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[See table of contents](#)

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ACTUALITÉS / EXPOSITIONS

TORONTO

Roland Jean, Workscene Gallery, Toronto, February 2 to 19, 1991



Roland Jean, *Installation view.*

Roland Jean, born in Haiti, moved to Canada in his mid-twenties (in 1979), and observed the brief life of the East Village scene in New York during the early 1980s. While this “journey” should be taken into account, it is dangerous to assume that it can serve as a convenient summation for the complexities of Jean’s art-making practice.

In a quick reading, Roland Jean’s work is rooted in post-1950s modernism – the impact of process and material by artists such as Robert Rauschenburg and Jasper Johns, the iconographic assembly of Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol, and the radical informality of the Fluxus Group. Jean’s work, however, reveals a different fingerprint and agenda – call it a cultural grafting – which is diaristic in nature. His

handwritten signs, collaging and pictograms, inform us through an array of multiple readings. His work also questions our fundamental assumptions about cultural expression (an inevitability in the late 20th century), dominated by the indexing of post-1950s art. At the same time, some form of categorization is inevitable – if only because we have been conditioned to provide an index for cultural production – now expanded to “explain” what are described as the “margins”. This often leads, in work such as Jean’s, to a phobia about the appearance of the unexplained and, at the same time, to a concealed patronizing tone.

One immediate similarity can be seen in the work of the late, Haitian-New York artist, Jean-Michel Basquiat – a type of visceral graffiti, alluding to a spiritual

(and political) plane that does not depend on Greek-Western models for its authority. But, as witnessed by recent work at the 1991 Whitney Biennale, Rauschenberg has mined these influences in his own earlier work – *objet trouvé* assemblages that derive their power from the very sources Jean is drawing from. For Roland Jean, these sources form an essential revelation and the declaration of self and place. His abbreviated drawing (which has appeared in many forms, starting with Picasso and Klee), is a means to find the most direct route between learned behavior and the nature of the social condition. Often, in contemporary Western art, this expression of “rawness” is transmitted as a consequence of our technological culture. If the appearance of a “leaner and meaner” Rauschenberg, forty years later, is any indication of the need for art to search for its “roots”, this can also be seen in other areas, such as the herky-jerky music of Tom Waits, full of transplanted indigenous influences, low sonic quality and a voice that makes mothers hide their daughters.

Roland Jean’s work demonstrates the potency of such signs. His repertoire is, apparently, familiar – surfaces are roughened (or violated), paint is dribbled, objects are added and removed, and everywhere, there is evidence of a journalistic speed and anxiety. If skepticism prevails, we can take this to be a pastiche, or

an act of theoretical de-construction. But something else is present, which cannot be so easily explained by the language we have constructed in order to rationalize a “de-construction”. One work presents what appears to be a “genuine” *objet trouvé*, a fragment of wooden hoarding, with “Erzulie” (the name of a Haitian voodoo goddess) sprayed over the top. In front is a stand-cum-colonial furniture, on which sits a matriarchal figurine with rosary beads and cross draped around her body. Jean has fetishized Catholicism, export art and signs of non-Christian belief, in a manner that carries its own logic.

Jean’s work raises questions that cannot be easily answered – his relationship to the contemporary world and the “fact” of his references, ranging from Haitian spiritual beliefs to the Mona Lisa to Miles Davis. These are not only deliberate signs of a socially conscious art, or an assault on the maxims of Western art history. Rather than proposing to redress the marginalization of non-Western cultures, the purpose of his art is revealed elsewhere. Simply put, it is the appearance and awareness of the self (where purposeful art must rest), in a delirious and hypnotic field. In one painting, Jean has written prophetically, « *N’importe quoi est art – L’art est n’importe quoi* ».

IHOR HOLUBIZKY

Annette Messager, *The Female Gaze*, Mercer Union, Toronto, April / May 1991

In a collaborative effort, Mercer Union and Cold City Gallery have mounted the first Canadian exhibition of the work of French artist Annette Messager. A survey of work executed between 1972 and the present, the exhibition illustrates the distinct roles Messager has assumed to challenge our emotive response. Messager’s œuvre enmeshes attraction and reaction as she enchants the viewer through a formal presentation and forces the viewer to confront his / her immediate reaction to the subject matter. Alternating between references to the body and reverence of the everyday, Annette Messager proposes a reversing of roles, as she invests inanimate objects with intent and denies the body and identity.

Figuring prominently in the work is the notion of

“possession”. This claim to ownership operates as a subtle nuance in *Mes vœux* (1988-90), where Messager alludes to possession in her presentation. The photographic images in the groupings are individually suspended by lengths of twine, at prescribed levels. Messager describes this as a progression of *Chimæras*, an earlier body of work that featured the framework of the spider web. The web has now collapsed with the weight of its “catch”. With the photographs themselves, there is Messager’s proclamation that her subjects surrender their image to her on film, conjuring up notions of the superstitious belief that a photograph constitutes the “robbing of one’s soul”. Messager effects this stripping of identity, resulting in an anonymous image, which



Annette Messager, *Histoire des robes*, 1990.

becomes an integral condition to the work. In *Histoire des robes* (1990) and *Histoire des petites effigies* (1990), she offers discarded, material possessions.

These references to ownership suggest a larger concern, territory, not that which is tangible or marked by possession, but the boundaries of desire and behavior. Annette Messager trespasses with resolve, uprooting issues of sexuality, gender politics and narcissism, eager to show us what she has found in ourselves.

Histoire des robes (1990) presents three examples of dresses, pinned out in their own display cases (with the care of collections in butterfly cases), carrying with them an imposed code. Messager plays with the implications of apparel, attributing meaning to different modes of dress, while also commenting on female role playing. The first dress, a Victorian day frock, appears with framed text. This treatment conveys an innocent expression, without a hidden agenda, where everything is as it appears. The second, a black gown, reveals female, anatomical snapshots seen through the outer veil of the dress. Here, Messager illustrates a seduction, as the body is “worn” outside the dress, suggesting allure in exposed flesh, camouflaged by a thin veil that demonstrates another aspect of seduction in enticement. The third article is a white nightdress, decorated by a central column of small sketches. The images in these small works appear as dream-like figures encoding more than surface meaning – the constructs of subconscious desire. Messager’s selections also illustrate female roles – the ingenue, the seductress, the wife – and the body evacuate could imply their incidence as patriarchal notions, reinforced by their presentation as “trophies” or collected accessories.

Mes vœux (1988-90) is a key work in understanding Annette Messager’s role as *provocateur*. Fragments of

the human anatomy adorn a wall in a dense formation, each image individually framed and dangling from twine supports. The work triggers a sense of voyeurism in the viewer, but it has little to do with the eroticization of the body. Rather, the images appear clinical and anonymous. Messager makes a direct reference to the function of photography in medical and judicial forums in the 19th century, noting particular interest in Charcot’s use of photography in his studies of hysteria (Salpêtrière Hospital). Intrigued by this method of looking at bodies, Messager employs the same tactic in *Mes vœux*, as the body becomes an object, frozen, relating nothing but its mass. “Photography quite literally kills movement by fixing it, and there is no chance for second thoughts. So it brings us face to face with the horror of time reduced to a quarter of a second; it is a form of re-creation dedicated to truth and imposture, just like taxidermy...” (Messager). She provokes the viewer by initiating response to the body as an erotic subject, and then quickly assumes a scientific stance. Each image becomes an instrument for research, dissected and offered for scrutiny. Annette Messager’s disjunctive assembly is infused with the power of attraction and, through formal, compositional means, alters the impact of the elements she employs. The fetishization of subjects is disallowed, and the viewer is charged with having to abandon a media-conditioned response. In this way, Messager also challenges the precepts of human behavior. The work is impassioned and vital, but Messager introduces restraints (placing things in cases and under glass, suspending frames). This treatment alludes to a tremendous energy that has been harnessed, and is a striking metaphor for an expression of the feminine within the confines of a masculine framework.

CLAIRE CHRISTIE