

New Work: Mai-Thu Perret



New Work: Mai–Thu Perret

November 21, 2008–March 1, 2009

The Swiss artist Mai–Thu Perret produces multidisciplinary, installation-based work that integrates socialist subject matter, feminist politics, and classic modernist themes. Her protean artistic practice flows from a utopian narrative titled *The Crystal Frontier* that she has been writing for nearly a decade. Comprising a series of discrete fictional texts that take various forms (including diary entries, letters, daily schedules, and song lyrics), it is a purposely unresolved, fragmented account of a small group of women in their twenties and thirties who have moved to the desert to escape a life codified by Western capitalism. The plot, set in a remote area of New Mexico at an unspecified time referred to as year zero, revolves around these women and their utopian commune, New Ponderosa Year Zero. According to the story, the women relocated after following an activist named Beatrice Mandell, who advocated that “a truly non-patriarchal social organization had to be built from the ground up, starting with a core group of women who would have to learn how to be perfectly self-sufficient before being able to include men in the community.”¹



Unsold goods a thousand years old, 2008. Courtesy Timothy Taylor Gallery, London

Utopia, by definition, is an imaginary and indefinitely remote place. Indeed, the term originates from Greek words meaning “no place.” This suggests that utopian enterprises such as Perret’s belong more to the realm of fiction and allegory than they do to practical experience. It is no surprise, therefore, that the novel has been a critical locus for utopian thought. In writing *The Crystal Frontier*, Perret draws on the rich genre of the utopian novel, made famous by Sir Thomas More, H. G. Wells, and Aldous Huxley, and specifically on protofeminist writings such as Margaret Cavendish’s *The Blazing World* (1666) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland* (1915). Upon closer review, a profusion of literary models become apparent in *The Crystal Frontier* and throughout Perret’s visual language, including J. K. Huysmans’s *Against Nature* (1884), Eugene Zamiatin’s *We* (1924), Gilles Deleuze’s “Desert Islands” (1953), and Robert Smithson’s “The Crystal Land” (1966). But insofar as *The Crystal Frontier* stems from Perret’s literary background (she has a degree in literature from Cambridge University), it also acknowledges the actual history of utopian communities in the United States—a history that includes Llano del Rio, formed in the California desert in 1914; the Oneida Community in upstate New York in the mid-nineteenth century; and the hippie communes that flowered across the country in the 1960s. In constructing her invented, utopian world, Perret cleverly abuts the actual and the virtual, commingling reality and fiction, present and past, historical fact and personal fantasy. In so doing she creates a thoughtful, imaginary space for her art objects to inhabit—an open-ended aesthetic universe as mysterious and alluring as it is historically and culturally canny.

Perret’s vivid narrative acts as a springboard for a diverse practice that includes sculptures, paintings, drawings, films, wallpaper designs, neon signs, architectural structures, tapestries, and ceramics. Rather than establishing a one-to-one correlation with the narrative, the objects in her installations are typically only alluded to in *The*



Echo Canyon, 2006. Private collection, Switzerland

Crystal Frontier; they are tangential items that could have been created in the ateliers of New Ponderosa Year Zero. For instance, in an entry titled “Echo Canyon,” Kim, one of the protagonists, recounts the discovery of a cave dwelling populated by feral children prone to hanging from the ceiling: “Underground beneath the second house they say there is a secret world of caves, shards of crystal as big as baseball bats hang down from the ceiling and there is water of a special kind that quenches all thirst and also all desire.” In Perret’s 2006 installation of the same name, an assembly of abstract metal sculptures loosely conjures her narrative description. One of the forms evokes crystalline stalagmites or a cactus, another resembles a desert shrub, and yet another recalls a cluster of bullhorns, the shape repeated in varying sizes to suggest the repetition and taper of an echo. While they look like vegetal desert forms, the sculptures are also reminiscent of a stage set designed by the Futurist artist Fortunato Depero in 1917 for an opera by Igor Stravinsky. Thus they unite actual imagery from the past with the imaginary space of the narrative, developing an association with the “Echo Canyon” text that is more suggestive than exacting. Perret resists a propensity toward the illustrative in her work; her objects propel the narrative into a coextensive material world that is richly layered with appropriated signs and symbols.

Rough-hewn, faceless mannequins, handmade from papier-mâché, tend to occupy Perret’s exhibitions—functioning, perhaps, as abstract surrogates for the characters in the story. This presentation features *Sylvania* (2006), a woman who stands with her arms raised up to the sky in a devotional gesture. She wears a short brown wig with a bobbed haircut and a dress made by a haute-couture embroidery manufacturer in Saint Gallen, Switzerland, with whom the artist collaborated on the piece. Forms naturally occurring in wood grain inspired the textured lace pattern of the dress. In fact, wood is a recurring motif in Perret’s

wallpaper, painting, and sculpture; the etymology of the name *Sylvania*—meaning “of the forest”—further underscores the importance of the wood pattern (a sylvan is someone who dwells in a densely wooded area).

The sculpture’s name, however, also signals a forest of a different kind—a metaphorical place laden with found and borrowed imagery. The forest this sylvan resides in could be best described as the “forest of signs” conjured by the 1989 exhibition of that name at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and its important antecedent, *Pictures*, a 1977 presentation at Artists Space, New York. These historic exhibitions featured artists who work with recognizable and often appropriated images. Sherrie Levine, a leading figure of this generation of artists, was featured in both exhibitions. Her provocative restagings of works by famous male artists—from Marcel Duchamp’s iconic conceptual sculpture *Fountain* (1917) to photographs by the American photographer Walker Evans—raised questions about authenticity, identity, and property in art; she is renowned for “unsettling the principles that have upheld the (male-dominated) conventions of mass culture’s images or of Modernist representations.”² *Sylvania*’s dress pays specific homage to Levine’s *Knot* paintings—sheets of plywood

with gold painted over the knots—that served as an important inspiration for Perret’s pattern.

Feminism is an important anchor of *The Crystal Frontier*, given that the narrative is moored in the protagonists’ desire to escape a culture regulated by patriarchal dictates. One entry in the story reads: “Our bodies free to bask in the sun, to be blown about by the wind, we will comprehend our relations and renovate nature, claiming back the life that has been stolen away from us, mutilated by patriarchy and capital, our bodies no longer cut off from each other.” This excerpt strikingly echoes the writing of one of feminism’s most seminal thinkers, the philosopher Luce Irigaray. In *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Irigaray posits that unless new feminine paradigms are developed, women will remain unrecognized outsiders of cultural discourse. She suggests that over time, as a result of gender, woman has been relegated to being an “other” who stands outside the culture she inhabits. “For what is important,” Irigaray writes, “is to disconcert the staging of representation according to exclusively ‘masculine’ parameters. . . . It is not a matter of toppling that order so as to replace it—that amounts to the same thing in the end—but of disrupting and modifying it, starting from an ‘outside’ that is exempt, in part, from phallogocratic law.”³ Perret’s project, like that of her predecessor Levine, attempts to activate such an outside space.

Though Perret invokes the language of classical feminism—and often quotes from important female artists—its presence functions as one voice among many in her polyphonous body of work. Constructivism, Marxism, theater, Bauhaus design, Minimalism, nature, the occult, Eastern religions, popular culture, and geometric abstraction are among the many subjects that banter about in Perret’s labyrinthine aesthetic world. She resists an all-consuming didacticism, instead unfurling a heteroglossic

constellation of associative ideas and forms to stimulate alternate ways of thinking. *The Crystal Frontier* is, in effect, an attempt to envision a hopeful space of possibility wherein new subjectivities are free to crystallize outside a world mediated by capital. In a letter to an anonymous friend who visited New Ponderosa Year Zero, another protagonist, Marina, writes: “I truly hope you will consider everything that we talked about and maybe come back for a while. But if you do, it must be with a real understanding of the fact that the revolution starts inside you, first and foremost. The rest is just icing on the cake, and we have little patience for it. Nobody gets mothered here.”

Perret’s introduction to *The Crystal Frontier* describes it as “a true life story.” Her use of the word *true* here is curious, as the narrative is clearly a work of fiction. This usage, however, interestingly relates to Marcel Proust’s notion of the past, which he described as “real without being actual, ideal without being abstract.”⁴ As for Proust, the real (or true) for Perret resides in the shifting patterns of time, whereby the real is summoned in a thoughtful recollection of past experiences. Perret echoes the Proustian collapsing of time in her practice, effectively provoking us to think about the present. For example, in a recent exhibition in Maastricht, the Netherlands, she juxtaposed the neon sculpture *Harmonium* (2007), inspired by a nineteenth-century painting by the Swedish artist Hilma af Klint, with *We* (2007), a giant sculptural labyrinth partly inspired by Robert Morris’s *L-Beams* of the 1960s. Though seemingly unrelated, the sculptural forms resonated: the soft glow of the neon’s organic shapes contrasted heavily with the hard-edged monumentality of *We*, prompting viewers to consider two very different moments of modern art, one obscure and the other well known.

Perret’s generative project mines the past and relates to the present while referring to an imaginary space existing outside any



culturally prescribed notion of time. After all, *The Crystal Frontier's* year zero does not exist in the Gregorian calendar. It is exactly this fusion of virtual and actual space that the philosopher Gilles Deleuze describes in his conception of a "crystal image." "The crystal image," he writes, "is the point of indiscernibility of the two distinct images, the actual and the virtual, while what we see in the crystal is time itself, a bit of time in the pure state, the very distinction between the two images which keeps on reconstituting itself."⁵ Like Deleuze's crystal image, Perret succeeds in splitting time in her practice while conflating oppositional states, simultaneously preserving and reconstituting the past while symbolically envisioning a crystalline future redolent with possibility.

Apsara DiQuinzio

Assistant Curator, Painting and Sculpture

Notes

- 1 All quotes from *The Crystal Frontier* are from Mai-Thu Perret: *Land of Crystal* (Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2007), 105–48.
- 2 Ann Goldstein, *A Forest of Signs: Art in the Crisis of Representation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 45.
- 3 Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 68.
- 4 Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, vol. 6, trans. Andreas Mayor and Terence Kilmartin (New York: Modern Library, 1993), 264.
- 5 *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Gilles Deleuze, Hugh Tomlinson, and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 82.

Mai-Thu Perret was born in 1976 in Geneva, where she continues to live and work. She received a BA in English literature from the University of Cambridge, England, in 1997 and attended the Independent Study Program at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, from 2002 to 2003. She has had solo exhibitions at Timothy Taylor Gallery, London; Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin; the Kitchen, New York; the Bonnefantenmuseum, Maastricht, the Netherlands; Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen, Switzerland; the Renaissance Society, Chicago; Centre d'Art Contemporain, Geneva; Galerie Francesca Pia, Zurich; and Praz-Delavallade, Paris. Her work will be the subject of a February 2009 exhibition at the Aspen Museum of Art and has been featured in group exhibitions at the Rubell Family Collection, Miami; the 2007 Lyon Biennial, France; Cherry and Martin, Los Angeles; and Midway Contemporary Art, Minneapolis.

Works in the Exhibition

Letter Home (After A.R.), 2008
Screen print on paper
Two prints, each: 33 x 23 1/2 in.
(84 x 59.5 cm)
Collection of the artist, courtesy Barbara Weiss, Berlin

Sylvania, 2006
Steel, wire, papier-mâché, acrylic, gouache, synthetic wig, steel, and lace
Dress by Susanne Zangerl, Zurich; custom fabric by Forster Rohner, Saint Gallen, Switzerland
86 1/2 x 53 1/2 x 23 3/8 in. (220 x 135 x 60 cm)
Collection of the artist, courtesy Timothy Taylor Gallery, London

Underground, 2007
Screen print on paper
33 x 23 1/2 in. (84 x 59.5 cm)
Collection of the artist, courtesy Francesca Pia, Zurich

Untitled, 2007/2008
Block-printed wallpaper
Dimensions variable
Courtesy Wallpapers by Artists, Dijon

Bandersnatch, 2008
Fiberboard and Plexiglas
98 1/2 x 27 3/8 x 38 1/2 in. (250 x 70 x 250 cm)
Courtesy Timothy Taylor Gallery, London

Borogroves, 2008
Fiberboard and Plexiglas
68 1/2 x 27 3/8 x 38 1/2 in. (175 x 70 x 100 cm)
Courtesy Timothy Taylor Gallery, London

Burbles, 2008
Fiberboard and Plexiglas
39 3/4 x 94 1/2 x 98 7/8 in. (100 x 240 x 250 cm)
Courtesy Timothy Taylor Gallery, London

The dragon gave birth to a golden phoenix that shattered the turquoise blue sky, 2008
Glazed ceramic
82 x 87 1/2 x 6 3/4 in. (208 x 222 x 17 cm)
Courtesy Timothy Taylor Gallery, London

Illuminate completely the mountains, the rivers and myriad blossoms, 2008
Glazed ceramic
22 x 8 3/4 x 4 in. (56 x 22 x 10 cm)
Courtesy Timothy Taylor Gallery, London

One sword one piece, 2008
Glazed ceramic
31 1/2 x 47 1/4 x 2 in. (80 x 120 x 5 cm)
Courtesy Timothy Taylor Gallery, London

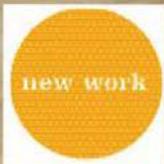
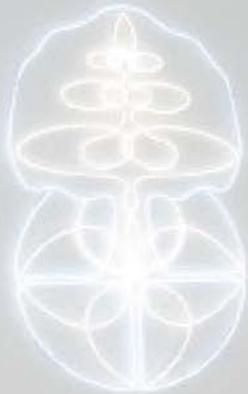
South of the river, it's a tangerine; north of the river, it's an orange, 2008
Glazed ceramic
19 3/4 x 15 1/2 x 4 1/4 in. (50 x 39 x 11 cm)
Courtesy Timothy Taylor Gallery, London

Unsold goods a thousand years old, 2008
Glazed ceramic
18 1/2 x 14 x 4 3/4 in. (47 x 36 x 12 cm)
Courtesy Timothy Taylor Gallery, London

Your original face, 2008
Glazed ceramic
18 1/2 x 14 x 2 1/2 in. (47 x 36 x 6.5 cm)
Courtesy Timothy Taylor Gallery, London

The *New Work* series is organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and is generously supported by Collectors Forum, the founding patron of the series. Major funding is also provided by the Mimi and Peter Haas Fund, Nancy and Steven H. Oliver, and Robin Wright. Additional support for this exhibition is provided by Pro Helvetia, Swiss Arts Council. Media support provided by *San Francisco* magazine.

Reverse, from left: Installation view of the exhibition *Land of Crystal* at the Bonnefantenmuseum, Maastricht, the Netherlands, 2007; photo: Peter Cox. *Untitled*, 2007/2008. *Sylvania*, 2006; photo by Stefan Rohner. This side: photos by Christian Altengarten, Lukas Wassmann, and Tom van Eynde. All images © 2008 Mai-Thu Perret



San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

www.sfmoma.org

Printed on New Leaf Reincarnation: 100 percent recycled, 50 percent postconsumer waste, processed chlorine-free, manufactured with electricity that is offset with Green-e®-certified renewable energy certificates, Ancient Forest Friendly.