

MAI-THU PERRET

The exhibition is organized by Lionel Bovier and Julien Fronsacq and is supported by the Fondation de bienfaisance du Groupe Pictet.

Born in 1976, Mai-Thu Perret's distinctive practice crosses a broad range of disciplines, from sculpture to film, ceramics and performance, incorporating multiple references (from avant-garde movements of the 20th century to Oriental philosophy) and fusing disparate methodologies culled from her academic literary background and her experience as a curator.

In the late 1990s, her fictional work *The Crystal Frontier* chronicled a community of women under the name 'New Ponderosa', inspired by Llana del Rio, a communitarian, socialist experiment established in the Mojave Desert in the 1910s. The history of Perret's fictional community is also her primary protocol for the production of objects. Her works are inspired by Constructivist and Bauhaus forms—movements which sought a role for art in the making of a new society, and which embraced artisanship and the decorative arts, both often marginalized in the history of Western art.

Year on year, Mai-Thu Perret adds to the concrete, existential fiction of her work, with new 'chapters' (mannequins, ceramics, textiles, wicker sculptures, neons, etc.) that do more than simply excavate elements of modernism: rather, she reinstates them in the present moment, making them available to the spectator as narrative "shifters."

MAMCO exhibition is organized in six "chapters": *New Ponderosa*, *Apocalypse Ballet*, *Evening of the Book*, *Arts & Crafts*, *Garden of Nothingness* and *Féminaire*.

By confronting Perret's work with conventional museum categories (abstraction, portraiture, decorative arts, etc.), the exhibition sheds new light on alternative narrative histories, and the collage of styles and genres so characteristic of Mai-Thu Perret's work.

Mai-Thu Perret's work has been the subject of major exhibitions in recent years, at SFMOMA in San Francisco, the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, London's Chisenhale Gallery, the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas, the Araau Kunsthau, the Bonnefantenmuseum in Maastricht and the Haus Konstruktiv in Zurich, but this is her first large-scale show at MAMCO, following a much smaller presentation in 2011, when she was nominated for the Prix Manor Genève.

New Ponderosa

The town of Ponderosa, in California, has a population of just 16. Nonetheless, in the late 1990s, Mai-Thu Perret set about collecting and editing an oral history of the community under the title "New Ponderosa." "New Ponderosa Year Zero" is the story of a group of women in their 20s and 30s who choose to follow the activist Beatrice Mandell and create a self-sustaining community in the New Mexico desert. Perret's works derive their form and function from the possibilities and potential of narrative itself. Each text (diary extracts, songs, theoretical notes) corresponds to a speaker (Kim, Beatrice, Marina), a form of address (intimate, or to the community at large), a vision (forward-looking or retrospective), and a

sentiment or state of mind (inward- or outward-looking). Depending on their attribution (to Mai-Thu Perret or a member of the community), the works in the corpus range from utilitarian objects to artistic experiments. Together, they define a new space that eschews conventional hierarchies and embraces artisanship, fine art, literature and the visual arts, delving deep into modern and postmodern social history.

Apocalypse Ballet

Apocalypse Ballet is an installation devised for Mai-Thu Perret's 2006 solo exhibition at the Renaissance Society in Chicago, entitled *And every woman will be a walking synthesis of the universe*. An ensemble of mannequins is arranged to form a history of the body, in spheres ranging from medicine to politics, dance and film. The figures' poses evoke experiments in emancipation from the 1900s (*Lebensreform*, Monte Verità), and 1920s East-West propaganda (in particular, Russia's Spartakiad and American musicals), in which the body is instrumentalized and stripped of its individuality. The figures appear to dance around a giant teapot, itself a display space for small, abstract paintings.

According to the critic Walter Benjamin, the fetishization of the body is enacted by an illusionistic play on form, on a continuous spectrum from body to object, the living to the inert: a form of metamorphosis perfectly illustrated in a print by Jean-Jacques Granville appropriately titled *Apocalypse du Ballet* (1844), which shows wine glasses transforming into pairs of hands, and a dancer (literally) turning into a bobbin of thread.

Evening of the Book

An Evening of the Book (2007) is a film and installation, both produced at New York's celebrated experimental

performance venue, the Kitchen. The film is in three parts—*Holes and Neon*, *The Book* and *Dance of the Commas*—each projected onto a sheet of paper covered with Constructivist motifs. *An Evening of the Book* is a free adaptation of an eponymous stage work by artists Varvara Stepanova and Alexander Rodchenko (1924), associates of Russia's Constructivist movement who devoted themselves to the production of art in support of the Revolution, from 1920 onwards. Identically-dressed female dancers perform elementary gestures in a kind of moving, living tableau against a plain backdrop alternately filled by a black banner and fluorescent tubes. They are surrounded by props in the shape of commas: punctuation marks essential to basic sentence structure. The exhibition's subtle homage to Milca Mayerovà's danced alphabet (1926) is also expressed in an ensemble of sculptures. Motifs drawn from Constructivism, Minimalism, and modern dance achieve a strange stylistic harmony, as though Mai-Thu Perret sought to trace a fine line connecting ritual, propaganda, and the concept of modernity.

Arts & Crafts

This section presents an ensemble of items (carpets, wallpaper, tableware, lights) and techniques (ceramics, warp-weighted tapestry weaving, kilim weaving) which are often consigned by conventional museography and art history to disparate categories including the fine, decorative or applied arts, and folk art. The decorative arts encompass the many skilled crafts and disciplines involved in architecture and interior decoration but are distinguished from the fine arts due to their functional nature. The "applied arts" came to prominence with the rise of the modern movements; the term refers to the use of

design and decoration in the production of everyday objects.

Mai-Thu Perret engages with these notionally disparate spheres to emphasize what they include or exclude, and how: the decorative arts retained their hand-crafted character, while the applied arts gave way to industrial production techniques. However, the Arts & Crafts and Bauhaus movements (respectively 1860–1910 and 1919–1933) disrupted the close connection between artisanship and industry, and the registers of authorship and anonymity.

By revisiting motifs and techniques as wide-ranging as kilim rug-weaving, Sophie Taeuber-Arp's *Dada Bowl*, and warp-weighted tapestry weaving, Mai-Thu Perret sheds new light on what these practices have in common and deconstructs the traditional thinking behind their separate classification.

Garden of Nothingness

In the sole gallery overlooking the outside world, Mai-Thu Perret has designed a space which is simultaneously abstract and narrative, chiming with the symbolic system of Zen that has inspired so many contemporary western artists. A closure, partially obscuring MAMCO's windows, draws back-lit traces of lightning which depict the illumination of *Satori*, or spiritual awakening in Buddhism.

This new production is inspired by the Japanese garden *Ryōgin-an*, created in 1964 in the Kyoto region, which

organizes a spatial succession of stones in greenery, alongside a design using gravel, and a bamboo palisade decked with designs depicting lightning bolts.

The artist has made this enclosure chime with instruments for a possible ritual, an *Eventail des caresses* (Fan of Caresses), featuring a series of bronze bells shaped like human organs, including a uterus, lungs, and a heart. This installation is thus set around the Zen principle of an interpenetration between emptiness and fullness, while also evoking the modern aesthetic of a form of extra-western spirituality.

Féminaire

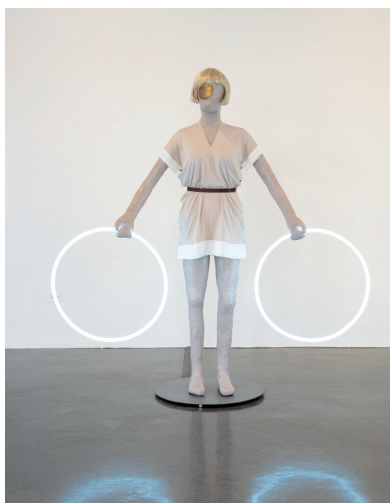
In spring 2017, Mai-Thu Perret staged an exhibition at her Los Angeles gallery under the title *Féminaire*. The show featured two differing displays: an ensemble of ceramics arranged in a grid on a wall, and a procession of female figures across a stage. Entitled *Les Guerillères* (like the 1969 novel by French feminist and revolutionary Monique Wittig) the female group is composed of stylized figures with readily-identifiable accessories (combat fatigues, Ranger Joe's military boots, machine guns). They are directly inspired by Kurdish women fighters who came together to form a resistance force at the beginning of the war in Syria, and were quickly adopted as media icons. At MAMCO the sculptures are shown facing banners that draw on motifs from abstract art and the vocabulary of classical heraldry.



Mai-Thu Perret, *Eventail des caresses (Poumons)*, 2018
Bronze, variable dimensions
Collection Mai-Thu Perret
Photo: Annik Wetter



Mai-Thu Perret, *The Crack-Up IV*, 2009
Carpet Paintings, acrylic framed in wood
240 x 180 cm
Courtesy Blondeau & Cie, Geneva



Mai-Thu Perret with Ligia Dias, *Apocalypse Ballet (The White Rings)*, 2006
Figure in steel, wire, papier mâché, acrylic, gouache, wig, neon tubes, steel base,
175 x 165 x 165 cm
The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, vue d'exposition
Collection Rubell Family, Miami



Mai-Thu Perret, *Little Planetary Harmony*, 2006
Aluminum, wood, plaster, latex paint, neon, acrylic on wood, interior paintings (acrylic on wood)
356 x 643 x 365 cm
Coll. Aargauer Kunsthaus, Aarau