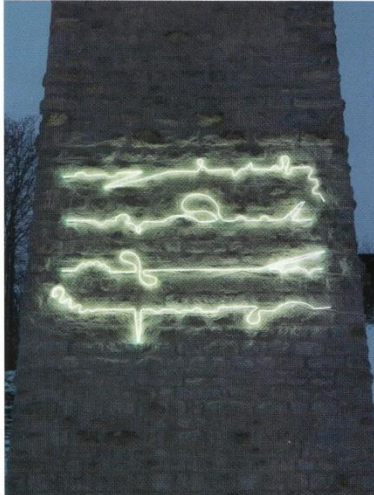


**Art**

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**Sleeping beauty**  
Mai-Thu Perret's *Flow My Tears I, Shandy* (left),  
artist portrait (below)

Art

## Modern female

Mai-Thu Perret splices feminist theory and modern aesthetics in her new opening at Simon Lee Gallery, *Slow Wave*. By Ysabelle Cheung

**B**y virtue of this mysterious thing called gender," ponders Mai-Thu Perret, "I am different." Her statement is not untrue – for the Swiss-Vietnamese artist, questions of identity and gender are not mutually exclusive from her artwork.

As Perret speaks about her upcoming solo exhibition, *Slow Wave*, at Simon Lee Gallery, she considers the axiom that permeates much of her body of work. "I am a woman, and when you're a woman you're made aware that you're different," she says. "It doesn't even matter whether I *feel* different or not; society or the world makes you different."

It is with this approach that Perret pragmatically tackles subjects prevalent in her installation and multi media works: feminism, socialism, postmodernism. Since 1999, Perret has immersed herself in her longest-running installation project yet, titled *The Crystal Frontier*, which revolves around a fictional female-only autonomous commune based in New Mexico. The project consists of a novel – an assortment of diary entries, letters, and textual fragments squirreled from the women's lives – and several domestic objects, which reference the 19th century Arts and

Crafts movement in their textile aesthetic. The women, Perret posits, travelled out of their urban infrastructures of New York and into the desert as a reaction to the elitist imbalances in capitalist society – here, again, the meaning of 'different' rears its head. In creating such a fictional enclave, where the women strive to grow a utopian, discretionary society in which to eventually reintroduce men, Perret's commentary on her own gender becomes clear: in the real world, exclusion is inherent.

**“**By virtue of this mysterious thing called gender, I am different

For her upcoming show in Hong Kong, Perret presents an amalgamation of installations collectively called *Slow Wave*. "A slow wave is the deepest, darkest form of sleep – the brain works slower, and you don't even dream anymore," Perret explains. The central piece to this exhibition is a plywood bed, fashioned faithfully

from the blueprints of Italian designer Enzo Mari, upon which a mechanised sleeping woman – perhaps a fictional character from *The Crystal Frontier* – lies. "I'm interested in the uncanny quality of this character who's sleeping but also breathing, a sculpture that's alive," says Perret. "Sleep is an undemonstrative state and you can simulate it with very little movement. There's a kind of interesting, imperceptible frontier between the inanimate and animate. And there's also a powerful sleeping beauty quality to her."

Other works include a series of illegible neon scripts, a continuation of Perret's work with manipulated neon tubes. The significance of the written language, to Perret (who studied literature at Cambridge before turning to other art forms), is clear in these works and also *The Crystal Frontier*, although her interest is eked out in different forms for both. With *The Crystal Frontier*, she's exploring a contained fantasy and also partially creating reality in making works referenced in the book. With these neon scripts, she discusses the relationship we, as a society, have with language and symbolism. "I think there's this urge we have to read and understand things. The abstract thing becomes

a barrier for sense and meaning," she says. "When you're looking at something that looks like writing, that you can't read, you're placed in front of your own need to decipher everything." The scrawls also relate to sleep brainwave patterns and movements.

Speaking once again about *The Crystal Frontier*, Perret briefly touches on the constructed reality of her art, relating its form to a waking dream.

"I think everyone has woken up from dreams wondering if they're real," she says, "and in a way it's the same with fiction and art – the objects and people do become real."

**Slow Wave** Jul 10-Aug 19,  
Simon Lee Gallery;  
simonleegallery.com.

