puts it, her "cup of tea". She recalls a boozy evening when an older male friend — a famous French artist — warned her that she would never become well-known if she made art in many different styles. To succeed "you have always to do the same and the same and the same", he told her. "I always wanted to mix together photographs, drawings, embroidery, collage, because I think we don't have one identity but a lot of identities. So I said: 'Non, I will do exactly the opposite!'"

Her friend's warning prompted her to assume multiple identities, making work as Annette Messenger, collector; Annette Messenger, artist; Annette Messenger, practical woman ("I'm not!"); Annette Messenger, trickster and more. Different personas still emerge today.

"It was not accepted at that time, especially in France. I had my first large show in Munich in 1973. Germany was more open for women."

The 1990s were a turning point: Messenger's work has become larger in scale and more outward-looking. She immerses us in surreal installations populated with characters from fairy tales and other (often English) children's fiction — "I like Harry Potter and Winnie the Pooh. I'm a very old child!" — and dolls, puppets, soft toys and stuffed animals, many of them wounded, cut up or dangling helplessly in mid air.



'Je suis mon propre prophète' (2016) © Studio Annette Messenger

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It's a way of talking about a world that she finds increasingly strange. "It's not necessary for an artist to have imagination; every day, surreal things happen." What surprises her? "The political situation, the strange regression in Europe, in Britain — nobody could believe Brexit, Donald Trump. I don't dream in the night, but in the day."

Is she more pessimistic today than in the 1990s, when, for instance, *Les Piques*, a series evoking the Terror of the French Revolution arguably took her work in a darker direction? "I am not pessimistic about France, but about Europe," she says. "It's a bad time for Europe when every country wants to cut itself off from the other. I always said I am not French, I am European. We have a chance to be European. You have Italy, Spain, England, all very different and so near. I love that. *C'est très riche.*"

Over the summer, Messenger's current drawing series gained momentum, going beyond ideas inspired by Femen to works that deconstruct what it is to be a woman: deliciously melon-like breasts bob across the ocean; blood showers from vaginas, accompanied by the French/English colloquialisms (*my poppies*, *my Bloody Mary*) used to describe it. "For me, to do drawings is like writing haikus," she says. "You must do it very quickly, with a lot of water, *très rapide ...* and if it's not good ... *pshhh, pshhh*" — she makes a gesture of ripping paper — "because you can't change something. *C'est fini!*"

The wall-mounted assemblages in her forthcoming show are made from bits and pieces sourced from the internet. "You can buy a lot of stupid things!" she laughs, as she points out *Pinocchio* (a recurring presence in her work) *Barbie*, Rodin's "The Kiss" and "Marriage for All", two same-sex couples [one male couple, one female] having sex. Messenger was intrigued that she could find plenty of gay men making out, but no lesbian lovers — so she altered the little ready-mades accordingly.

In 2005, a story of *Pinocchio*, told through a billowing red installation, won Messenger a Golden Lion for the best national pavilion at the Venice Biennale. The Japan Art Association has just awarded her its *Praemium Imperiale* prize for sculpture. From Mexico City to Sydney to Beirut, Messenger is in demand. But she remembers the days when her art teachers told her that her work was as good as a man's. "The first time, I was happy," she says. "The second time I was ... *qu'est-ce que il dit?*"

Above all, Messenger is proud that she's always made the art that she wants. "No gallery has ever asked me to do this or that because it will sell. I see people who are unhappy with their work and I feel privileged to be totally free." She pauses. "Maybe it's because I'm a woman — an outsider."