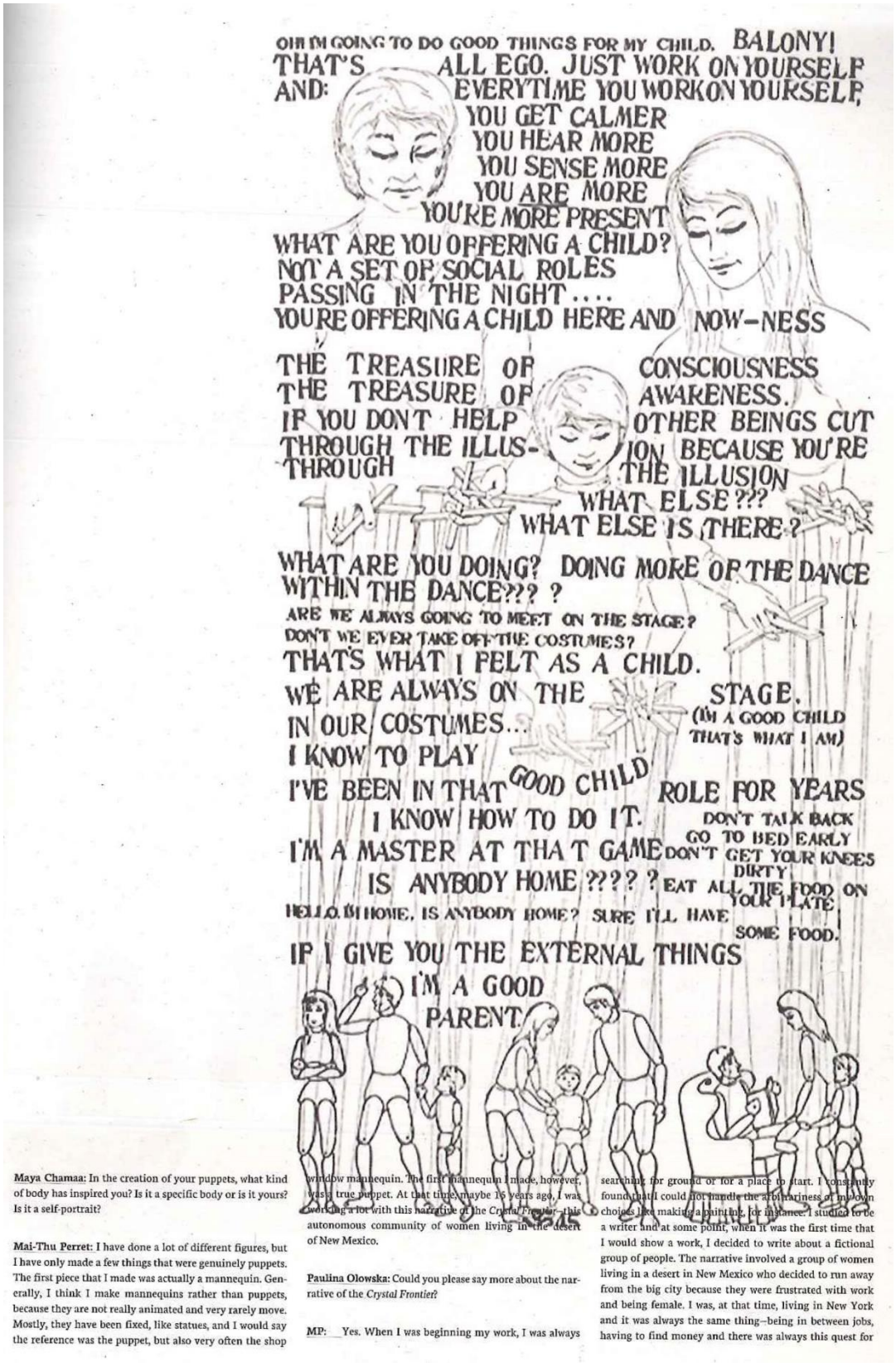
Crystal Frontiers

Interview with Mai-Thu Perret



Maya Chamaa: In the creation of your puppets, what kind of body has inspired you? Is it a specific body or is it yours? Is it a self-portrait?

Mai-Thu Perret: I have done a lot of different figures, but I have only made a few things that were genuinely puppets. The first piece that I made was actually a mannequin. Generally, I think I make mannequins rather than puppets, because they are not really animated and very rarely move. Mostly, they have been fixed, like statues, and I would say the reference was the puppet, but also very often the shop window mannequin. The first mannequin I made, however, was a true puppet. At that time, maybe 15 years ago, I was working a lot with this narrative of the *Crystal Frontier*—this autonomous community of women living in the desert of New Mexico.

Paulina Olowska: Could you please say more about the narrative of the *Crystal Frontier*?

MP: Yes. When I was beginning my work, I was always searching for ground or for a place to start. I constantly found that I could not handle the arbitrariness of my own choices like making a painting, for instance. I studied to be a writer and at some point, when it was the first time that I would show a work, I decided to write about a fictional group of people. The narrative involved a group of women living in a desert in New Mexico who decided to run away from the big city because they were frustrated with work and being female. I was, at that time, living in New York and it was always the same thing—being in between jobs, having to find money and there was always this quest for

freedom. My idea was to write about the life of the *Crystal Frontier* women and then create their work or make one that would depict them.

It was quite simple and, in a way, I thought if I wrote the story, the work would create itself, because I was generating what the story dictated me. In a way, it took off the pressure of trying to imagine what to create. Also, I liked it because it meant that the work wasn't mine. It was of the people and this was very exciting to me.

PO: Is there always a representational figure within the *Crystal Frontier*?

MP: At the beginning there was very little figural representation because it was much more about craft objects. I would make the things that they made, or I would make their environment, their architecture. In fact, there was very little art. It was more about writing and there was this kind of utopian architecture, utopian design, and craft.

PO: Is it a take on the avant-garde and the idea of craft taking over the arts?

MP: In the beginning it was and at that time I also started thinking that if these people had design and architecture they must have had art and some form of self-expression. I started to think about the kind of art they made, and this is where I began working with ceramics and making objects. It was the production of these girls. At some point, for a show that my friend Steven Parrino did in New York, I made this piece called *La Fée Idéologie (The Fairy Ideology)* involving this life-sized puppet. The idea was that the puppet represented everything the women in the community had run away from or didn't want to be anymore—and actually what it was, was me. The concept was that it was an image of the past, but I was using myself or a very sketchy version of myself, to represent in this puppet. I gave the puppet clothes from my studio and I made very simple papier-mâché works. It also emerged from a reference to a book called *Be Here Now*. This book was very popular in the 1970s and was written by a man named Ram Dass (born Richard Alpert). He was teaching at Harvard and together with his friend and associate, Timothy Leary, they were doing the first experiments with LSD. Both left Harvard to do things like distribute LSD in prisons and research the effects of hallucinogenic drugs further. After this period, Dass became a mystic and went to India. He changed his name from Richard Alpert to Ram Dass and wrote this book called *Be Here Now* which is completely amazing. It is a criticism of Western society or the Western way of life and it is all hand-drawn. This one page in particular shows a family of three—a mother, a father, and a child. They all appear to be puppets that are holding puppets that represent them, creating this mirror imaging of puppets. I became obsessed with this image because this drawing is so cool and crazy.

MC: Was this picture a critique?

MP: Yes, absolutely. The image depicts the alienated way Western families live, in a sense, that they were manipulating puppets of themselves without even realizing it. This puppet that I was working with was also meant to be an image of alienation. It was like the alienation of the women in the *Crystal Frontier* and everything they had left behind. That was my little story.

PO: I wanted to stop here with one question regarding this theory of the abject by Julia Kristeva. *Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be.* The abject marks what Kristeva terms a *primal repression*, and I was wondering if this is something that you think about?

MP: Yes, I think that maybe it is something that I thought about because it is something you inevitably end up thinking about in terms of figures. However, these were really meant to be mannequins.

PO: How do you describe your way of thinking about mannequins?

MP: My way of thinking about mannequins is that it is a commodity. The mannequin is what you use in the store to sell things. And I think it also came from *Mike Kelly: The Uncanny*, because he has this whole thing with the origin of figurative sculpture. I was really captivated with this work and this theory about how figurative sculpture happens.

PO: Yes, and it's very similar to Kristeva's theory.

MP: Exactly, and he also talks about abjection. For example, the idea of the first figurative representation of the human body as things that were placed inside tombs in order to accompany the deceased. He also discusses Edgar Degas and *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* in regard to the fundamental transgression that this dancer represents, because he put the real clothing, the tutu, onto the bronze sculpture. It suddenly created this short cut between the real body and the body of the sculpture, somehow making her into a corpse. This is always somewhat on my mind. With figures, or mannequins, this show was a statement. It was situated in Art Basel and my intention was to create a kind of market, so the audience could see all the clothing of the women from the *Crystal Frontier*. The mannequins were meant to be the display system for these clothes. The Russian Avant-Garde shaped it and a text that I wrote inspired the clothing. My friend made the clothes and she is also very interested in this Avant-Garde design. In the beginning they were puppets, then they were mannequins and finally they became statues—figures in space. This was the slight progression in the creation of this work.

MC: Did you think about performance? Perhaps a mannequin and some people playing with this idea of the abject?

MP: Yes, I did later on. I always thought about performance but for me performance is difficult because I like it when things are sort of dead, in a way. I have done one performance with a dancer in 2014 or 2015 in Geneva. It went to different places, but it was premiered here. It was exactly this idea where you animate the puppet. I have always known these things could move or that the figures make the viewers themselves into mannequins by standing next to them in the space. It's this kind of uncanny, doubling of yourself that was really important. In this piece the idea was to work with a musician, a singer, and a dancer. The musician was Beatrice Dillon, from London, the singer/songwriter was Tamara Barnett-Herrin who is a really old friend of mine and the dancer was Anja Schmidt from Geneva. This puppet piece was based on the Japanese art form called *Bunraku*. It is this amazing form of traditional Japanese puppetry where they use life-sized marionettes and the person manipulating the puppet is not hidden. Usually in Western puppetry there is some kind of device that hides the manipulator and the focus is only on the puppet. There is an illusionistic demand.

The system of Bunraku has a very traditional Japanese stage that is codified and ritualized. On the side of the stage, you have a musician and a singer, who is the voice of the puppets. The background may have a big tree or a set of trees, maybe a house, but is extremely simple and does not change. In the center is where the puppets are manipulated. I think that in traditional *Bunraku* there are usually three people, two working with the body and one that works with the head. The manipulators are dressed in all black and the puppet is almost as big as they are. The dance is between the body of the puppets and the body of the manipulators, which is completely incredible. This became my fixation—to work with the puppet and the dancer live on stage. Together with my friend Tamara Barnett-Herrin, who would write the songs and be the voice, we wrote this narrative of transformation of different bodies, from one to the next. The puppets become different characters.

PO: How is the set? Was it like a theater situation or was it more like a performance?

MP: It was a performance situation and was constructed like an abstracted *Bunraku* set. You had the puppet in the center with the dancer and it was very frontal. The audience was not in the same space with the dancer. Apart from the typewriter, the only stage element was the light. It was big and round, resembling the moon.

MC: Is it only women who manipulate the puppets?

MP: Yes. It's only one woman who manipulates the puppet. The crew is all women.

PO: What about the script - is it yours?

MP: Yes, the overall narrative is mine, but the individual songs were written by Tamara. It is an overall process where the two of us discuss the development of the piece. I send her books, poems, or inspiration and she sends me other materials in response. Then in the studio, here in Geneva, we do this two-week session where we work together with the musician (Beatrice Dillon) and the dancer (Anja Schmidt) to try and come up with how the puppet will function. It was quite difficult technically to figure out how to work with this body that was a bit lumpy and the articulation wasn't working well. On the other hand, it gave the body an imperfect quality like a *Bunraku* puppet. One day, I would like to have a professional for the puppet because I would like to design something with more puppets. This comes from a desire I have for creating this work at *The Kitchen*.

PO: I have a question about fashion, because one of the first works I saw of yours was in Venice. It was this silver mannequin outfitted in an awesome skeleton dress made by Schiaparelli. There is this characteristic of an obvious use of fashion and, as you mentioned, in collaboration with your friend, but could you say something about this?

MP: Firstly, I think fashion is important because it is the shape of the time you are in and also it's a form of self-expression that everyone uses. It's a part of everyday life and the everyday life of the body. I've always been interested in avant-garde fashions partly because the outfit is one of the places where social prescriptions on the body or rules of the body are enforced. It is where people are trying to revolutionize clothing, behavior, or the way of existing in society. I find it, of course, especially a feminine thing. Or it is identified in our society as a very female thing.

PO: I would like to move to the subject of your most recent work. In a sense, I feel the title of our conversation here could be *Puppetry and War* and I wanted to ask you about your newest piece at the David Kordansky Gallery. I think the representation of the woman warrior is a pertinent subject now for all matters and you turned it into a set of mannequins.

MP: Yes, so the show is in Los Angeles. It is structured around eight, maybe nine female figures or mannequins representing female soldiers. I made these pieces for an exhibition last year for a museum in Dallas. In a way, this is a second iteration of showing this work, because I really played with the display of the exhibition. When I put on the show in Dallas I had a number of concerns. The first one was a museum called the Nasher Sculpture Center that specializes in modernist sculpture. They have a lot of very canonical sculptures. They have a very beautiful Rodin, an amazing Naum Gabo, and some figurative and abstract sculptures that are very interesting. It was a show for a context that was very museum-like. I think I have a tendency to mimic or play with an exhibition place when I am presented with it. I just think "Okay, it is a sculpture museum, so I am going to do free-standing sculptures." I did not want to do a show with too many objects on the wall or paintings and in a way, I was kind of aping what was going on in the museum as a place. Figurative sculpture and the body are always important in my work. At this point, I had not done mannequins in some time, so I was interested in working with this and there was a general geo-political context that I was working on. It was a horribly depressing period with terrorist attacks in Paris and the war in Syria—all of these images of bodies in pain and also the questions within the Islamic state regarding women's bodies being erased. During this time Valerie Snobeck, who I didn't know very well, sent me a video on Facebook about the Kurdish Woman's Protection Units in Northern Syria in Rojava. I watched the video and became completely enthralled with it. I started looking at other videos and I fell into this rabbit hole of observing these images of young Kurdish girls who are sixteen to twenty-two years old, living in a place that is in a total state of upheaval and war. They are trying to create a new kind of system of government according to more equalitarian principles in a very patriarchal world. In the state of Rojava where they live there is a state that was founded on the ruins of Syrian power. Kurdish people basically took over, organized themselves according to the principles of their leader, Abdullah Öcalan of the PKK in Turkey. This kind of communism is based on ecological principles, feminist principles, and of the recognition of the people. It is a very strange place because politically they set up these protection units, or militias, and for every male part they need to have a female counterpart. So, for example, a municipal councilor, who is a man, will always need a female council to counter balance. This is very intense in this particular part of the world. So, they created this female army to counterbalance the male army. These young females enroll voluntarily. There was a documentary showing them not fighting but maintaining everyday life—playing together, singing folk songs, and visiting their parents. It was so moving. At some point, when it came to the exhibition, I wanted to do something with figures to pay homage to these people. Knowing that of course it is a projection because I have never been there, and it is not a documentary work in any way. I did not want it to be exploitative.

MC: How was the show received in Dallas?

MP: It was strange in Dallas because I think people recognized their own violence. American violence, gun violence and, of course, it was before Trump was elected as the President of the United States. Dallas, I think,

is a democratic city, but the state of Texas is very Republican. So, it was very strange in this context, but it was also very interesting, because people were discussing the Vietnam War, women and violence, and violence on women.

MC: In the show it was also conceived of puppets standing on a carpet on the floor?

MP: Yes, so the show in Dallas was much more immersive. The viewer was in the space and had to descend the stairs where there was a glass covered in Vaseline and then one could enter the room.

PO: How did you get the idea to use Vaseline?

MP: It was because, at first, I was looking to build a cinderblock wall or have a silicone curtain, but I could not find a material that worked well. Then I thought of putting something on it and I liked the Vaseline because it has a sort of sexual connotation. Vaseline is also a petroleum product and the War in Syria has a lot to do with oil as well. It is also something you put on the body and petroleum is something used for lubricating guns. I also was fond of the fact that it made the glass very blurry and you could not really make out who was inside. The viewer walked around the mannequins and it became more about this uncanny encounter. If you look at photographs of visitors in the room with the figures you cannot make out who is a puppet and who is a human.

MC: Are the guns real?

MP: No, the guns are made from polyester resin replicas and they are actually replicas of a replica. I bought a pellet gun, a compressed air gun, online and it's an AK47. We produced a lot of replicas and many different versions. I think it is very seductive because they have candy-like colors and are not war-like colors at all.

PO: How did you feel about the relationship between the figures and the carpet?

MP: I suppose the carpet was meant to be a giant flag and I think I wanted to make it less about this particular political story and more about this mental state. The carpet helped with this image because it looks like a projection or like a Rorschach test—it had some abstract expressionist painting aspect to it and I liked that it was in a different space. I think what I really worked on was trying to adapt different materials I had previously used in other exhibitions into this one show. It was somewhat like a collage, trying to make sense of disjointed materials like wicker hands and silicone faces. Some of the silicone faces are highly realistic and usually they are molds of a friend's face. I like reintroducing this other level of reality. For instance, there is an image of Latifa Echakhch, an artist, and Laura Ravelli, a gallerist from Milan. You can recognize these people in the mannequins and it is a very strange thing. The faces are ceramic. There are also bodies made from papier-mâché and boots made of bronze. It was important for me to have bronze present because then it becomes "a real sculpture." There is this contrast between very cheap, basic materials like papier-mâché and then very fancy black, bronze boots.

MC: What do you think about the feminization in puppetry? Do you think that something like this exists or is it a subject to be made? I suppose Contemporary Art is great, in a way, because it introduces new languages. Now we can finally talk more about crafts, higher archaists, lower archaists, and collaboration. What we are trying to do with *Pavilionesque* is administer the marionette and the puppetry as a technique and your work, intuitively, has so much of it.

MP: I think quite intuitively, because I actually don't know that much about the history of puppetry. There are a few things I have seen that I respond to and there is an obvious kind of conflation of the body and the female doll. There is this natural urge to sort of reclaim this alienated image of oneself because the doll is this passive woman that doesn't move, react, have will power, doesn't have an agenda and is manipulated by this sort of god-like figure who is usually a puppeteer and normally expected to be a man. *The Sandman* for instance, where puppets come into being because of a loving man who has created this puppet and it becomes this sort of perfect girlfriend, in a way, and she will never disobey you.

PO: Yes, but also, as women, we have puppets from the beginning. We are given a puppet as our first thing to play with.

MP: Yes, but isn't this a part of trying to make you into a mother? I have always thought that this is what it was all about. I always thought it was terrible and I hated it. When I was a kid I didn't really like "the baby" because I always thought it was encouraging your role of having a child later in life and I think that is kind of horrible.

PO: I wanted to ask you about the *Crystal Frontier* and how, in a way, you are creating a specific environment for these figures. Is there something abstract or do you have a goal of what you would like to create with them? You spoke about *The Kitchen* and creating an even larger environment with the *Bunraku*, but is there something else you are thinking of?

MP: Well, there is something I have always wanted to do and that is not only to have moving puppets but moving sculptures. It is my little fantasy to think about creating a play where the sculptures would move just as much as the people acting. I guess I am always working towards this with different projects, but I still haven't done anything like it. I think the stage set element is another aspect I would like to work with.

*Mai-Thu Perret - a Swiss multidisciplinary artist, encompassing sculpture, painting, installation and performance. In her works she combines feminist politics with literary texts and homemade crafts and 20th century avant-garde aesthetics. She studied at Cambridge University (BA in English) and at the Whitney Independent Study Program, New York. Since 1999 she has been working on a project called The Crystal Frontier - a fictional narrative chronicling the lives of a group of radically minded self-exiled in New Mexico to establish a feminist commune. Awarded both the 2011 Zurich Art Prize and Le Prix Culturel Manor 2011.