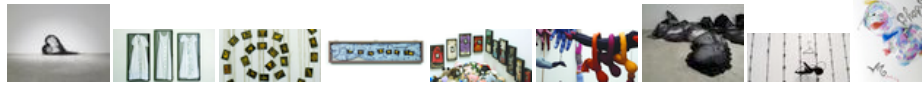


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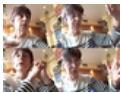
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- Davis Langlois
- Christopher Davison

'rak'rüm (noun);  
the back room of an art gallery  
where artists and art lovers hang

## Annette Messenger



Annette Messenger,  
*Et range ta chambre [And tidy your bedroom],*  
2007-2009  
© Galerie Marian Goodman

Annette Messenger studied at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs, Paris. She won first prize in the Kodak Photography International competition in 1964. In 1995 the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and New York's Museum of Modern Art co-organized her first major American retrospective. She has had solo exhibitions at the Museo de Arte Moderno in Buenos Aires (1999) and the Musée...[\[more\]](#)



## Interview with Annette Messenger

**Paris, Aug. 2011** - The day I caught up with Madame Messenger at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts de Paris, it had been a while since I'd seen her last, and I mistook another person for her. I quickly realized my error, because the artist is such an integral part of the school she taught at until recently that every few feet she's stopped by someone who wants to know what she's up to, students and professors alike.

Just back from Mexico, Ms. Messenger has concluded a solo exhibition tour that included three major cities. I wanted to find out more about her Mexican year, especially in the wake of the cancellation of *l'Année du Mexique* (Mexican Year) here in France after a rather disastrous example of international relations gone wrong. We settled into a quiet corner in a café nearby Rue Bonaparte for a conversation about solo exhibitions, traveling in Mexico, getting hit on by art critics, and one particularly dangerous topic — women who are artists.



Two Mexican Saints, video still; Courtesy Annette Messenger

**Cynthia G. Valdez:** So you just wrapped up a big tour...

**Annette Messenger:** Yes, we could start with my Mexican year because 2010-2011 was my Mexican

museum year: Monterrey, Puebla and Mexico City. Three very different places, from an institutional point of view. With each venue it was necessary to work with the space, the floor plan, to go in advance to see the place, even though, personally I like to have the possibility to change things afterward, even if I've worked everything out in advance. In Mexico City I changed things around because of a piece from Los Angeles that didn't make it to the show [one in the series *My Trophies*].

**CGV:** *That's an important piece, because it depicts your hometown. You're talking about the one with the pair of feet, and the sailboats...*

**AM:** Yes, that piece shows the seaside, very near to where I was born -- I used to go there with my father -- and then there's the other side, the other foot, which is more phantasmagoric. There's a fetus in a spiral.. well all that went back to Los Angeles! I was born in Berck-sur-mer.



Annette Messenger, *My Trophies*, 1987, Photograph, Acrylic, charcoal, and pastel on gelatin-silver print, 81 1/8 x 67 in.; Courtesy Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

**CGV:** *That piece must bring back a lot of memories for you?*

**AM:** It evokes different memories, dreams, a mixture of things. It's never a specific memory, never a kind of autobiography in my case. My work is a fake autobiography; a kind of mixed-up identity, mixed-up like I did with the different Annette Messagers: the collector, the artist, the handywoman, etc.

**CGV:** *In what way does a missing piece, a piece that doesn't make it to the show, perturb things?*

**AM:** Well I was perturbed because I had planned on putting that piece in the biggest exhibition space, [in Mexico City], on a very large wall, along with the other pieces, at different heights, and well it just wasn't possible anymore. So I changed things around: I installed *The Lines of the Hand* there instead, and in another, smaller space, where I'd planned on putting something else, I installed *My Trophies*, so it was okay, but at first I was thinking, "Ohlala what am I going to do?"

**CGV:** *But it worked out, precisely because you made sure that you were around to adapt and change things if necessary.*

**AM:** In my case, it seems absolutely necessary, especially because of the kind of work that I do. It's sort of like, for example, with music, you have partitions, but the partition can be played differently. With paintings, paintings are more autonomous than say, *The Lines of the Hand*, [an installation piece that involves writing on the wall]. In that case, if you have an air conditioning duct on the wall, on the floor plans you don't have those kinds of indications, obviously. There are always surprises, and generally they're bad. But it's okay, you have to be able to adapt to the situation, as well.

- Christopher Dawson
- Petr Davydtchenko
- Iole de Freitas
- Nick De Pirro
- Georganne Deen
- Jen DeNike
- Malaka Dewapriya
- Rodney Dickson
- Dino Dinco
- Jim Dine
- Lecia Dole-Recio
- Daniel Dove
- Zhivago Duncan
- Mark Dutcher
- Jack Early
- Stefan Eins
- Gregory Euclide
- Franklin Evans
- Cécile B. Evans
- Erica Eyres
- Shepard Fairey
- Harun Farocki
- Tony Feher
- eliza fernand
- Joshua Field
- Broken Fingaz
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- Nicola Bergström
- Hansen
- Margaret Harrison
- Kate Hawkins
- Iris Häussler



Annette Messenger, *Articulado-desarticulado*, 2001-2002 (detalle) Titeres automatizados, cuerdas, poleas, motores, madera, cables, computadora, software, tela, lámparas; Courtesy San Ildefonso, Mexico City.

**CGV: Do you know of any other artists that do what you do, which is to go personally to each international venue to install a show?**

**AM:** Well, you have to take into consideration that *Annette Messenger* [the solo exhibition that toured Mexico] was a big show, not really a retrospective, because it doesn't start in the 70s, if not in the 80s, but nonetheless a big show. For a group exhibition I don't go, or in that case I'll send someone, but for Mexico, there were three large spaces involved, with Mexico City being the largest. What I liked about Puebla was that it was so intimate. Anyway, I really do think it was necessary to go; it's part of the job to go. Last year was just too much, because in that case I did Poland, Russia and then Monterrey, in Mexico, all of which were big, work-intensive shows.

For me, it's really important to take the time to stay at home and work. At the same time, however, when you're traveling, it's good to distance oneself from work in progress. Oftentimes, in the evenings, [while traveling] I work, I write a bit. If I'm at home I start writing emails, I pay the bills, I do the laundry, I cook. When I'm traveling for a show I'm more relaxed, I write a few emails but not many; I can concentrate, and also I get to review my old work, as well. I always try to approach things from a fresh perspective and that allows me to develop new ideas. But you have to be careful not to burn out, as well.

**CGV: After the big expedition that was Mexico... Can you sum things up a bit for me?**

**AM:** I think it's worth mentioning that my work has been greatly influenced by Mexico. By the way, I've been there seven or eight times. But the first time, I was just astounded by the churches there. In Puebla I think there are around 300! I didn't go to all 300, of course... In Mexico City, there's a church right next to San Ildefonso [the Mexico City venue], and there are all these saints up on top, on these kinds of shelves, with real clothing. But the clothes are so old! And just coated with dust, it was like a layer of marble, all in the folds; you could almost feel the thickness of so much dust.

[In Mexico] there's just so much accumulation of gold, of baroque, all kinds of combinations. And then there's what's known as *milagros*, or *ex-votos*, the little body parts; all of that is very, very dear to me. In my work I focus more on the body parts of lovers, but it's still feet and hands like in the churches you see everywhere in Mexico. I've always felt very akin to Mexico -- ok, so maybe not so much in regards to the food; I have a hard time with all the spicy food. But it's just such a visual country, which is to say that there's just so much to look at, all the time, everywhere. Posters, people, different communities. Visually it's just overwhelming; sometimes it's just too much, and you have to stop. The colors, the smells, the markets, everything. The religious iconography. There's this street in Mexico City, near the cathedral, and it's just filled with nothing but plaster religious icons! By the way, I bought one, a little baby Jesus-doctor; I'd never seen that one before! I put it right next to my bed, and before I knew it I was sick. The Lord's vengeance!



Annette Messenger, *Historia de las pequeñas efigies*, 1990-1995 Animales de peluche, ropa enmarcada, fotografías blanco y negro de dibujos; Courtesy San

- ms Trausser
- Julie Heffernan
- Pablo Helguera
- Jeremy Hight
- Desiree Holman
- Guo Hongwei
- Scarlett Hooft Graafland
- Marc Horowitz
- Paul Housley
- Hudson
- Hush
- INSA
- Invader
- Pooja Iranna
- Alex Israel
- Alfredo Jaar
- Matthew Day Jackson
- Malia Jensen
- Koo Jeong-A
- Theodora Varnay Jones
- Parker Jones
- Hayv Kahraman
- Tillman Kaiser
- Emil Karila
- Kathy Kelley
- Kristi Kent
- Laleh Khorramian
- Felix Kiessling
- Lee Kit
- Aukje Koks
- Jeff Koons
- Tamara Kostianovsky
- Anouk Kruithof
- Sojung Kwon
- David LaChapelle
- Deborah Lader
- Nicolas Lampert
- Jason Lazarus
- Christine Lee
- David Leggett
- Matt Leines
- Tomas Lemarquis
- Laura Letinsky
- Louise Lincoln
- Angela Liosi
- littlewhitehead
- Jake Longstreth
- Sarah Maple
- Ari Marcopoulos
- Renzo Martens
- Servane Mary
- Eric May
- Aspen Mays
- Heather McGill
- Jeff McLane
- Steve McQueen
- Preemptive Media
- Diego Medina
- Saul Melman
- Feng Mengbo
- Mathieu Mercier
- Christopher Lawrence
- Mercier
- Jazz-minh Moore
- Justin Mortimer
- Yoshitomo Nara
- Neighborhood Public
- Radio
- Dona Nelson
- Daniel Nevers
- Camilla Newhagen
- Kristina Newhouse
- Kori Newkirk



**CGV: So I'm curious about something, tell me what you think about the term "woman artist?"**

**AM:** A very dangerous topic! It's as if you pointed out to a Jewish person that he or she is a Jew. If the Jewish person points it out it's alright, they're okay with it, but if you say to them, "You are a Jew," they're going to say, "What are you trying to say?" It's such a tricky subject. Personally I don't think that women should be segregated any more than I think men should be. In fact, there have been masculine ghettos, for quite a number of years; there were nothing but male artists in all of the exhibitions, and no one ever noticed! Nowadays, I don't think that it's right to create feminine ghettos either. That being said, I think that women have contributed so much to art, and continue to do so. Also, artists such as Félix Gonzalez-Torres, who have used what I consider to be feminine materials. I really think that since the end of the 60s, and continuing on into the 70s, so many inroads have been made in feminine art. But, you have to be very careful when using these terms! Be wary of shows about Women Artists. By the way, the Centre Pompidou did a really huge one last year, where they showed their collection of art made by women. I was very worried about how that show was going to turn out, which ended up being very interesting. What I noticed was that women in the 70s were making very violent art; it was very brutal. But then, women had a lot to be angry about.

Granted, I'm personally not into making claims like, "We women should not be doing this or that." On the contrary, I immersed myself in the feminine. I was using household materials to create art, because the home is also the woman. I used fabrics, cushions, soft materials, embroidery. But I was enunciating, I wasn't opposing myself to anything. I feel that in France, it just wasn't possible the way it was in the United States to stand up for something. In Europe, we have such a long history of art that's just so present, that goes back so far... When I first started out back in the beginning of the 1970s, because I was a young woman, everyone was always telling me, "But don't you want to have children? You *are* going to have children, one of these days..." And I noticed that no one ever asked a man the same question, which I thought was very strange. After all, to have children men need to be involved as well! So people were always making these kinds of comments, "You want to be an artist, and yet, you're a woman!" Well, for me that wasn't a problem, but for everyone else here in France, it seemed there was a problem. You see, I was raised the same way my brother was; my father painted, he was an architect, there were always crayons around for us.



Annette Messager, *Historia de los vestidos*, 1990. Vestido, acuarelas bajo cristal; Courtesy San Ildefonso, Mexico City.

There's a story I like to tell, and it's about the day that I decided to become an artist, a professional artist, not just continue to do a little painting now and then, but to make a living out of it, you know? So I said to myself, "Here's the thing: staying at home and painting is great, but that doesn't make you an artist." Unfortunately, there's a lot more to it than that; you've got to show your work to people, you've got to be able to talk about it. So, in a gallery, not far from here (near the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris), there was an opening for an artist whose work I really liked. I didn't know him, I only knew there was going to be an opening. So I said to myself, "Okay, you're going to go to this opening. You're going to talk to the artist, you're going to look at the paintings, you're going to tell him that you like his work. And you're going to get yourself invited to dinner afterward." It's very difficult to say anything of intelligence to an artist at an opening! What do you say? "Oh, it's very beautiful!"

So I go to the opening, and of course, people are talking to the artist, a bunch of blah-blah, so of course I had no idea what I was going to say, there I am, looking at the paintings. I liked them, so there was no need to force myself, and well, in the end he said, "Would you like to stay for dinner after the opening?"

I still remember that dinner very clearly, it seemed like the most wonderful dinner in the world! There were art critics, and everyone was really nice, the conversation was flowing, and I sat down right next to this art critic, who was quite well-known at the time, I think he's still alive. So he says to me, "And you Miss, what do you?" So I say, "Well I'm an artist, and, by the way, if you're interested you can come and see my work." So he says to me, "Sleep with you, sure. Look at your work, never!"

That sobered me up on the spot, but I said to myself, "Actually I'm really glad that he told me that." Because it brought me to the realization that in the art world, in France, I was going to have to watch out for things like that. In a way, he did me a favor.

- RON NEWARK
- David Nicholson
- Rachel Niffenegger
- Ray CRO Noland
- Niall O'Brien
- Alice O'Malley
- Michele O'Marah
- Kevin O'Neill
- Ruben Ochoa
- David Ostrowski
- Angel Otero
- Kamau Patton
- Princess Pea
- Lorraine Peltz
- Anne Percoco
- Joshua Petker
- Raymond Pettibon
- Richard Pettibone
- Philosophy of Time
- Travel
- Max Presneill
- Wilfredo Prieto
- Ged Quinn
- KChung Radio
- Sumedh Rajendran
- Joe Ray
- Sameer Reddy
- Davis Rhodes
- Samuel Richardot
- Ben Rivers
- Ry Rocklen
- Steve Roden
- Lisa Ross
- Casey Ruble
- Paul Russo
- Will Ryman
- Georgia Sagri
- Dean Sameshima
- T.V. Santhosh
- Nadja Sayej
- Melanie Schiff
- Mithu Sen
- Raphaela Shirley
- Yinka Shonibare
- Lisa Sigal
- Clay Sinclair
- Michael Smoler (High Energy Constructs)
- Deb Sokolow
- Joe Sola
- Madeline Stillwell
- Matt Stolle
- Go Sugimoto
- Benjamin Swaim
- Ryan Taber
- Tony Tasset
- Jan Tichy
- Bruce Tomb
- Anthony Torres
- Tam Tran
- Emilie Trice
- Mierle Laderman Ukeles
- Brian Ulrich
- Phoebe Unwin
- Guido van der Werve
- Sarah van Sonsbeeck
- Bestué Vives
- Maria von Kohler
- Jessica Voorsanger
- Awst & Walther
- Asim Waqif
- Zhang Wei
- Heidi Wood

**CGV:** *That's right, it's as if he were cluing you in on the temperature of the art world at the time. But wasn't it a difficult realization to come to, being so young and new to art?*

**AM:** That's one of the advantages of being part of a minority, as I was, when there were very few women artists in France -- you develop great strength, because you're up against a great deal. I think it must be a hidden strength. But politicians are going to have to learn to listen to what minorities have to say.

Mark Woods  
Hu Xiangqian  
Xing Xin  
Cui Xiuwen  
Mario Ybarra Jr.  
Pinar Yolacan  
Liz Young  
O Zhang



Annette Messenger, *Historia de tres noches blancas*, 1990. Ropa, madera, acrílico, fibras vegetales, papel, metal, tinta y lápices; Courtesy San Ildefonso, Mexico City.

**CGV:** *I'm under the impression that you're working in a quite different direction than you have in the past. You've been incorporating machinery into your practice, for example...*

**AM:** Right now I'm working on a new piece that's very different from anything I've done so far. I work with these bits of soft metal, very black, making these kinds of constructions. In the beginning, when I gave myself all the different identities: Annette Messenger the collector, I was working with newspaper clippings, or with drawings; Annette Messenger handywoman, artist, worked with taxidermied animals; Annette Messenger the storyteller, the peddler... But we are whole beings, with many different identities, sometimes very contradictory, but still, I think maybe these identities do end up creating a whole. What I was trying to achieve with the different identities in each exhibition space, was the effect of a different artist who'd created each group of pieces. Because, you know, people refer to "women artists" but really, so much depends on the spectator as well. They say the spectator creates the work. Well, I always thought that when people see a woman's name associated to a work, they're going to see it a bit differently. There are so many factors to take into consideration. A man has a different way of seeing things than a woman. We don't all have the same sensibilities. What a relief we women haven't started seeing things the way men do!

*ArtSlant would like to thank Annette Messenger for her assistance in making this interview possible.*

--Cynthia G. Valdez

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