

ARTSEEN

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ANNETTE LEMIEUX: *Mise en Scène*

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Having grown up in the politically conservative American South, I was first exposed to feminist thought not by my community, but by the film *Legally Blonde*. It's a tepid film in many ways—I don't think the word “feminism” is ever uttered—but I can attest to the capacity of popular movies to awaken critical consciousness. Such a political efficacy of movies—particularly in small-town America—is the subject of Annette Lemieux's exhibition *Mise en Scène* at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, which honors the artist with this year's Maud Morgan Prize, awarded to Massachusetts-based women artists.

On view, through bodies of work both new and old, is Lemieux's timely consideration of the longstanding but increasingly visible political and social divide that's often characterized between urban and rural Americans. The works identify film as a medium that can uniquely serve as common ground for many populaces; it can transport stories and ideas while often locating reference points for diverse audiences, traversing political bubbles. The films, with their discussions of censorship, pathologization, racism, and class division, resonate today almost as if they aren't, in fact, decades old.



Annette Lemieux, *Censor (A)*, 1994. Photoetching printed in black and gray. Promised gift of Richard E. Caves. Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Lemieux's 1994 photo-etching portfolio *Censor (A-E)* extracts stills from *The Great Dictator*, Chaplin's parody of Adolf Hitler—the two figures notoriously donned the same mustache—and explicit lambast of fascism. The film was banned in many parts of Europe, and Chaplin (a British native) was later censored as a Communist sympathizer in the time of McCarthyism; he was exiled from the United States in 1952. One of Lemieux's prints shows Chaplin as Hitler holding a balloon globe, which he pops in the film, mocking the dictator's destructive aims of world domination. But three black stripes—classic emblems of censorship—cut across the page, a nod to the film's censorship and, simultaneously, a formal device for Lemieux's compositions. The still from the film sits in the top left corner; amidst the stripes, the composition clearly references an American flag, connoting the hypocrisy of Chaplin's subsequent censorship in the U.S.

Formally, the prints strike a delicate balance: the imagery in *Censor (A-E)* is rather literal and legible (regardless of one's familiarity with Chaplin's film, the resemblance between the men is iconic). At the same time, the works are elegant. Others variously nod to censorship—by way of films such as *Fahrenheit 451* (*Fire Cone* and *The Watchers*, both 2017)—or reproduce the artist's bedroom as an installation populated with prop facsimiles

from *M* (*Elise*, *Elise 2*, *Pete and Repeat*, and *Scout*, all 2017). The latter

installation nods to a film best-known for its social criticism, particularly due to its early public discussions of mental illness, the death penalty, and pedophilia. Elsewhere, she takes aim at racism and poverty, as considered in *To Kill a Mocking Bird*, by reproducing a still from the moment in which the young protagonist accidentally rolls into the yard of a neighbor who is suspected of being pathologically dangerous, but who later saves the child from a murderous white supremacist (*Spin*, 2017). Bringing the films to life in a personal, domestic space, the artist highlights how personally affecting even politically loaded films can be.



Annette Lemieux, *SPIN (detail)*, 2017. Pigment Inkjet on cotton, velvet. Three panels at 32 × 32 × 1¼ inches. Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Lemieux's consideration of film as a bridge between disparate Americas—in particular, films that influenced her young political consciousness—is timely and imperative, but her criticism ultimately plays it safe. Hitler's world domination and censorship in the form of black lines are easy targets, posing no immediate threat and positing no controversial opinion. Similarly, references to *M* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* operate at the somewhat-safe remove of historical distance. The works are undoubtedly political, but not especially polemical in today's environment—which is both their limit and their merit. Like the Hollywood-style progressivism of *Legally Blonde*, Lemieux's works represent issues and introduce critical thought, but don't themselves serve as rigorous critiques. Similar to the popular films she takes as her subjects, her critique is both poignant and palatable. But like a polite discussion about movies with relatives over dinner, it's neither offensive nor compromising, radical nor alienating. Nonetheless, it's a start.