

Flash Art

NEWS

2011 is truly a rich and full exhibition year for Swiss artist Mai-Thu Perret, and therefore a good occasion to get more familiar with the artist's oeuvre, which is defined by themes that include utopian feminist literature, art theory and moments in design history such as Soviet Constructivism and the Arts & Crafts movement, to name but a few. Alongside her institutional solo shows at Kunsthau Aarau, MAMCO in Geneva (where she won the Prix Manor 2011), Haus Konstruktiv in Zurich (where she was awarded the Zurich Art Prize 2011) and Le Magasin in Grenoble, she is also participating in the main exhibition at the Venice Biennale, curated by Bice Curiger.

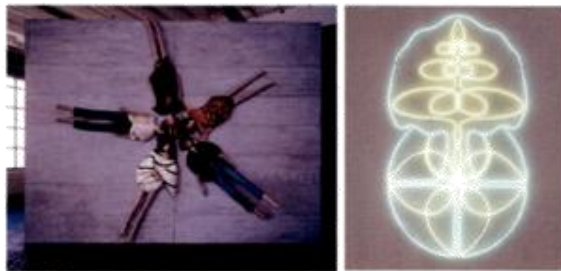
Taking a look back at her work, since 1999 Perret has worked on *The Crystal Frontier*, a continuous narrative about a group of women who moved to the desert of New Mexico to build a commune on their own. As an alternative societal model, far away from neoliberalism, this commune, called New Ponderosa Year Zero, provides the background for Mai-Thu Perret's work. *The Crystal Frontier* consists of diary entries about life on the farm, dolls made of papier-mâché, but also abstract paintings on plywood and artisanal objects such as textiles and pottery with which the commune ekes out a living. All are part of this versatile body of work.

Though the narrative itself has moved from the fore- to the background in the last few years, it is still fueling most of the artist's work. In a recent conversation she stated: "It began as a way to construct a space for myself, a space for my work that would be more complex than that of the fiction of an individual's necessary relation to her work. It was about beginning." Perret constructed *The Crystal Frontier* not as a classical linear story, but by using the fragmented narrative as a literary method. Texts include the diary entries as well as flyers and other records of the organizational structure of the commune. This strategy has enabled her to leave the narrative open, to change and rearrange it parallel to her own subtle shifts in artistic interest. It works not just as a "prosthetic" aid for the viewer (and partially also for the artist), or a backbone, but also as a point of departure from which to open questions about modernism — as

EUROPE

MAI-THU PERRET:
HYPER BALLADS

Raphael Gyga



All images MAI-THU PERRET, clockwise from top left: A Uniform Sampler 2, 2004. Harmonium, 2007. Society is a Hole, 2009. The Crack Up II, 2009.

self-created source materials that can be used again and again in different contexts.

Thus by choosing the textual form of the fragment, Perret appropriates a moment of modern literature and, also, a form of postmodern literature where fragmentation, pastiche and sampling are essential. Most of these textual pieces, usually shown in exhibitions as framed paper works laid out with text in special fonts, revolve around themes found in feminist classics or other first-person narratives about communal living.

For the text work *Letter Home (After A.R.)* from 2006, Perret even appropriated a whole text, a letter by Alexander Rodchenko to his wife Warwara Stepanowa. During his stay in Paris in 1925 for the construction of the Soviet pavilion for the World Exposition, he wrote a

letter to her in which he describes his stay in the metropolis and his disdain for it. Perret's only intervention in the original text is that she made the city's name anonymous (P instead of Paris) and then injected it back into her narrative system. The message of the letter, the disgust with capitalism and the decadence of the modern city, is looped through the voice of one of the commune's members and becomes a motif for their societal model. It points to Perret's interest in the Constructivist movement, and all the related questions of revolution and building a new society. This interest also led her to Stepanowa, from whom she appropriated many of her fabric designs, and whose clothing designs she has re-worked (often in cooperation with designer Ligia Dias). In this "constructivist" tradi-

tion, the form and function of language(s) is one of Perret's main interests, including a sense of performativity included in its utilization. Perret's analysis of the "letter" as a form but also of the "image" could be best described as functioning in tension at the intersection of a speech act (John Austin) and an image act (Horst Bredekamp).

In her most recent exhibition at Galerie Francesca Pia (2009-10), Perret showed her text works together with a series of small abstract paintings. On a meta-level both bodies of works could be read as different languages. Perret elaborated on this in her own words: "I wanted to do an exhibition of these new paintings, which was quite a step for me, and I also wanted to open up another space with the texts. There was a very formalist concern, print against paint, sign against symbol, shiny against matte. The texts are not illustrative; they are fragments, only connected by their juxtaposition and our assumption of a shared authorship. The paintings also gesture towards a language. There are diagrams, flashes of past histories, maybe even something like a voice, just like in the texts." For Perret it is important, then, that the experience of her works is not split into two parts: the objects and their explanation, the signs and their signification; they should in this case be read as a reflection of this problem and the modern tendency to bifurcate and divide.

One of Perret's primary working strategies resists this tendency by deducting forms (in the sense of new solutions) from situations that could also be described as "problems" of a sort. She lays out a set of parameters and tries, within these self-inflicted borders or constraints, to derive a set of new possible forms without limit (like in her ceramic works where she uses a predetermined vocabulary of forms like eggs or mice). In this sense the borders/constraints can become a generative mechanism. Maybe Perret's career to date could be best described as a multidimensional practice — one that she can rearrange steadily like a ballad (a form of verse, often a narrative, set to music) and that can be rewritten, reorganized and applied to several "musical" structures. In this sense they are true "hyper-ballads."

