



OPEN SPACE

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Interview: Mai-Thu Perret & Laura Moriarty: The Crystal Frontier



Mai-Thu Perret, Borogroves, 2008; MDF Ultra Light, synthetic foam, plastic mirror; courtesy of Timothy Taylor Gallery, London; photo: James Lander; © 2008 Mai-Thu Perret

"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, and comprised of a series of discrete fictional texts that take various forms (including diary entries, letters, daily schedules, and song lyrics)." Apsara DiQuinzio, SFMOMA assistant curator of painting and sculpture, in the exhibition brochure

"Laura Moriarty's Ultravioleta is a novel about a spaceship named Ultravioleta, a spaceship that is made of paper, or more precisely, of 'personal letters' that are 'passionate, desperate, and philosophical. As the reader soon realizes, the novel is itself the very spaceship described in its narrative..." Andrew Joron, in Rain Taxi.

I thought it might be interesting to put these two artists, from different generations, different countries, and with very different practices, but with some shared concerns, in dialogue with each other. Bay Area poet and novelist Laura Moriarty interviews Mai-Thu Perret about *The Crystal Frontier*, and about M-TP's New Work exhibition, on view through March 1. You can also hear Mai Thu in conversation with Apsara this Thursday evening in the Wattis theater.

Laura Moriarty: *That the location of the utopia in The Crystal Frontier is the American West is interesting to those of us who live here because we are aware of a local utopian impulse, sometimes in resistance to Western culture, sometimes in response to it. I wonder if the presence of such places as Soleri's Arcosanti in Arizona or Old Oraibi, Taos (and other Hopi towns in New Mexico), or also Max Ernst and Dorothea Tanning in Sedona contributed to your desire to locate the community in the Southwest? Or is it more the landscape itself?*

Mai Thu Perret: Yes, these existing communities were very important for me, and to a large extent it's because of these examples that I decided to locate the Crystal Frontier there. I first went to Arizona and New

Mexico to see my friend the painter Olivier Mosset, and our visit to Arcosanti, for example, was a real eye opener in terms of the reality of a utopian commune. With a group of friends from Switzerland and New York, we took a tour of the place, led by a very enthusiastic volunteer, and after seeing their living quarters, the fields where they grew their crops and their constantly expanding buildings, we were led around to the metal studio. This is the place where they cast bronze bells that the community sells in crafts shops all over the world to raise money. There was only one

bell shape, in different sizes, designed by Paolo Soleri. Since the metal shop had been touted by the volunteer as a place where people could unleash their creative energies, one of my friends asked him if they ever made anything else than bells. The volunteer looked puzzled, and as though he could not understand the intent of the question, quipped "We can make anything, as long as it's a bell." It was almost like a Zen koan come to life. Of course, I love the landscape too, it played an important role for all these forerunners and does so in my story too. On one level, it's about a narrative blank slate, and the emptiness of the desert fits this idea perfectly.



New Work: Mai-Thu Perret (installation view); SFMOMA, November 21, 2008 – March 1, 2009. © Ian Reeves

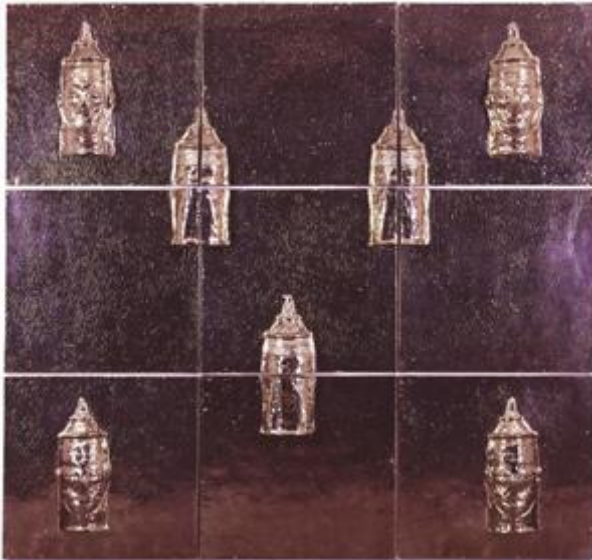
How does symmetry function in your work? The symmetries that exist in the work at SFMOMA, as well in 2012, and in other works of yours findable on the internet, are compelling and seem to be thematic as well as visual. There is the repeated radial symmetry of the wallpaper which reflects wonderful textile and decorative traditions; the use of eggs, hair (wigs), and other objects which are naturally symmetrical; the mirror symmetry of the sculpture of the woman, the women in the story and yourself, and of your production as an artist and theirs; some of the movements of the dancers in An Evening of the Book (and of course the pattern overlaying them in the moving image); and, perhaps most intriguing, the expression of the story – presented as something to be inferred and experienced rather than watched or read – in many parallel media.

Symmetry in some sense is a readymade form of composition, and I suspect that's one of the main reasons I am so interested in it. It relieves me of the burden of more idiosyncratic, "creative", or "personal" compositional choices. There is a parallel with the story, you're right, in the sense that the story was also imagined, at the beginning, as a kind of machine that makes the art, a device to relieve me from the arbitrariness of picking this color rather than that one. In some way I am looking for a kind of automatic dimension to art making, and symmetry is a good shortcut for that. I enjoy a lot of the associations that come with symmetrical forms: naturally forms, patterns, repetition, outsider art. However, there are also many different instances in the work where symmetry is broken, offset.

An added question: Does making a work in one media create the desire for works in different media to balance or fill out the 'story'?

I'm not sure I would use the word balance, but it's true I tend to react in terms of opposites, I am easily bored and always afraid of settling into a style, so if I do one type of work I tend to want to follow with something different, or at least contrasting.

Elements of Buddhism appear in this work, especially text — is it mostly Zen? — and I wonder if there is any aspect of Buddhist practice that is a part of the activities of the women in The Crystal Frontier or of your own artistic practice?



Mai-Thu Perret, *The dragon gave birth to a golden phoenix that shattered the turquoise blue sky*, 2008; glazed ceramic; courtesy of Timothy Taylor Gallery, London; photo: Christian Altengarten; © 2008 Mai-Thu Perret

I assume you're referring to the titles of the ceramics from my exhibition 2012. Yes, those all came from a book called *Zen Sand: The Book of Capping Phrases for Koan Practice*. It's a book of phrases used by Zen students as possible answers to Koans, or riddles. Many of them take the form of small poems, or haikus, and they are often absurd or paradoxical. I don't practice meditation myself (although I often wish I did), but I have always enjoyed reading about Buddhism and other non-dualistic spiritual traditions. When I first encountered the phrases it was like finding a treasure trove of readymade poetry. They were a perfect match for the absurdist and process based logic of the ceramic works. While other Buddhist motifs appear in my work (the position of the hands of the mannequin titled *Heroine of the People* is one very clear example), the women in the *Crystal Frontier*, like myself, are not especially observant. They practice yoga regularly though.

You commented in an interview with Paul Van Den Bosch and Giovanni Carmine that "The text is the nebulous network of significations that describes the Crystal Frontier. A thing can be related to the Crystal Frontier, connected to it, without it being necessarily spelled out in an actual, readable text." Can you say more about the network that comprises the Crystal Frontier — what it is made of and how your thinking about it has evolved as the project has grown?

I think what I meant there is that the artworks, taken together, create a kind of text, even if it is not spelt out in explicitly written stories. One of the things that I discovered, after working for a certain amount of time with these two layers of a written story and the objects, the artworks in a traditional sense, was that the existence of the text in some way came to overshadow the complexity of the objects themselves. I had never meant to split the experience of the work into two parts, the objects and their explanation, the signs and their signification.

Is there a greatest conflict in The Crystal Frontier? What motivates the 'citizens' there? By that I mean is there a goal other than independence?

It is probably different for each individual. I don't think there is a homogeneous goal beyond trying to be happy and to survive. They are looking for something, but like all of us they don't know what it is exactly.

Can the arrow of time be reversed in this realm? Is there time travel?

Do you mean our realm? There is time travel through books and the mind, I guess. On a deeper level, time, like everything else, does not exist, it is an illusion caused by our mental structure (at least if you believe the Buddhists we talked about earlier). I was always very bad at physics in school, but my limited understanding of the theory of relativity would tend to substantiate this view. One day, there could be time travel in this realm.

How does 'money' work in The Crystal Frontier? Is there an imagined system that the products of the women are destined to become part of? Is it barter, or more like an exchange based on numbers? Does number itself relate? (Sometimes I imagine that numbers, even writing itself, were/was devised by women to keep track of stored crops and other practicalities that came up once hunting and gathering became agriculture.)

The Crystal Frontier is so small, it's barter between themselves, and also money which they use when they

are out in the regular world, where they sell their products for example. In one of the stories they discuss the trust fund of one of the members, on which they have been living for a while. *The Crystal Frontier* is not a perfectly functioning utopia, they still depend on the larger world for a lot of things, and this dependency, while convenient in many ways, is the source of many heated arguments between the women.

Your idea reminds me of a book by Sadie Plant, *Zeroes + Ones*. She argues that women have always been close to technology, and uses the example of the jacquard looms, traditionally used by women in weaving factories in the north of England, which are the ancestors of the first computers.

I am fascinated by the mescaline teapot. Is there a visionary or ritual aspect to the culture of The Crystal Frontier?

Yes, some of them experiment with psychedelic drugs to see things they would not be able to see otherwise, or maybe simply for fun.

The teapot is also an art gallery, when you walk inside it is a perfectly plastered round room, with 5 small abstract paintings hanging inside. There is this complicated structure, just to entice you to look at the simplest kind of paintings.

The teapot also looks like a spaceship, don't you think?

Do you have any desire to, or is there any possibility of, creating a site in the Southwest as part of this project?

I could see myself living there for a little while, and doing things there, but as far as *The Crystal Frontier* goes, I have no desire to make the commune a reality. If I tried it in real life, it would be very, very different, I am sure. It is very much about fiction and the possibilities it gives you.



Mai-Thu Perret *Unsold goods a thousand years old*, 2008; glazed ceramic; courtesy of Timothy Taylor Gallery, London; photo: Christian Altengarten; © 2008 Mai-Thu Perret

And finally, speaking as a fan, are there plans to make a text version of The Crystal Frontier more widely available?

The text was published in my monograph, *Land of Crystal*, published by JRP-Ringier in 2008, which is a quite widely available book. We have discussed making a paperback version of only the texts, so maybe one day...

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, and attended the Independent Study Program at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Laura Moriarty is the author of *A Semblance: Selected & New Poetry 1975-2007* from Omnidawn Publishing and *An Air Force*, a chapbook from Hooke Press. Other recent books are *Ultravioleta*, a novel, from Atelos and *Self-Destruction*, a book of poetry, from Post-Apollo Press. She has taught at Mills College and Naropa University & is currently Deputy Director of Small Press Distribution in Berkeley. She is findable online at A Tonalist Notes and elsewhere.