



Annette Lemieux

By **Robert Birnbaum** | Published: September 18, 2002



Conceptual mixed media artist **Annette Lemieux**'s work is included in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York; The Whitney Museum of American Art; The Solomon R Guggenheim Museum; The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; The Decordova Museum; and numerous museums around the world. She has received numerous grants and fellowships and exhibits regularly at the McKee Gallery, New York, and was included in the Whitney Biennial 2000. Annette Lemieux lives in Brookline, Massachusetts and teaches at Harvard University.

Robert Birnbaum: You were born in Norfolk, Virginia.

Annette Lemieux: Yes.

RB: Is there a story behind that, or was it an ordinary circumstance?

AL: My father was in the military.

RB: Navy?

AL: No, Marines. So I guess that's why I was born there. We lived in Virginia, North and South Carolina when I was young and then when I was 3 1/2 or 4 we moved up to Torrington, Connecticut. Then my mother decided that she didn't want to go on the Marine tour anymore and said, "I'm staying here." So then my father took off to wherever and I grew up in Torrington. It was also my mother's hometown, which probably made it easier for her to say, "See ya."

RB: Did he come back?

AL: Oh no. He wasn't invited back.

RB: How long did your father serve in the Marines?

AL: He was a lifer. 22 years. He served in Korea and Viet Nam.

RB: Torrington, Connecticut sounds normal.

AL: (laughs) It's an old mill town. After the war, the factories went downhill because they weren't producing ball bearings. So the whole place was—and still is—disintegrating. There are many empty storefronts.

RB: What's the population?

AL: I have no idea. I honestly don't know. I'm bad with numbers.

RB: How big was your high school?

AL: I don't remember, but it was pretty big. It wasn't like a small cow town.

RB: You went to art school directly after high school?

AL: No, I went to a community college my first 2 years, in Winsted, Connecticut. And then I had plans to go to Syracuse University, but I couldn't afford it. It couldn't afford me, in terms of giving me money. So then, I followed a friend, stupidly, to Flagstaff, Arizona and once I was in Flagstaff, Arizona, I felt like I was on a deserted island. Void of civilization. So I went back to Connecticut that next year and didn't go to school. Then I returned to school half time at the University of Hartford.

RB: How did you end up in Flagstaff?

AL: I went to visit my father and he drove me from San Diego to Flagstaff. I hated every minute of it.

RB: The drive or the company?

AL: With him. He was strange. He was a Jesus freak at that moment in his life. It was like I was on a different planet. The landscape was strange.

RB: Was he out of the military at that point?

AL: Yes. I think he needed another club to join. He needed a larger-than-life support system.

RB: Why did you go to art school?

AL: The natural thing to do I think.

RB: I didn't go to art school. (Both laugh)

AL: For me it was very natural. I remember going into my guidance counselor's office in high school, saying, "I want to be an artist." And he burst out laughing and talked me into applying to secretarial school. (laughs) Then I went to my art teacher and said, "I guess I'm going to secretarial school." He burst out laughing. He said, "No, no, you have to go to art school. We'll find a way and the money to get you there." So I got a scholarship and then Basic Educational Opportunity Grants. But I always made work. I remember my first painting in kindergarten.



Lily (2000) by Annette Lemieux

RB: You said, "I always made 'work'." Instead of saying, "I always made 'art.'"

AL: Is that what I just said? Yeah, I don't want to be presumptuous. (laughs)

RB: Do you remember the first thing you made?

AL: Yes.

RB: Do you still have it?

AL: No. I didn't have the kind of parents that kept things.

RB: What was it?

AL: I think it was a background under the water seascape for a shadow box. I remember there were three things: blue water, a brown rock and probably an orange fish. I remember wanting to make the fish feel real. So I put the head of the fish on the right side of the rock and the tail of the fish on the left side of the rock and I created 3 dimensional space. I couldn't believe it. So for me it was a very exciting moment.

RB: Was being an artist synonymous with being a painter? Was painting the same as art, in the minds of children?

AL: Probably because it's the most immediate material. Everyone has a piece of paper and watercolors or pencils. As opposed to paper mache or pottery. Back then, any ways. I studied painting in Art school but now I am mixed media.

RB: Let's jump ahead 30 years. Now, you are teaching at Harvard University.

AL: (Long pause, both laugh) Next question. (laughs)

RB: Here you are, having left high school with ambitions to be an artist. One teacher tells you to go to secretarial school and another encourages you. 30 years later you are at the world's greatest university, teaching art.

AL: Yeah, kind of a big coup.

RB: Does the past reverberate in your life as you move forward? Do you carry with you the memories of these things?

AL: Constantly.

RB: You have been teaching at Harvard for a while?

AL: On and off since '96. You want me to say this; they made me a Professor of the Practice. I knew that's what you were fishing for. I taught at Brown from '92 to '96 and then at Harvard. At one point I was teaching at both places. Which was too much: it was all teaching and no making art in my studio. I'm really lucky and hopefully they're lucky having me there. Professor of the Practice—they try to bring people in from an industry—that point of view as opposed to an academic point of view, that's what I'm there for. I'll be teaching conceptual mixed media based work. We created a new track for the kids so that the kids can do theses with a conceptual thesis. It's always been there since I've been there but never formalized. Instead of doing a thesis on painting or sculpture or photo there is now also conceptual mixed media.

RB: Is Harvard interested in teaching artists art or creating artists?

AL: Both, probably both.

RB: Do you want to talk about the brouhaha surrounding the last director of the program?

AL: Well, no. I'll say Ellen Phelan created a great program. There were many reasons why she was asked to leave. We were told some. I wasn't there and I don't know what's true or not true. She created a terrific program and there are a number of us that are still there working with the new Chair and trying to keep the program as good as Ellen made it.

RB: I want to indulge my own interest here. I am more interested in understanding what's involved in living as an artist than what the product—the art—of that life is.

AL: How you survive as an artist.

RB: Right. I find talking about art—art theory and criticism has this language that I find opaque. I understand that every discipline and life form has its own language games...

AL: A lot of artists feel that way too. About Artspeak, that's a very common feeling.

RB: You left school in that late '70s, early '80s?

AL: I graduated in the fall of '79 or '80 and I went to New York City. Luckily while I was at Hartford Art School, Jack Goldstein and David Salle were teaching there. Big names in the '80s in the New York art world. So I got to New York and I sort of had a job lined up with Goldstein, and that didn't work out, and when that fell through I called up David Salle and I started assisting him and artists in his same gallery, The Mary Boone Gallery. So I supported myself by working as a studio artist, as an assistant, as a bookkeeper—that didn't last—as a receptionist—that didn't last, as a waitress—that didn't last.

RB: How long did each of those jobs that didn't work out last?

AL: About a half year each. I also did demolition. I did window dressing.

RB: Demolition?

AL: You go in a place with an ax and you start whacking away.

RB: Great training.

AL: Yeah. I remember walking home—I was in lower Manhattan—in Soho and I would have to walk to the West Village, covered in white dust. People looked at me kind of funny, but I thought walking covered with white dust was kind of normal.

RB: Maybe they thought you were from New Guinea.

AL: I don't know. Let's see, where were we?



**Walking on Water
Revisited (2000)
by Annette Lemieux**

RB: Would it be fair to say that your early years as an artist in lower Manhattan were years of struggle and scrapping for survival?

AL: Oh yeah. I remember having a \$2-a-day budget. Which was pretty great back then. It bought me a challah French toast breakfast. Coffee and orange juice and a pack of cigarettes...

RB: How much were cigarettes?

AL: Less than a buck or a buck. Now they're \$5. You can only live on a \$2-a-day budget for so long. I maybe pulled it off for a month but I was starting to get weak. I remember walking by grocery stores and bodegas wanting to steal fruit. I couldn't, I'm a Catholic girl. It was a pretty hungry time.

RB: What about the endless stream of openings and receptions and thereby supplement your diet?

AL: You know I never did that. People do this, stuff themselves, and drink themselves to death. But no, I don't remember food being at a lot of openings. Or maybe it was all gone by the time I got there. I have no idea. (Both laugh).

RB: I think it's funny that event planners and publicists have finally become aware that there is such a crowd—the free shrimp crowd—people who show up at events simply to gorge themselves.

AL: Oh yeah, Elias Fine Arts has the best food. Or maybe the only food out of many galleries.

RB: Really. I guess I never get there early either. Early '80s, this is the time of Basquiat and Schnabel.

AL: Yes, it's the beginning of it. I worked for David [Salle]. Julian [Schnabel] but we didn't get on so well. Matt Mullican, Gary Stephan, Troy Brauntuch. These people were either at the Mary Boone Gallery or Metro Pictures. It was the rebirth of painting and a lot of money in art. Luckily in '85 I quit David—after a while you can't be a studio assistant. You just start drooling.

RB: You were drooling because of the big money art work was getting?

AL: It was more like it was hard to be in someone else's studio, watching them make work and doing everything for them so they could make their work and feeling miserable because you were not in your studio doing the same, full time. I worked 2 days a week and would work all the other time in my studio and that's why I was so broke. I left David so I could get health insurance via another job. I didn't tell you this, but in '83 I was run over by a white Ford van. I was sort of an invalid for a while. The insurance company wouldn't insure me, in the end, anyway. So I was stuck doing this horrible book keeping inputting job for this art moving company. It was really terrible. I was really miserable. In '86 I got two grants, one from NEA and one from the

New York Foundation for The Arts. I had a show that was doing pretty well. So everything was coming together that one year and it afforded me to quit my awful job, get a larger studio. Also, to get a very cheap small apartment in the East Village. Basically, I just worked full time from '86 to '92 without a need for a teaching job or any kind of employment. Then the art market crashed in the early '90s.

RB: In that period of full time art making, were you showing regularly?

AL: Oh yeah, I think I do about the same now. It hasn't changed much 2 or 3 shows a year. Plus all this other crap you do, like benefits.

RB: You do benefits?

AL: Oh yeah, judging shows. Panels. Lots of stuff.

If I couldn't do my work, it would be as if someone took the air out of me. It was a necessity to survive. So it would have been that or die. I didn't have a choice. So I just worked my ass off.

RB: You mentioned being lucky—I'm certain you are acquainted with artists who haven't been so lucky—have you considered what you might have done had you not been lucky? Is there a pivotal point where you became confident you could live your life as an artist?

AL: Well, if I couldn't do my work it would be as if someone took the air out of me. It was a necessity to survive. So it would have been that or die. I didn't have a choice. So I just worked my ass off.

RB: Were you tested past a critical point?

AL: I was tested. I think that I am constantly being tested.

RB: How were you affected by the art market crashes of the early '90s and the early 21st century?

AL: I was teaching in a lot of different places to keep things going. I would have just enough sales to be able to produce another show. This year I had a windfall. I did really well with my last show in Aspen at the Baldwin Gallery. I get pretty good critical support but that doesn't mean you are selling out your shows or even selling one piece out of a show. There has always been just enough to keep it going.

RB: A peculiar place for a serious art gallery, Aspen?

AL: Actually, not. That's where people vacation, who have money and who are collectors. And they have plenty of time to ski and look at art.

RB: How do you compare the opening reception in Aspen to one that might take place in Boston?

AL: I was there Christmas time, so everyone who was supposed to be there was there, vacationing. It was closer to a New York opening than to a Boston opening. In terms of big-name collectors.

RB: And you did well in that show?

AL: Yeah and it was difficult work. It wasn't easy work. It was mixed media work, Plaster sculptures, marble sculptures, paintings that wouldn't necessarily be paintings for a painter. Photographic work done on sheer material that was enormous. So, it was difficult but they're [Baldwin Gallery] are doing a great job with it. A 10-foot-high sculpture made out of about 15 feet of hair just sold.

RB: A sculpture made of hair? Whose hair?

AL: It's real hair. There are all these bald women in Europe walking around. It was 7 ponytails—but it's more like 7 times 3, 21 European ponytails. It takes about 3 good-sized ponytails to make a nice ponytail. It had to be real hair, of course, because that's how I am. It was dyed to my color and I pin curled it to reproduce the waves that curl my own hair. It's great when you are working with such weird materials because a whole new world will open up. This happens constantly because I am constantly working with new materials. But the piece, which was created after 9/11—not that that work is so directly connected to that media experience, because I didn't experience it first hand—I couldn't do any negative imagery or negative assemblage in my studio. So all the images or things were positive gestures. For instance, one painting was called *Comfort Painting*. It was a circular big pillow on a wall that you could lean on to. The hairpiece was called *Rescue*; it imitates a knotted rope for someone to climb down.

RB: Why couldn't you do what you refer to as negative images?

AL: I had an aversion to anything that was difficult to look at...that brought up images of 9/11 or images of war or devastation. Similar to Busby Berkeley films in the '30's while WWII was about to happen and the Great Depression is going on. Maybe it was some sort of escapism, I don't know.

RB: Have you gotten over it?

AL: No. I'm preferring making images that are more positive—that have a lot more to do with life and less about death—there was always a lot of death in the work. Now there is more life in the work.

RB: At what point in your life did you start to look at the body of your work say things like, “There is a lot of this or that in the work?”

AL: My last year at school. I got a BFA at Hartford Art School and never got an MFA because I didn't have any money. I also didn't have the knowledge on how to do that, how to get a MFA. The work became very self-conscious then because I finally pulled it together. And everything started to make sense—why I would do one thing and not another. As soon as I got out of school I started to look at that work that I produced and saying, “Okay, what's wrong with it? What's missing?” I would analyze that and put those things in the work and I constantly make work that way. You make a piece and you say, “So what?” and then, “What is missing and where else do you have to go?” You have to be self-critical all the time. It's a hard way to make work but...



Fall (2000) by Annette Lemieux

RB: It just occurred to me that writers I've talked to don't reread their work.

AL: Really. They don't reminisce about a piece?

RB: I've never asked that question. They may have a sense of their work's totality.

AL: Have you spoken with writers who are also critics?

RB: I'm sure I have.

AL: I'm curious about how people work. A big part of teaching is teaching your students how to critique their own work, by having group critiques. And you ask a set of questions...not that there are any right answers but it's important to try to articulate what you are trying to pull off so that you can figure out how to do it better.

RB: Strange word, 'better'. I think the notion of there being no right answer or solution is quite right. In writing, much is made of choices that are presented to the writer.

AL: Yeah, I try to teach the kids what materials would best make their idea physical. Whether a painting or sculpture or mixed media piece—we look at it and analyze it—there is skill critique as well as mental critique. It's about

keeping your ideas clear, are they communicating. When I was first introduced to the word 'conceptual' I had to look it up. I didn't know what the hell anyone was talking about. I always thought about my work as practical art making as opposed to impractical or unclear or retinal. I had problems with work that was purely formal.

RB: Two things that really interest me about an artistic life. One, is the connection to the real world...

AL: That's a good one.

RB: Meaning the practical issues. Does one have a schedule and pay attention to the clock? Do you do the same things everyday? Do you wake up at 4 in the morning and say, "I have to do this." How much does your life resemble the ordinary workaday life?

AL: Work should consume you. But you have to know when to shut it off. Like, I love going home and putting on my cowboy pajamas and watching dumb TV. When you are working that hard conceptually and physically in the studio, you need to know when to shut it off. If you over work you are making less work in the end because you are exhausted. I'm like 5 days a week, 9 to 5, 9 to 6 because that's when everyone else is working. Maybe, I'm like this little industry like everyone else. When I was younger I probably worked longer hours and more in the evening because I was younger and I had a lot of assistants—assistants would go get my lunch—I remember when I couldn't afford an assistant I didn't know how to go get my lunch. I realized there was something really wrong when you can only operate in your white-walled area. That's why I like teaching. You get stupid if you are in the studio all the time. It's important to participate. I used to ride my bike a lot to my studio and you have no confrontations when you are on your bike. You have more confrontations when you are sitting in your car having road rage or when you are walking and you stop in all these different shops to get stuff for the day and you have these great exchanges and you see things you weren't even thinking about looking at, that somehow influence a piece. So, it's really important to participate in the real life. That's why I'm 9 to 5, five days a week. Except when I'm teaching.

RB: Do you have visions or out-of-body experiences?

AL: Every night.

RB: Fantasies that somehow overcome you or come over you that disconnect you from so-called reality?

AL: I have a very vivid dream state every night. In color. I don't know if this answers your question when I am working—really working, the world falls away. You are in this zone and there seems like this bottomless well of ideas.

When you are not working it doesn't come to you. For me, only through work can I make work and work begets work.

When I am working—really working, the world falls away. You are in this zone and there seems like this bottomless well of ideas. When you are not working it doesn't come to you. For me, only through work can I make work, and work begets work.

RB: I don't think we have exhausted this subject, but let me get to my second concern. How conscious are you of art as commodity in your work?

AL: I really don't pay attention to that too much. You can't. You really have to leave that outside of the studio. I remember in '86 making a really enormous, big brown painting and saying to myself, "Who the fuck is going to want this big brown painting?" It actually did sell in that show. They don't know what they want. So you make your work and hopefully they want that when they see it. I was never interested in the idea of art and commodification. Like doing a whole career about that. There are artistes from the '80s who do that. I think it's a good idea for one piece, not even one show. It's very boring. There is always economics involved in whatever you do. So it's kind of silly.

RB: We've both seen the Johns to Koons Pop art show at the MFA. Jeff Koons is the artist that manufactures and has his assistants make his work.

AL: That's a pretty common practice. It's very Warholian. But Rubens did it too. Everyone did it. Michaelangelo had assistants. Rubens had a guy who painted the lions; a guy who painted the trees or a girl who painted the rocks. Rubens created the idea of factory before Warhol.

RB: So, this would not be a source of condemnation for an artist the fact that they mass-produce work.

AL: Art should not be confused with skill. Skill is a part of it. Anyone can learn how to paint. The eye to wrist coordination—one reason I stopped making very large 2 dimensional paintings was that in 1983 when I got in the accident in New York I got run over and I had to recuperate for more than a half a year and I couldn't make my large geometric paintings that were actually symbols like flags and crosses. So I started thinking about the work pragmatically, coming up with the idea, "Okay, I can do photos of this or I can go buy this at a store and it will be a sculpture after I manipulate it somehow. Or I can acquire the paintings that somebody did and recombine them and call it something else. So, mixed media conceptual is really how am I going to make work from the bed with all these casts on my body."

RB: What did you do with the casts?

AL: Threw them out. Not something you want to remember. It wasn't a pretty moment in my life. It was pretty hard.

RB: What's the "Strange Shapes of Objects" show?

AL: Oh, "The Strange Life of Objects."

RB: Sorry.

AL: That was going to be the title for my mid-career show at the Rose Museum [at Brandeis University] that I recently cancelled. That title comes from a quote from a Robert Pinkus article about my work.

RB: Can we talk about why you cancelled that show?

AL: It just wasn't the right situation.

RB: What is this notion of 'mid-career'?

AL: You are half way through your career and someone wants to show it and summarize you at this point in time. It's not like a retrospective. It's quite common that artists in their 40's have a mid career survey if they have a big history.

RB: I take it such a show involves much self-assessment?

AL: No, I don't want to assess myself. The point is you have to have a very good curator doing that.

RB: And you are not creating new work.

AL: This is looking at your entire body of work. For me that would mean 20 years worth of work. At one point I was working with this great curator Lelia Amalfitano and she left the museum. She was one of the people that were dismissed from the Gallery for the School of the Museum of Fine Arts during the Malcolm Rogers reorganization of the corporation...

RB: (Laughs heartily)

AL: Why are you laughing?

RB: I love euphemisms

AL: So she [Lelia] left the Rose and I was quite disappointed, not being able to work with her. If I were to go on to do this I would have to recreate another situation with her or someone like her.

RB: So we get the story after all?

AL: Pretty much. That's the polite version.

RB: How do you look at the future?

AL: Of what? Of me?

RB: Your work.

AL: I'm just going to keep on making it until I can't. I just look forward to making really good work. Without planning where that's going to go. I'm more concerned about making really good work.

RB: You have representation?

AL: Uh huh. In Boston it's a number of people. Barbara Krakow, in terms of doing shows. Mario Diacano, once in a while, because he reopened.

RB: Your work is always changing. Do you go through clearly delineated phases?

AL: I'm constantly in a communication phase. [Robert laughs] So you have these different ideas that you want to communicate and then the materials follow.

When you know someone's work and you understand the visceral quality of the work then you can view it in a website. You are not really viewing it the right way, but you have an understanding of what it probably feels and looks like.

RB: But in terms of the visual presentation, you could go from labeling garbage cans...

AL: Which I have never done. I just want to make that clear...

RB:...to the Black Flag print you did.

AL: Look has to do with language if a particular look carries a particular phrase then you use that look. But it's not about the look it's about the language it offers. It's not style conscious.

RB: Right. That's you. But curators who are assembling shows, what level are they operating on, visual or conceptual?

AL: Both. Mixed media and being stylistically different is not new news. Think of Duchamp, Art De Povra and the conceptual work from the '60's and '70's. A lot of people have difficulty with it still. A lot of people think art is only painting.

RB: Someone who sees a piece of yours, how would they know what you are working on currently?

AL: Oh, they know. Especially with web sites new work is pretty much up now. People don't even have to go to galleries. When you know someone's

work and you understand the visceral quality of the work then you can view it in a website. You are not really viewing it the right way, but you have an understanding of what it probably feels and looks like.

RB: It's like seeing art in a book.

AL: Yeah, but it's not the best way. But at least you can be familiar with what is going on stylistically. Especially if you don't have opportunities to get to New York or Documenta.

RB: Do you look at art on the web?

AL: When I first became computer friendly, yes. But not so much anymore.

RB: When you go to New York do you go to a lot of galleries?

AL: Not a lot. I can maybe do five a day. I don't see a tremendous amount. I never saw a lot of work.

RB: The current show at the MFA has over 200 pieces in it. Were you able to digest the show.

AL: Oh yeah. I know the work. There were a couple of nice surprises though. It was nice to see the Baldessarini and the Lichtenstein that reminded me of Monet's cathedral paintings at different times of the day.

RB: I like the alcove of three Anselm Kiefer paintings.

AL: I liked the left one which had poppies and had to do with how life like poppies can grow in the middle of construction sites or the middle of a war. And if you go to Italy in the spring or early summer, it's true you see a construction site of dirt pushed up as a hill and you have poppies growing on top. It's somewhat amazing how life sprouts in the worst situations. I really love that painting. I know the other stuff so I loved the surprises.

RB: This ends Part I. We'll try for Part II soon.