

Interview with Annette Cyr

Annette Cyr is a painter and filmmaker whose latest short, “Blindness” will be in the Festival de Cannes Short Film Corner, May 14-19, 2018. Cyr earned her MFA in Painting from Yale University, and currently divides her time between her studios in New York City and San Diego where she is Associate Professor, Lead Faculty of Art at National University.

Vanessa Bender: Was there a pivotal moment when you decided to follow your path as an artist?

Annette Cyr: I was a sophomore in college. I took a figure drawing class in which I drew from a nude model for the first time. When I showed up for class the teacher thought I was the model. I was very embarrassed. When I was drawing from the model, the voices in my head stopped for the first time in my life. I realized this is IT.

VB: what kind of voices? Any story behind them?

At the time the voices were all questions or shoulds, coming to me in such a dense and jumbled way, they were like static. Now I can sort them out, and the voices are the committee of characters inside me. They can be helpful as advisors or characters in films. But not then. In my late teens and early 20’s, the voices created continual interference and confusion for me.

In college, I knew I needed a practical career – a way to earn money. Both of my grandmothers had essentially been single parents, raising their child. I took art history, and thought I would be an academic.

But I didn’t look like those girls with smooth hair pulled back. And the path was too predictable: you could see your life, all the way to the end. Horrifying!

I set up a challenge for myself: I was going to live in Paris for my junior year. If I could develop my art on my own, outside of school, I would let myself become an artist. I drew from the sculptures a couple of times a week at the Musée Rodin, and from a live model at the L’academie de la Grande-Chaumière (OMG it is still there, as it was for me in the 70s, and as it was the 19th century!).

I didn’t take studio art classes in Paris. I took art history, French phonetics and cinema. My art history teacher at La Sorbonne, Mr. Jean Thomas, was a painter, and he let me turn in a portfolio instead of a final paper for the class. He was very encouraging. He said I drew with “une ligne masculine”. Today this would be politically incorrect, but it was intended as high praise and meant strength.

In fact some male artists’ drawing does not the strength I prefer: Some of Matisse’s line work is a bit flaccid for me. The way Ellsworth Kelly has his plant drawings float on the page, with stems ending randomly, seems careless to me. I prefer lines that grow up out of the white of the page.

I made progress that year on my own, outside of an art school setting. I decided to let myself become an artist. My dad said, I’m not 100% behind this. That’s okay, I replied. I’m the only one who has to be 100%behind this.

Later when my parents saw the work I’d done the first semester at grad school, each one came to me separately the next morning to praise my work. I was so relieved. Didn’t know how helpful their support was, until I had it.

Although I was graduating from Yale with an MFA in painting, one of 18 students in my class – out of how many applicants? – my high school friends were way more excited about my getting married. I thought, wait a minute, I got into graduate school at Yale. Do you know the statistics on that? How hard is it to get married?

I don't blame you one bit. A good marriage is hard to find and should never be forced. If it was it would likely be a setback. Happens all the time... So where does your inspiration come from?

Inspiration comes from whatever catches my attention for no logical reason. This can be from the world around me: As an undergraduate it was light on a fishbowl and the Santa Barbara landscape; as a graduate student it was the gym (formerly only for men) gang shower used by women, and all along the way: magazine images, 19th century woodcuts and the tradition of Western figurative painting. I tend to paint what is missing in my life – to balance everything. I first painted the beach when I lived 3000 miles away. I seriously started painting flowers and animals after living for several years in the cement and asphalt of NYC. With the early “Women in Predicament” series, after I finished each painting, I noticed that I was painting what I had just gone through in my life. Then I ended up painting what I was going through simultaneously WHILE I was living it. That was rough. Very difficult to be living what you are painting, and painting what you are living, but it pushed me up to transform the paintings (and my life) along the way: (“Crucifixion” became “Crucifixion/Resurrection”); “The Birth of Venus” evolved into “My Death Rides Beside Me”).

Curious, I decided to paint what I *wanted* in my life – which was a loving relationship. So I painted couples and “Kiss” paintings for several years.

Now, with my current “Predicaments Project”, I’m looking in three directions at once: back on my life, examining where I am now and also forward into old age, to create images of the entire timeline of a woman’s life. This is not the same as the traditional 4-part “Ages of Man”. I am grateful for that tradition, as it got me asking, how does this play out for me? I’ve always been looking at the tradition of painting to see what I can take from it, to see how I can pull it, make it relevant for myself and my time.

Can you tell me about the processes that go into your work?

I draw every day. If I don’t know what to draw, I draw what is in front of me.

This led to the “San Diego Studio” Series. For an artist to draw or paint one’s studio is a tradition. But now we have a computer and all these cords. What seems really stupid and ugly becomes quite amazing when you draw it. I also took photos of the paintings as I worked on them. This freed me up to change them hugely along the way. There are at least 6 of them: all of the same corner, and each one is really different. Trapezoids of light come in from the skylights at times. I added flowers or a plant at times. I wanted to track the way a painting for me, for the painter is about the process: the courage it takes to make those changes – there is no “command z” in painting to take off layers. Being a painter takes more courage than any art form (except maybe carving in stone or wood). You can’t go backward, or undo. You must always go forward.

By filming the San Diego Studio Series, I wanted to show the amazing things I see as a painter along the way. This is the delight of painting for a painter! Something no one else sees. I want to capture that. The final painting is only the latest stage, or even just the residue of all the activity that went on before.

The Studio Series films are animations of the actual process – we could say the life story – of each painting. Sometimes the canvas is a battleground, sometimes a garden or an ice rink. You never know.

Also, the processes that keep you connected to the modern art community?

I go to art exhibitions of all artists I know. Over the years I’ve gone to wonderful art colonies. This is a great way to find your tribe. Instagram is a great way of seeing what others are doing now and inspires

me to do mini-movies and keep on looking around. I am inspired by following artists who show not only their own work, but include whatever they are looking at, and art exhibition they like. This is very rich visual sharing.

What inspired your “Women in Predicament” series?

Originally I was inspired by the Western tradition of figurative painting. I wanted to paint like Veronese, Rubens, Goya, Delacroix but in a way relevant for my time. I took battle scenes from Rubens and changed the men in armor into men in business suits. This became my “Men in Business Suits” Series from the mid80s. ”Someone said, You’re a woman. Why are you painting men?” Why indeed? I next painted “Boat Launch” (1989 at Yaddo). The source is an 18th century engraving of a man launching a boat. I changed it to a woman launching a boat. It was transformative and empowering. “Boat Launch” is the first “Women in Predicament” work, though I did not have that umbrella title until later. In “Boat Launch”, I wanted to keep the power of the gesture that always happens on the small sketch, and apply it to the large canvas. I stayed with black and white and exerted myself to keep the energetic arcs and wide lines on the large version.

For sources for “Women in Predicaments”, I continue to look at paintings from the tradition of Western painting, historic photos, engravings or woodcarvings and current news photos swapping genders as needed. I learned to trust my instincts as to what images I develop. I realized at one point I was painting my life. Curious, I decided to paint what I wanted my life to be or what I wanted in my life, to see what would happen in my life and art. This led me to the Kiss and Lovers Series of the 90s.

I wanted to be the next Michelangelo – to take the grand tradition of figure painting – Titian, Goya, Veronese, Rubens, Delacroix – and put it in terms for our times and my life. Any day now I’ll find m Sistine Chapel!

How did these ideas evolve?

Some of my “Women in Predicaments” appeared first in the “Divine Comedy Installation Painting”(BACA Downtown, Brooklyn 1988). For this I created my idea of Hell (l’inferno) Purgatory and Paradiso in which Hell is perennially losing battles, and here is where my “Woman on Fire” first appeared. The source for this image is a news photo of a stunt man who caught on fire on set in Miami. “Stranglehug” first appears from Purgatory. In which Purgatory is about continual battles, perennially battles ensue, with no one stopping, winning or losing. The source for “Stranglehug”, (in which a man and woman are locked in a hug while simultaneously strangling each other), is a tiny Inuit ivory carving from the National Museum of the American Indian. My Paradiso is a swimming pool, viewed from underwater. No women in predicaments there! Just paradise!

The Ages of Man is a traditional theme and I decided to do an Ages of Woman sometime in the early 90s. I saw how I was painting my life along the way, and only needed to go back and find an image for youth. This is “Girl on Horse in Pond”, of a young girl balancing on the back of a horse in water. The source for this is a tiny, tiny black and white image from a nudist magazine.

In doing my Ages of Woman theme, I discovered that there are far more “ages” or stages, we pass through as women, and so, I hear, do men.

How film became as a source of inspiration for my painting.

For the first time in my life, I was having trouble painting: nothing seemed engrossing to me. I was isolated in San Diego at the time, where art seems to be narrowly conceptually based or recreational “plein air” painting. There are also a decorative abstract strain and a photorealistic tradition. None of these are useful

to me.

Two solutions appeared, one in painting, the other in film:

1. In painting, I knew I needed to draw everyday, anything, to get going. I needed a mentor. I went to Maria Sybilla Merian, and started drawing from her amazingly beautifully orchestrated “botanicals”. More than botanicals, she was years ahead of other scientists in observing and documenting the life cycles of butterflies and insects. Each of her prints from “Flowers, Butterflies and Insects” shows the host plant and all the life stages: adult, egg, caterpillar and chrysalis of one insect. I also started reading about her life. She earned her living through her prints, supported herself and her daughters, left her deadbeat husband, went to South America in 1699 to draw and study the flora and fauna there.
2. In film, I entered a graduate program (as a student!) online in digital filmmaking at National University.

I had learned from an online writing class, that if I had homework deadlines, I created work I wouldn't have otherwise done. I also knew that my films done up to that point had great stories but lousy production values, and I needed to up my game to a professional level. I needed to find a group of filmmakers to work with as well.

These two threads – one for painting and one for film – interwove when I decided to make a documentary for my thesis film based on Merian as my painting mentor: “Merian & ME”, about a middle aged painter being inspired by the wisdom of an older creative woman, albeit over 300 years older. Along the way I transformed “Merian & ME”, an experimental doc, into “Blindness”, a narrative (fiction) film. The core story of both “Merian & ME” and “Blindness” is the same: how do you find your way beyond an impasse as a painter, when life intervenes with its challenges to your creative vision and your health? How do you balance the responsibilities of midlife with the need to find your way out of a creative impasse?

I knew I could do a documentary, having done one before. On the other hand, to write, direct and produce a narrative film, with a professional cast and crew, was a novel and huge challenge, so I went for that. I like to do the thing I don't know how to do. I could make use of the information, skills, experience from graduate school to make this shift – to take my filmmaking from, what I call selfie films (which I still love and do) to another level: by working with a team of actors and crew.

HOW Is Blindness connected to the Women in Predicament series?

Both my painting and my film come from my life. What I am doing in painting provides stories for my film. What I'm doing in film leads me to painting ideas. Each serves as both relief from and a launching pad for the other.

FILM How would you define *Blindness* in 140 characters or less?

A painter struggles to finish paintings for a major show, as her father, going blind, moves in with her. She learns she has the same gene for blindness. He has given up astronomy and relearns a Chopin nocturne. She refuses to do something else besides art. Inspired by his playing, she creates sparkling sculptures in wire, like the stars she can no longer see.

What are your next steps?

As a filmmaker I'm a content creator. As a painter, I'm an image maker. The content that informs both is the life of a woman artist. Here are my current plans in each art form:

In painting, I am working on “The Women in Predicaments Project” for museum and gallery exhibitions. “Predicaments” includes new versions of all my “Women in Predicament” images to date, as well as new images of a woman’s life, as I expand the timeline of a woman’s life into old age and up to the moment of dying. “The Women in Predicaments Project” includes both paintings and wall-sized digital projections, and was directly inspired by “Emerging”, which is also a narrative of all the stages in the life of the main character, Elizabeth, from 10 to 100 years of age.

In film, I am writing “Emerging”, a mini-series about the life of an artist from every decade of her life, from 10 to 100. “Blindness” is the proof of concept for “Emerging”. I will be pitching “Emerging” at the Cannes Film Festival as a mini-series.

The Value of a Film Festival

The main point of having a short film done and in a festival, is to show what you can do as writer/director. You use the short film as a launching pad for the next project. Your next pilot outline or script needs to be ready and waiting in your suitcase.

When I finished “Blindness”, I looked at all the scripts for other films I had in the works. I discovered each one was from a different stage in an artist’s life, and this led to my next film project: a mini-series, “Emerging”, about an artist at every decade of her life.

And here, again, painting and film interwove and merged for me: the film idea for “Emerging” reminded me of my painting idea of the ages of woman idea. This inspired me to develop my “Women in Predicaments” into a major exhibition project. The “Women in Predicaments Project” includes images of all the ages of woman from 10 to 100, done as large-scale paintings and digital projections.

What does a submission for Cannes entail?

You need to have all the same materials that you need for applying to any festival.

For all festivals, you put your digital film on vimeo.com, password protected; on Withoutabox and on FilmFreeway. Have prepared: A short digital film, (for Cannes, you upload it directly to their site) For the Application, have ready to upload:

- 2-3 stills and a poster
- Director’s statement
- Director’s bio
- A list of cast and crew

Pay the fee For the Festival, have ready:

- Have business cards ready (industry professionals seem to prefer these)
- Have postcards ready
- Have your next script/project packed and ready to pitch For Cannes specific information:

Go to <http://www.festival-cannes.com/en/festival/> and read the directions. Cannes has two sections: Cinefondation which has no fee, and a strict length limit of 15 minutes including credits, and Short Film Corner (Court Film Métrage).

Watch : <http://cannes-or-bust.com/2015/01/submitting-a-short-film-to-the-cannes-festival/> for a quick, smart overview. Google: Cannes Starter Guide for more info by same author.

Q. VB How can you help other artists progress in a field as competitive as painting and filmmaking?

A. AC We all have different characters within. Here is advice from two characters in me:

Annette Souris (the mouse, who is genuine, serious, sincere, and the main character in “The Life of a 21st Century Artist” film series): You have to trust yourself, do the work and keep showing up.

Dr. Lutèce (the realistic, French therapist from my film, “My New Look” <https://vimeo.com/248729464> Password: DIRECTOR for BenderArts Readers): “This is not about art. It’s about you. You *are* the art work.” Dr. Lutèce advises you to go to therapy and get over your shyness. Learn to speak up, act confidently (whether you are or not) and dress to surprise.

Do you have a philosophy by which you live?

I’m grateful. All we have is some time here. Life is what we make of it. The meaning of life is what you decide it to be. I’ve been given talent and it is my responsibility to protect, grow, use and share it. Right now, I’m living with Janis Joplin’s “Don’t ever compromise yourself. You’ve all you got.” I’ve been surprised by how empowered I’ve been by the recent shift in gender politics, and initiatives like “50/50 by2020”.

I’m reading Eugene Delacroix’s journals. He wrote about Domenichino, “ this great painter, who combined that true humility which is almost inseparable from great talent...” This stopped me in my tracks: the idea of humility connected to talent. How shocking to apply this thought to our era.

What was the best time in your life? Worst?

There have been lots of both bests and worsts. Oddly, they seem to come together. When I think of the best times, they were embedded in the midst of the worst. When I think of the worst, I remember the glimmers of grace in *their* midst.

There was one time in which I had no money, no home (the subletters refused to move out of my loft), no husband (he said he didn’t love me anymore). But I had friends. They helped me. I called a friend, Wendy Setzer, and said I needed a job. It was Tuesday. She called me on Wednesday and asked if I could start the next day. That’s how I got into design which lasted as my day job for the next 20 years.

When I was at my emotional weakest, I had to find away to take the most difficult actions on my behalf: get a job, evict the subletters, and undertake my divorce. I found strength in myself I didn’t know I had. I took over the reins to every aspect of my life.

BTW, for job security and your development as an artist or filmmaker, never turn down a promotion. Learning to manage others is useful to being a successful artist or filmmaker. I use managerial and design skills burnished in publishing on a daily basis. for filmmaking.

Now is the best time in my life. I have energy, time, health, job I love and confidence to trust myself. I have a strong network of talented friends. I have an affectionate, supportive and creative husband. I am focused with no time to waste.

Did either or both of these experiences impact your art?

Yes. In bad times, drawing and painting always gets me through. For example, “The Women in Predicament” painting that I started during my divorce began as an upside down Crucifixion. (The source is Michelangelo’s Crucifixion of Saint Peter in the Vatican.

Over that year, she eventually starts to look angry, then determined and begins to lift herself up off the cross. The title became: “Crucifixion/Resurrection”.

Have you ever wished you developed another skill, or art form, in life? If so what and why?

- Sculpting in marble: I first thought I was going to be a sculptor.
- Singing: My secret dream is to be a jazz singer. Working on my Peggy Lee set now.
- Cinematographer: to know how to paint with light with a camera, as Valentina Caniglia the DP (Cinematographer) on “Blindness” does.
- Actor: It’s amazing the characters we have within us. To let them out to play and express themselves would be fun and wild.

How would you compare teaching art online to teaching art in person?

You have to work harder in online teaching to convey warmth and personality. You must be more astute psychologically to listen and understand the students in the online format. Humor is riskier to convey in online teaching.

On the other hand online teaching lets me avoid personal fears and prejudices. We all have them and it’s better to be aware of them. For example, online I can seamlessly give tough feedback to a student. In a classroom onsite, sometimes the student towers over me. I must marshal courage and tact, and give that honest feedback.

How has teaching impacted your art?

What I make my students do: two sketches a day, I do myself.

I’ve learned some important things from my students:

1. Students make me see things in new ways: one student did a small drawing of the boring, flat, San Diego Mission bay. It was as exquisite as a Flemish landscape painting, with perfectly balanced proportions of sky and water over and above a tiny strip of land.
2. When students do presentations on other artists’ work, I discover new amazing drawings by Diego Rivera and Corot and others.
3. I also learned that the Internet is rife with fake images. TIP: Always look at art from museum sites, not blogs. One of my students found 5 drawings by Michelangelo on line. Only one was truly by Michelangelo.
4. In my classes at National University, the students are usually first generation going to college and working adults, often with young children. In every group of 20 students – all non-art majors – I can immediately see that there are at least 3 or 4 students with the talent equal to my students at Pratt, RISD and Parsons. Visual talent is everywhere. As it has been said, opportunity is not. Everyone learns to draw perceptually in 4 intensive weeks, no matter what their starting point might be.

Is there anything I didn’t cover, but should have?

Yes, money and therapy.

Money:

1. Find a way to earn money that gives you time to paint weekly, that supports your self respect and

does not numb your brain.

2. Get a master's degree along the way.
3. Work both in the business world and the academic world if possible. Each one makes you grow in different and important ways.
4. Set up a way to paint without other distractions weekly and also for at least a month every year. Increase your creative time over your life time.
5. Therapy: If you are shy, frustrated, have money issues, hit a wall: get a therapist, read relevant books, go to 12-step groups, go through "The Artists Way", journalize, do improve or whatever it takes for you. Self-help helps.

What was going on in your life when you created this piece?

OMG Vanessa, you have picked the most snarky work I've ever done!!!

I'd been in NYC for 10 or 15 years, always painting, always hoping to be discovered and get in a gallery. Meanwhile I was working full time, usually crammed into 4 long days, in graphic design, asking myself, would Michelangelo be doing this? And why does a painter need to learn how to manage people anyway? I should move to the country and get a job driving an ambulance instead.

What you have to know is that when I was an undergraduate in the late 70s, artists like Donald Judd were considered gods. The 70s art student was supposed to start by doing figurative work and evolve to doing abstract or conceptual or pop work. I realized after my first year of painting, that I would never evolve beyond being a "figurative" painter.

The best painting works both figuratively, by which I mean it has content, and abstractly, by which I mean the formal elements are also the content. This brings us to my definition of the difference between painting and illustration (and is probably the most important thing I can tell you): Painting evokes (in the viewer) and Illustration depicts. Great illustration is great, however it is not painting. Some "paintings" by my definition, whether abstract, conceptual or photorealistic, are illustration.

I have nothing for or against Judd per se. His work just gives me nothing useful. That's all. And yet, this sort of artist has a major career. In the case of this ad, it was of course "Donald Judd Stacks" but the way my eye first read it: it appears as Sucks. The type just lines up that way, and for those of us who read by shape, that was how it first appeared to me. I figured some fine artist was working as a designer, and being irked at the design day job – using a very narrow part of his or her visual gifts – and set up the letter tracking to convey the visual effect: "Donald Judd Sucks", as either revenge or a cri de coeur. I just clarified it a bit in this work from the "Good Girls" Series, (2014).

1 Homework: Take a class – anywhere, of any kind. If doing homework makes you do some new work, hey eat that humble pie. You are back on track.

2 Do "[The Artist's Way](#)" (possibly again, even for the 6th time). When journalizing each day puts you down a well of ever-spiraling gloom, stop.

3 Do something physical on a regular basis: dance classes will help your drawing and composition, as your body connects to gravity and power. Swimming will help your subconscious show up –welling up from the water-echoes as you do laps. Or jog. Night walks around the block. Jane Fonda's tapes on your phone. Remember it takes at least 5 times of doing something for it to click. Being a painter is like being an athlete. Eat right, sleep right, and stay strong.

4 Find a mentor. I'm shy and live in the 8th largest city in the USA, which, surprisingly or not, is designated as an underserved area for the arts by the esteemed College Arts Association.

I found a 17th century artist, Maria Sibylla Merian, and drew after her etchings each day. I read everything I could about her. She became my advisor.

1 Have fun. You can't just command the Muse to show up. Sorry, the 19th century is over. She's liberated now. She/He wants power. And she/he wants to have fun. So have fun – whatever that means for you. Taking a hot bath was my treat – and antidote to anxiety and depression. I've had 3-bath days.

2 Paint wildly on 6 old ugly paintings: Take 6 of your old paintings that are ugly. Turn them upside down, sand them and start new paintings on them. You'll be amazed at the richness from the oil and color below.

3 Move on the page or canvas: Painter's impasse* is not quite the same as Writer's Block – which poet William Stafford wrote is overcome by “lowering your standards”. In painting, a visual and physical medium, you just need to *move*. Action breeds action. So move pencils, markers, and kind of paint over paper. I found huge dictionary-sized sketchbooks on sale and started doing 3spreads a day – with anything: collage, glitter pens, sketches after traditional paintings, which moved me onto new work. *my term for this state.

4 Your Biggest Painting Idea: Write a description of your biggest painting idea; maybe some sketches too. Your Muse loves power and ambition. Your Muse loves tenderness too. The Muse is any or all genders.

5 Take up another art: if you have excellence in one, you know the process required and can apply that to another art. You will never be at zero. You will bring your painter's ability to the other art, Refreshing both. The days of doing only one thing well in art to be taken seriously as an artist are over along with the rest of the 70s.

6 Be in a “taking in the new phase”, before you can be in a “putting out your new art work phase”. Without being logical, look for what catches your eye: from ads in the junk mail to postcards at a museum to your old work to the weeds in your yard – and compile these images, sketch from them, trace them, and recombine them.

Thank you for sharing your art, wisdom, and pragmatic approach to living an artful life with maximum productivity. You truly breathe art and opportunities to make the creative dots connect. Many learn from you and I'm grateful to be one of them.