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Annette Lemieux didn't intend her new show to be political — but it is



JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

Annette Lemieux's new exhibition of works at the MFA is based on movies the artist loved while growing up.

By Cate McQuaid | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT | SEPTEMBER 22, 2017

Annette Lemieux did not intend for “Mise en Scène,” her new exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts opening Sept. 24, to reflect the current political moment. She started planning it before the election. It would be about film and revolve around movies she loved growing up.

But those films — Fritz Lang’s “M,” Robert Mulligan’s “To Kill a Mockingbird,” and François Truffaut’s “Fahrenheit 451” — address themes of fear and oppression that feel chillingly pertinent today. Charlie Chaplin’s “The Great Dictator” also makes an appearance, in her 1994 print series “Censor Portfolio.” That, too, hits home.

“This came before the 45th,” Lemieux says, referring to Donald Trump. She’s in the gallery, putting finishing touches on the installation.

“I’m not that topical,” she says. “One could find in our past, or some other country’s, another awful, horrible ruler.”

Her work is often rooted in her past, and ours.

“The films that influenced her are part of our American consciousness, reflecting issues of race, whiteness, censorship, how we treat each other, issues of power,” says Liz Munsell, the MFA’s assistant curator of contemporary art and special initiatives, “We see that because of the moments she chose to tease out.”

The museum tapped Lemieux for its Maud Morgan Prize, awarded to a woman artist living in Massachusetts, which includes a solo exhibition. The artist, a senior lecturer in visual and environmental studies at Harvard, lives in Brookline,

It’s a surprise that Lemieux didn’t win the Morgan prize before now. The artist, who turns 60 in October, has lived here since the late 1980s, and she has had an illustrious career.

Although her art is not overtly political, Lemieux is not one to hesitate to take a stand. In 1989, after the Corcoran Gallery of Art yanked Robert Mapplethorpe’s traveling retrospective, anticipating protests about its erotic content and National Endowment for the Arts funding, she canceled her own show there.

The day after the election last November, Lemieux e-mailed the Whitney Museum of American Art and instructed them to upend her piece “Left Right Left Right.” The raised fists in 30 photolithographs now point downward.

“I made that during the ’96 campaign,” she says. “The piece seemed optimistic when I made it, but after what happened, it made no sense.”

Lemieux’s conceptual art, often derived from already-existing imagery and found objects, can be tantalizingly precise in its references but large and encompassing in the questions it asks.

“Her work is so creepily familiar to so many of us that it becomes personal because we’re projecting our experience on it,” says Munsell, noting a uniquely American small-town ethos in Lemieux’s art.

Lemieux was born in Norfolk, Va. Her father, a Marine, was deployed, and she and her sister moved with their mother to the mill town of Torrington, Conn. Her parents divorced, and her mother patched together a living working at the five-and-dime.

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“When I was a child, I would antique with my mother almost every weekend,” the artist says. “She had no money, but she somehow pulled it off.”

Every Saturday, Lemieux went to the Warner Theatre, an old art deco movie palace in Torrington. She’d get there early, toting her bag of candy to the same seat.

“I loved Bette Davis, Katharine Hepburn, Ann-Margret,” she says. “They were my role models. They showed me a world I didn’t have.”

Those three actresses don’t appear in “Mise en Scène.” Instead, a girl alone and in peril recurs. “SPIN” features three bright, monochrome pictures of Scout, from “To Kill a Mockingbird,” curled inside a tire, rolling toward Boo Radley’s house and danger.

Lemieux arrays them in a grid, rotating the image to suggest the tire’s spin. That left one square of the grid empty, where the artist draped a swatch of black velvet bleached with white stripes.

Think of race. Of whitewashing. Of the stripes in the American flag. Think of a flag sweeping down to start a NASCAR race: And off goes the girl in the tire.

“This was an intuition,” Lemieux says, pointing to the velvet. “I was working with bleach and velvet, and I just thought, that would look great there.”

Lemieux came of age just after the appropriation-happy Pictures Generation — artists such as Cindy Sherman and David Salle — made their mark, and to some extent followed their lead.

“I’m always taking objects from another place,” Lemieux says. In her last show, she played on Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp. “I don’t like ‘appropriation,’” she says. “I call them duets.”

But Lemieux’s work extends well beyond appropriation, connecting to minimalism, Pop, and feminism. Her exhibitions string together images or objects like words in a sentence, and the associations she makes embrace life’s contradictions, sometimes comically and sometimes caustically.

“Mise en Scène” features a hair-raising polarity between peril and play. The Great Dictator bounces an inflatable globe. A ball like the one a murdered girl plays with in “M” appears. Then there’s Scout in the tire.

We may read contemporary danger into such things — and into the fate of a benumbed and illiterate public in “Fahrenheit 451.” But the artist is reluctant to limit her work by labeling it as about anything, including the current moment.

“All this stuff that’s happening now is around us all the time,” Lemieux insists.

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After all, the films she duets with were made decades ago; their themes are perennial. But just now, the volume seems turned up, and Lemieux's art, if not directly referencing the present, offers ways to wrestle with it.