

ARTFRUM

EGALITARIAN ELITE: Mai-Thu Perret at David Kordansky Gallery by Keith J. Varadi

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Mai-Thu Perret, *Astral Plane*, Installation View

Like much art being made and shown today, the work of Swiss artist Mai-Thu Perret is transparently tied to money. It looks expensive. It looks rare, unique, and considered. It looks decorative and nonfunctional. When shown in a group, it looks like a personal collection; when shown individually, it looks easily collectable. It looks like art, but not like the timid, mannered art currently being exemplified and magnified at contemporary art fairs. It looks more like something that would be sought after by some Indiana Jones type character Leonard DiCaprio or James Franco could potentially play rather than those actual actors, both of whom now happen to be avid and visible art collectors.

When one walks into the large, pristine show room at the gallery's Smiley Street location, a typical reaction tends to be that of disappointment—not in what is being shown (often impressive paintings and sculptures), but rather in how it can be shown (or the lack of surprising possibilities). It is not a stretch to imagine the large space as an expansive solo presentation in an expanded booth at one of the aforementioned art fairs. However, upon entering Perret's most recent exhibition at David Kordansky, this is proven to be far from the case. Instead of falling prey to assumed conventions of big gallery presentations—for example, showing the right amount of something, anything to convey status and stability—these uncanny, ornamental works seem to each be selected to convey something about an unknown culture. This is a surprising possibility.

The exhibition title, *Astral Plane*, feels very appropriate. The faux artifacts on view conflate and confuse time and place far more than most images or objects the majority of art viewers will see at any given commercial gallery. Few artists today, or in recent memory, can manipulate our historical and cognitive understanding of objects like Perret. One might think too of Huma Bhabha, Jimmie Durham, or Esther Kläs. Like these artists, Perret avoids employing expected, overdone signifiers in order to communicate an “otherness.” Unlike these artists, Perret prefers a refined patina over a weathered one.



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Often times, her works evoke ancient eras; other times, they allude to ones we have perhaps yet to experience. Furthermore, there is usually a subtle pointing to the mythical or supernatural. However, the elegance of these objects and the delicacy in which they are handled grips us and grounds us in a curious manner. It reminds us of the hard work of humans and the touch of the skilled hand, which is also why people are drawn to luxury goods and fine dining, and which is also why Perret’s works feel like fine, luxury goods.



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Despite this general polish of everything contained in Kordansky’s space for this exhibition, the thought and touch apparent in these works give them (and the space) a feeling of personal engagement, of personal investment, and even a muffled personality, attempting to be distinguished and distinguishable. This sense of the personal (and hinted personality) temporarily suspends the immediately understood class associations and implications tied to luxury goods throughout time in various regions, and additionally elucidates the universal desire or impulse for us to reveal and illuminate or repel and isolate those we don’t understand. We, as humans, tend to want to learn more about those unlike us, but only to a point; we tend to want to avoid the uncomfortable. Perret’s refined patina lures us in, makes us want to learn, and tricks us into not feeling uncomfortable, even if some of the actual associations or implications might edge on discomfort.



The hand woven tapestries display stark and striking iconography without suggesting any sense of anything one in 2014 could recognize as being very iconic, aside from a hand, which at first glance could be viewed as too vague or base to discern any sort of profound meaning. But upon further consideration, that is likely just the point—the mind is where every idea begins, but the hand is what carries most ideas out. The ceramics, brittle in material but powerful in form, oscillate between being magical and majestic. The most compelling of these on the walls suggest a sort of pod or cradle for eggs, which are essentially just pods or cradles for potential life. The vessels on the floor pedestals are literally what are used to carry the things that hands execute from the directions of the mind.

Mai-Thu Perret, *Untitled IV*, Haute Lisse Hand Woven Wool Tapestry, 78.74" x 59.06", 2014



Mai-Thu Perret, *Above the saddle no person, below the saddle no horse*, Glazed Ceramic, 22" x 19" x 2", 2014

Mai-Thu Perret, *Untitled III*, Haute Lisse Hand Woven Wool Tapestry, 78.74" x 59.06", 2014



But the cornerstone of the entire exhibition, *Black Balthazar*, is an overt metaphor for labor. It is a beautiful black wicker donkey. It is the articulation of an amazing transformation. It is an elegant, elegiac statue of a poor, dumb creature constructed of poor leisure-time materials.

After circling through the space, time and place no longer seem to be the sole focal point. Rather, the constant quest for power and autonomy throughout time, regardless of place, is perhaps what is further confused and conflated. Who has it, who gets it, and how?

Mai-Thu Perret, *How can a sparrow know the aspiration of a wild swan?*, Glazed Ceramic, 17.75" x 22" x 2", 2014

Within the context of this powerhouse gallery, it appears Perret's sexy and surreal objects propose a further confusion and conflation of power and autonomy within the art world. Maybe like Perret's devotional donkey, she is suggesting that the art laborer (the artist) can actually have power and autonomy in an art world that seems to be dominated by luxury and excess. Though, the true charm and appeal of Perret's own power and autonomy is her works' diplomacy and malleability. They camouflage themselves and adapt in order to appeal to the dealer, the collector, the critic, the curator, and the laborers. These are strong, convincing political works in an apolitical art environment.



Mai-Thu Perret, *Among gods and humans, only I know*, Glazed Ceramic, 13.78" x 28.74" x 19.69", 2014

Mai-Thu Perret, *Black Balthazar*, Birch Plywood, Rattan Core, and Water-Based Paint, 48.43" x 45.28" x 11.81", 2013