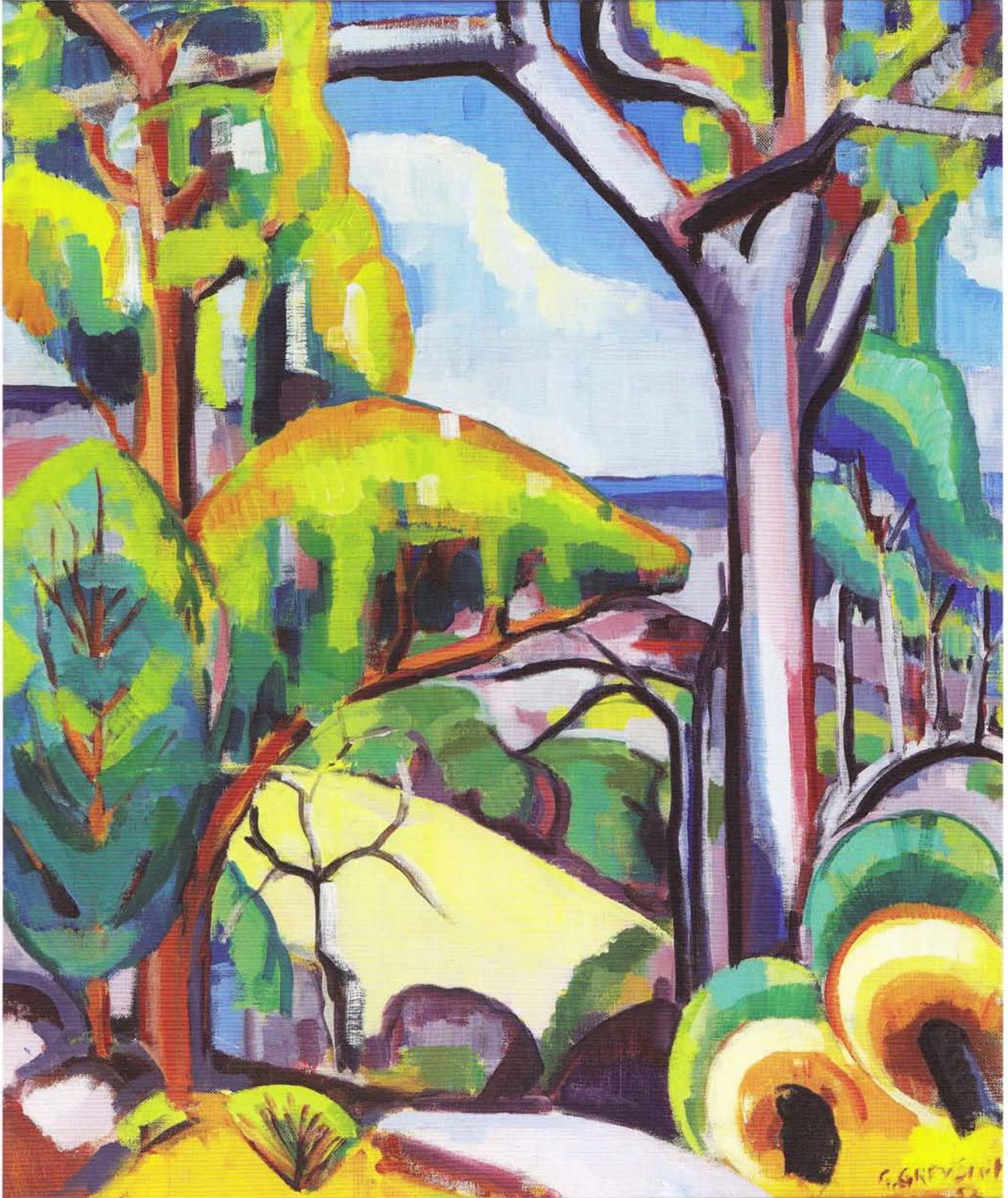


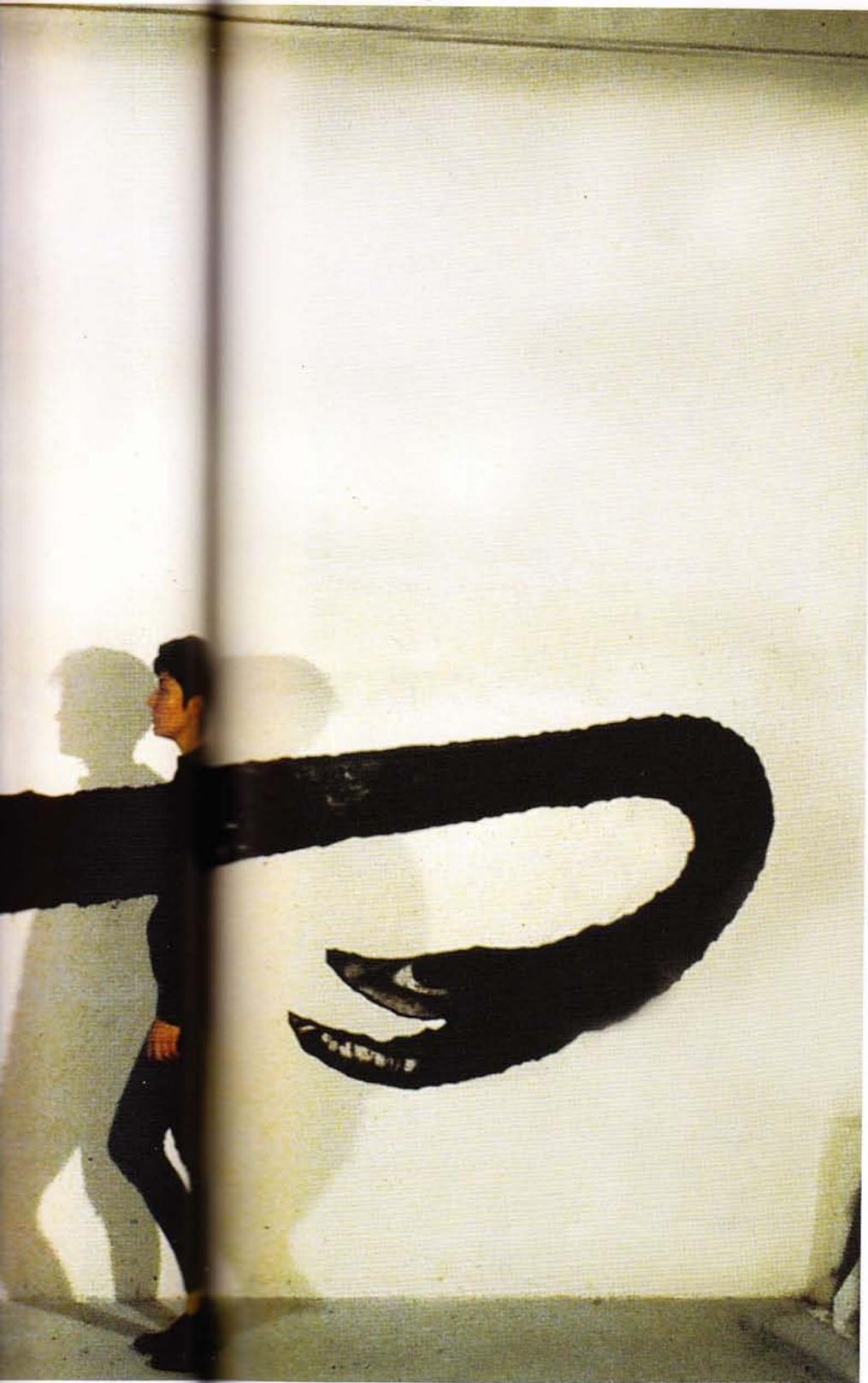
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Guy Grey-Smith | Annette Messenger's 'motion / emotion' | Special focus on Queensland

Translating emotion: Annette Messenger in Australia

CAROLINE HANCOCK



Annette Messenger is one of the world's most renowned contemporary artists, with 'Casino', her French Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, receiving the prestigious Golden Lion award in 2005. She regularly exhibits all over the world, and this month sees the opening of 'motion / emotion' at the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia (MCA), her first major solo exhibition in Australia, a country where her work has been shown since the late 1970s. On the eve of her MCA show, Messenger spoke about her long engagement with Australia, and the complexities of translation inherent in her mixed-media practice.¹

Caroline Hancock: Tell us about your relation with Australia.

Annette Messenger: At some point in the 1960s, my father lent me a book of black-and-white photographs of Aboriginal tree bark [paintings]. I have no idea why he had this; it must have been quite rare at the time. I was fascinated and kept copying from it. I was very interested in Jean Dubuffet then, and that might have been the link. I have been to Australia on at least four occasions over the years. The first time was for the Biennale of Sydney in 1984, and I also have been to Cairns and to Canberra.

CH: In fact, your work was shown in three Biennales of Sydney.² What are your memories of the 1984 exhibition which you attended?

AM: The late Jean-Louis Pradel, who was with the École des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, invited me to participate and I showed a selection of *Chimères* (Chimaeras, 1982–84), some of which will be represented in the MCA exhibition. This was the first time I drew a large cobweb directly on the wall. Mike Kelley was there, showing work that was very different to what he did later. Tony Cragg was there, too, looking for scraps in dustbins, pieces of plastic.

I had brought all my materials from France: I had large distorted and cut-out photographic prints, mixing male and female body parts to render them animal-like and fantastical. I was associating painting and photography, a deliberate unhappy marriage. The painting was black and white and the photography was overpainted with coloured inks. This was my Méliès period.

CH: The exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia in Sydney is your first retrospective in Australia, presenting over 20 small and monumental works from the early 1970s to the present day. How are you going about it?

AM: [Chief Curator] Rachel Kent approached me a number of years ago and we began working on this together three years ago. As always I visited the museum and worked intensely on the plans and with little maquettes of the spaces. Each time I am terrified I won't manage and want to run away initially. But everything is mapped out for Sydney now and I will be there for the installation.

Lines of the Hand (1988) is composed of black-and-white photographs which are hung tilted; with offered words that run up the wall to the frames. These will be written in soft, tender colours by students in situ.

I always like to mix the types of work presented so that the audiences can understand that I use very different media and techniques. I make monumental projects but also small pieces that I manipulate myself. This then is a reflection of my life as an artist – I alternate.

Projects like this also enable you to revisit past work, by chance or intentionally. I had cut out images of what women do to themselves for supposed embellishment, or to be more synchronised to a certain norm, and made *Les tortures volontaires* (Voluntary torture, 1972–2013). At the time in the 1970s, I remember printing countless photographs myself and spending days in the basement in the dark. Two years ago, I found 81 photographs from this series which I had completely forgotten about. I recently framed them.

CH: An installation composed of 300 parts is being lent by the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Strasbourg, in France. Its intriguing title is *Sans légende* (2011–12) – is this to be translated as 'Untitled'?

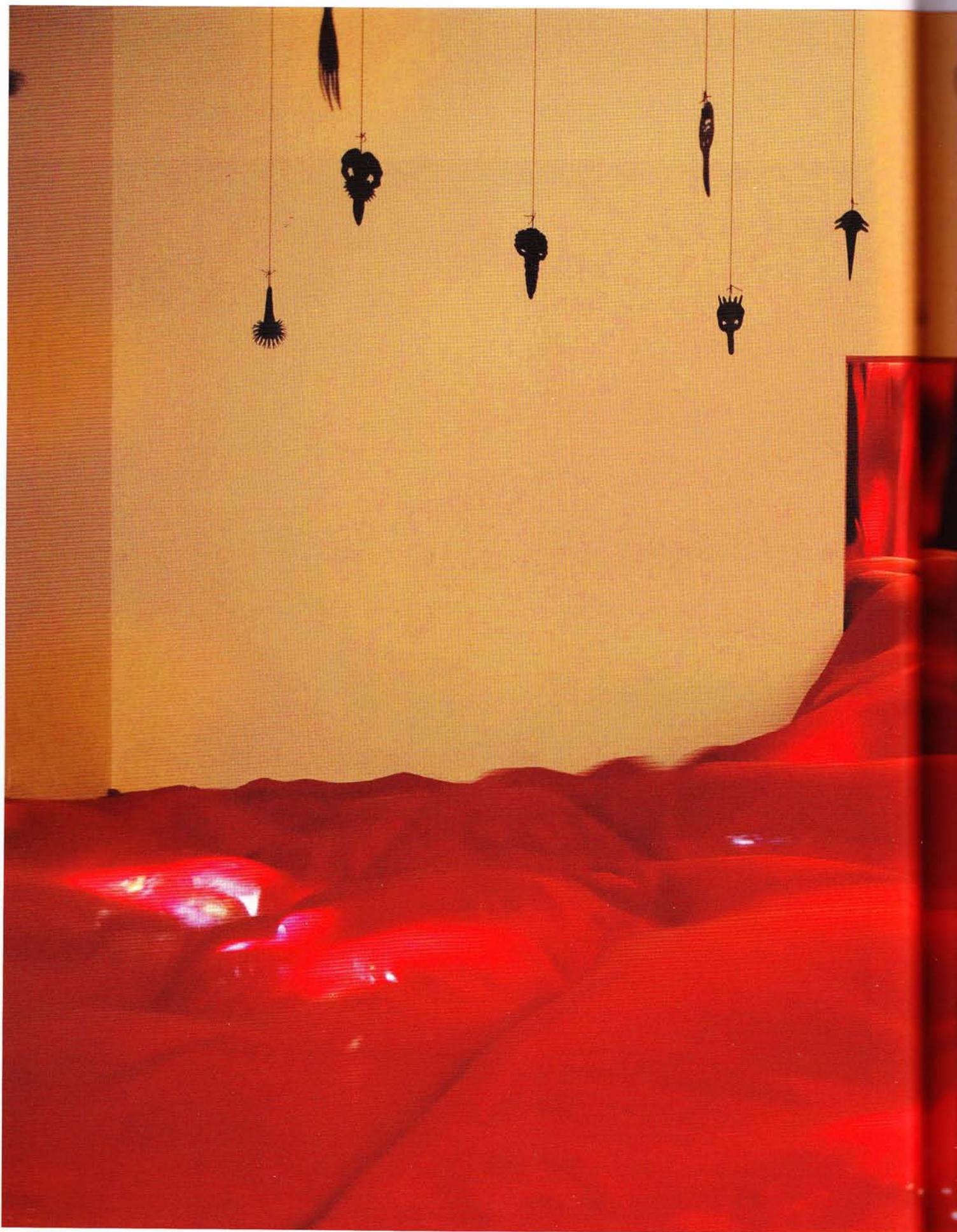
AM: Not really. I chose *Sans légende* because it plays sonically with the word *cent*, that is to say the figure 100 (in French 'sans' is homonymous with 'cent'). That was to suggest that there are countless potential captions to give to this work. I love words for their meaning, their sound and their visual form. I would have loved to have been a writer. The problems of translation are also infinitely interesting, but very complex. My titles are often badly transferred to another language.

Patricia Falguières's essay for the catalogue is a very interesting historical review of the struggles women had to face in the art world. Her title has the same sort of word play that verges on the untranslatable: *Fée d'artifice*. Perhaps 'Fairy Works'.

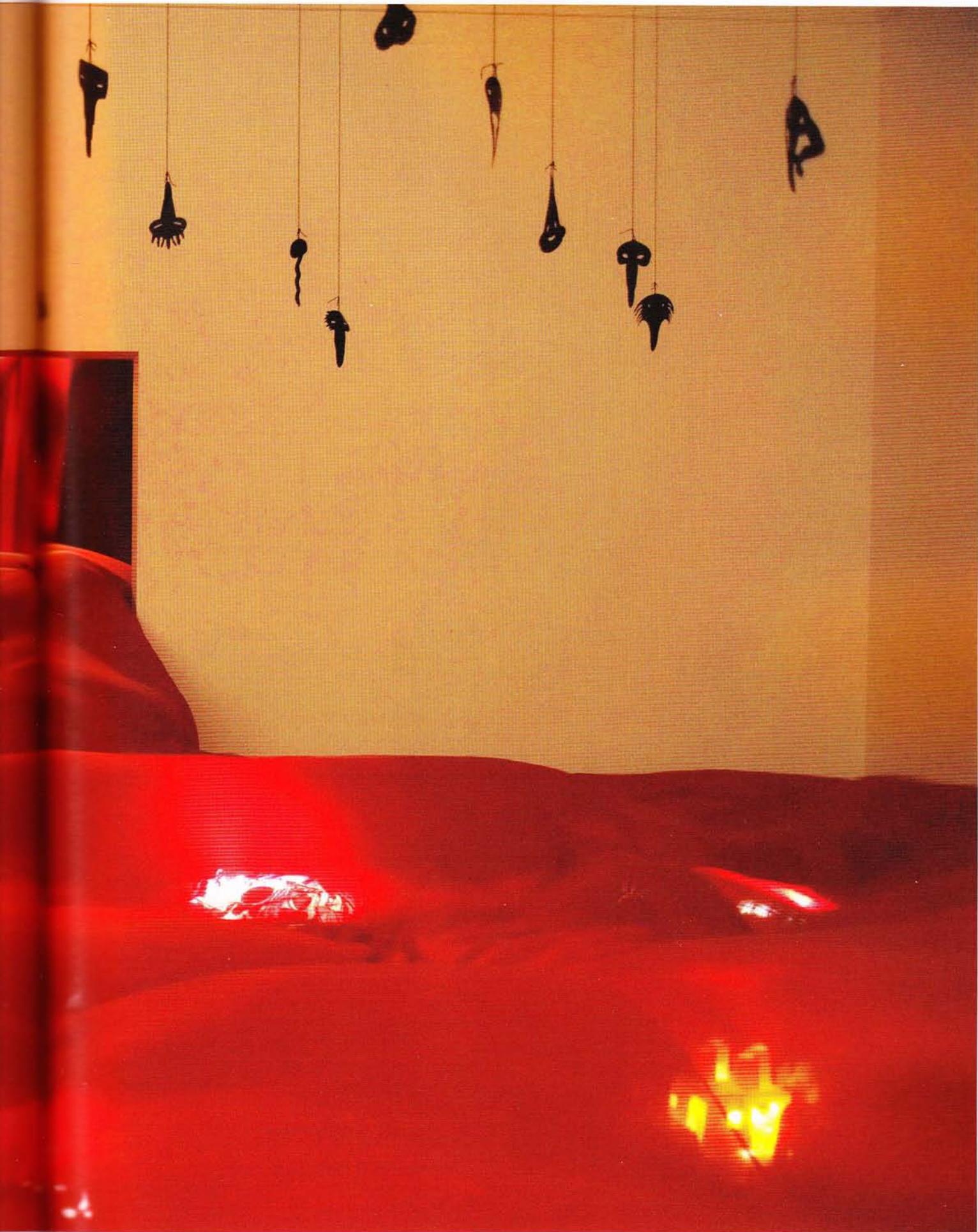
CH: The title of the exhibition 'motion / emotion' is also the title of one of your 2012 artworks which will not be shown here.



Annette Messager; Penetration (Pénétration), 1993–94, cotton stuffed with polyester, angora wool, nylon, electric lights; 500 x 500 x 1100cm overall; National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, purchased 1996; © Annette Messager/ADAGP



Annette Messager, Casino, 2005, installation view; red pongee silk, string, rubber, various elements, optical fibres, fluorescent tubes, fans, software; image courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, Paris and New York; © Annette Messager



AM: This title captures the overall movement and repetitions in the show. There are elements of that installation here, like *Le Tutu dansant* (The Dancing Tutu, 2012) and *Le Chapeau de Sorcière* (The Witch Hat, 2012) with hair, fans, motors and light effects. *motion/emotion* will be in the exhibition I am working on in Düsseldorf in the [European] autumn.³

CH: The National Gallery of Australia in Canberra has displayed consistent interest in your work. All three works in their collection will be presented in the MCA exhibition. *Mes vœux* (My vows), dating from 1989, was purchased in 1993; and the large installation composed with cotton, polyester, angora wool, nylon and electric lights called *Pénétration* (Penetration, 1993–94) was acquired in 1996.

AM: I exhibited this work in Germany in Monika Sprüth's gallery and it was bought for the museum in Canberra. It was also shown in a biennial in Korea. It will be in the middle of the show at the MCA, in a room which is over 5-metres high. I love height but this is a challenge! Around this will be a map of *tendre* [tenderness] with pieces of unravelled wool and drawings of the insides of bodies.

CH: When was your first retrospective?

AM: The first one was in Grenoble in 1989.⁴ But, in fact, the first instance I was asked to do such a thing was a few years earlier than that by a museum in Lyon. I was horrified – at my age! No! ... I really hate dates, and the past. The idea of doing such an exhibition would always hurt my arms, stomach. I just couldn't imagine going backwards; it felt like being mummified. Now I find it amusing!

CH: What are you working on at the moment?

AM: I made the most of a long waiting session in an airport to start itemising all the signs which are bans. I have continued via the internet which I adore for this type of search. I have redrawn them to make a new collection: 'Pregnant women are not allowed to drink'; 'No electric glasses'; 'No tatoos'; 'No sex in the spa'. They are all real ... Of course you are not allowed to walk (you wonder), not allowed to drown (swim), chew gum etc.

It is not so far from *Ma collection de proverbes* (My Collection of Proverbs, 1974–2012), 15 embroidered fabrics with the worst possible derogatory sayings about women. I had no idea I would find so many horrors at the time. In fact, in 1984, the museum in Canberra purchased an edition of the related artist's book I made.

CH: Rachel Kent's catalogue essay often refers to your reading of Roland Barthes's book *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (1977).

AM: This was incredibly important to me. In fact, at the moment, I watch films in the evenings. *Rosebud* last night, for instance. I have always been very influenced by cinema: the close-ups, the fantastic black-and-white contrasts. Particularly François Truffaut and Alfred Hitchcock. And Alain Resnais, of course. I am fascinated by his trajectory from dark films like *Night and Fog* and *Hiroshima Mon Amour* to *Life of Riley* (*Aimer, boire et chanter* in French) at the end of his life.

CH: The exhibition includes two words written with fishnets.

AM: Yes, indeed: *chance* and *désir*. I have made a number of these and Rachel Kent chose these. They are at once sombre and optimistic, tragic and burlesque. The French word 'chance' has different meanings like fortune and luck, the unpredictable, and it brings up the key question of probability.

1. This conversation took place at Marian Goodman Gallery, Paris, 18 April 2014.

2. The artistic director of the 3rd Biennale of Sydney in 1979, titled 'European Dialogue', was Nick Waterlow OAM. Among others on this occasion, he collaborated with Pontus Hulten and one section of the exhibition, 'Uses of Photography in Europe', was curated by Béatrice Parent. The catalogue indicates the presentation of Annette Messenger's *En Voyage* (On Tour, 1977, 13 charcoal drawings and 12 colour photographs). In 1984, the 5th Biennale of Sydney, 'Private Symbol: Social Metaphor', was directed by Leon Paroissien. An additional separate 12-page publication was made by the French organisers, titled *François Boisrond, Annette Messenger, Annick Nozati, Georges Rouse* (Paris, 1984), with a text by the curator Jean-Louis Pradel. In 1990, the 8th Biennale of Sydney, 'The Readymade Boomerang: Certain Relations in 20th Century Art', was directed by René Block. This included the mixed-media installation *Mes Petites Effigies* (My Little Effigies, 1989).

3. 'Annette Messenger', K21 STÄNDEHAUS, Düsseldorf, 27 September 2014 – 22 March 2015.

4. 'Annette Messenger: comédie tragédie 1971–1989', Musée de Grenoble, 1989; with a tour to Bonn, La Roche-sur-Yon and Düsseldorf. Curated by Serge Lemoine and Christine Poullain.

With sincere thanks to Rachel Kent, MCA, Sydney, and Marian Goodman Gallery, Paris.

Annette Messenger: motion / emotion is at the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney, from 24 July to 26 October 2014.



Annette Messager, Mes vœux (My vows), 1989, silver gelatin photographs, colour pencil on paper, string; installed (variable) 350 x 90cm; National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, purchased 1993; © Annette Messager/ADAGP