

# ARTFORUM

## Annette Messenger: *Messages from a burning world*

As told to Sarah Moroz

(May 13, 2022)



Annette Messenger, *Daily* (detail), 2015–16, mixed media, dimensions variable.

Throughout a formidable career that spans six decades, Annette Messenger has reconceived everything—down puffers, bras, stuffed animals—into ambivalent emblems of collective dysfunction and desire. In her atelier in Malakoff, just south of the Paris perimeter, she toils between the playful and the macabre, between parody and critique, mining personal obsessions and slyly veering into social transgression. Below, the artist—whose latest show, “Comme si” (As If), runs from May 11 to August 21 at the Lille Métropole Musée d’Art Moderne (LaM) in France—discusses coping with angst, the pitfalls of memory, and art-world opportunism.

**THE EXHIBITION INCLUDES** very recent works that I haven’t shown before. Many are drawings. I did a piece on Jeanne d’Arc, who has fascinated me since I was a little girl. Watching her burn made me very, very scared then. She’s the first feminist, maybe. I did drawings of her burning and wrote out sentences—simple but beautiful—from her trial. When she was asked if she heard voices, she replied, “*J’ai eu la volonté de le croire*” [I had the will to believe so]. When you’re an artist, it’s kind of like that: You have to force yourself to believe.

The museum already had my toy animal work *Faire des cartes de France* (Making Maps of France), 2000, in its collection. It’s an *art brut* museum, and while I didn’t take inspiration from their collection specifically, I love *brut* artists like André Robillard, who makes work from shotguns and canned goods, and Aloïse Corbaz, who was always seeking her prince charming and drawing herself with this so-called prince. So much imagination.

I made a work with keys, telephones, handbags, scissors, things like that, scaled excessively large and in black. If we lose our keys or our phone, it's dramatic. There are big stories, and then there are smaller stories—our stories—which are also important. The two have nothing to do with one another, but we're involved in both.

I'm also presenting *La Revanche des Animaux* (The revenge of the animals, 2019–21): bits of destroyed, blackened city on the ground—the Centre Pompidou is broken, as well as the Eiffel Tower and Notre-Dame de Paris—invaded by toy animal heads. And against the wall, there are drawings of animals. They're kind of random, a little mystical, a black-and-white delirium on paper. In the museum entryway there are new sound pieces, my voice whispering words like an echo: “*comme si, comme si, comme si . . .*” Repeating a word makes it nonsensical, like religious liturgy or a prayer. In the stairway, I created a pretty wallpaper composed of little drawings. They look like flowers, but they're uteruses.



Annette Messager, *L'Utérus doigt d'honneur* (The middle finger uterus), 2021, mixed media, fabrics and acrylic, 23 x 30 x 4".

Times are increasingly troubled: viruses, war. The recent French elections terrified everybody. I'm alone today [Messenger's partner of some fifty years, artist Christian Boltanski, died in July 2021]. It's not an optimistic time. But we make do. That's the way it is. We have to make light of it. The world is a comic tragedy—it's very grotesque. My “Tête-à-tête” (Face to Face) series are *vanitas*, skulls that make fun of death, distance it, appropriate it. We have to appropriate the dramas that surround us and, in a way, befriend them. It works, more or less. [Laughs] There are days it works, when the sun is out. Let's say it will work. From all the misfortunes, you have to do something and not just endure it.

Once, I went to see an exhibition of mine and told myself: *I'm going to look at it as if the work wasn't mine*. There was someone in front of me, and he turned around and said, *Can't you see you're in the way?* [Laughs] And he was right, I had no right to be there. Seeing older work is always a little hard—there's always a discrepancy: *I was like this during this period, but I'm not like that anymore*. All my identities join together. I'm an overgrown child and an old lady at once. Of course, we each have a background, but you have to clear out the past.

It was quite hard when I started, as a woman in France. There weren't many women artists who were recognized in the history of art. And textiles and embroidery and a kind of female sensibility: These weren't given any consideration. But I wanted to show what was in a house—and show that these were also *materiaux nobles*, as much as bronze and oil paints. This was considered *un travail de fi-fille*: “girly” work. Everything is about feminism now though; it annoys me. If you asked me if I was a feminist twenty years ago, and I said yes, I'd be looked at askance and told I was old-fashioned. Today, it's feminism at every opportunity. Maybe it's a necessary path. But I just want to be exhibited with good artists, of any genre. I don't care which.