

Escape the Brexit Blues with the Artist Mixing Fairy Tales, Zen Gardens, and Feminist Separatism

Artist Mai-Thu Perret on the connection between witchcraft, feminism, and how it all relates to her major new installation in the UK.



In anticipation of Sunday's 'Super Blood Wolf Moon, GARAGE is celebrating all things lunar.

Witches, in case you haven't heard, are perhaps more popular than ever. Lana Del Rey [put a hex on Donald Trump](#) a year and a half ago, and one can hardly swing a dead cat these days without bumping into [an acclaimed film, a new TV show](#), or even [interviews](#) with the craft's contemporary practitioners. In a timely addition to animal masks, textile banners, and an atmospheric spoken word soundtrack, all loosely inspired by the occult, fantasy, and metamorphosis—opens this week at the non-profit Spike Island in Bristol.



Mai-Thu Perret Superpotent (2019) (detail) Installation view, The Blazing World, Spike Island, Bristol Works courtesy the artist and Simon Lee Gallery. Photograph by Max McClure

Witches aren't the only manifestation of unruly women the artist is concerned with: in 1999, Perret began writing *The Crystal Frontier*, an account of a fictional feminist commune in New Mexico, which has provided an important framework for much of her work since. This exhibition is rich with literary sources and visual references, from Anne Carson's 1992 essay *Gender of Sound* to Eiichi Yamamoto's 1973 film *Belladonna of Sadness*. For *GARAGE*, the artist discusses how she intertwines radical feminist politics with the history of modernism, [the Arts and Crafts movement](#), and Eastern spirituality.

GARAGE: Since the inception of *The Crystal Frontier*, shows of your work seem to function like pieces added to an always-expanding narrative. Was the research into the figure of the witch for this exhibition a development of what

Mai-Thu Perret: There is an obvious kinship between the female warriors of *Les Guérillères* and the figure of the witch as an archetypal, non-compliant woman. Around the time I was invited to do this show, I had met curators of a feminist festival who wanted me to conceive a public monument to [Michée Chauderon](#), who in 1652 was the last woman to be executed for witchcraft in Geneva (my hometown). The subject led me to read books with a feminist point of view, like Silvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch*, in which she argues that the witch hunts and the systematic persecution of strong, independent women were not a footnote to the history of the period but rather a fundamental force in the destruction of the commons and the disciplining of the peasantry into a servile workforce for the capitalist system. I also read anthropological texts, such as the French ethnographer



Mai-Thu Perret *Superpotent* (2019) (detail) Installation view, *The Blazing World*, Spike Island, Bristol
Work courtesy the artist and Simon Lee Gallery. Photograph by Max McClure

What was your approach when translating these theories and histories into visual art works?

Costumes and masks are the simplest way into transformation, as any carnival celebration can attest. The masks offer representations of the transformation of humans into animals (a key concept of the Sabbath in the histories I read), and the scaled down dimensions of the dolls houses in the exhibition, rendered in ceramic, ask for mental projection into a diminutive space. They also recall the gingerbread house in the fairy tale of "Hansel and Gretel," since ceramics is also a kind of baking, and involves similar working processes in terms of construction and glazing.



Mai-Thu Perret *Abnormally avid* (2019) Installation view, *The Blazing World*, Spike Island, Bristol
Works courtesy the artist and Simon Lee Gallery. Photograph by Max McClure

There's a ceramic house, and a basket of apples, that made me think about works like artist [Joan Jonas's *The Juniper Tree* \(1976\)](#) , or writers of magical realism like [Angela Carter](#) , who re-imagined these stories, and used subversive tactics to liberate female protagonists from objectified gender roles.

I'm an admirer of both Jonas and Carter. As society transitioned from feudalism into modernity, the figure of the witch moved from the village square into the nursery. The witch is an archetype now engrained in our collective unconscious. It is a kind of cliché or readymade, from fairy tales to Hollywood films.

How is the stage set, which is composed of three abstracted, minimal motifs (a tree, a ramp, and a cone), indebted to Japanese Zen gardens?

The Zen garden reference was driven by an interest in shadows; what in the West we would call minimal forms. A number of important Zen gardens were designed with the presence of the moon in mind, knowing full well that the satellite would not be visible most of the time, therefore putting absence at the center of those places. In my mind (and my own idiosyncratic misreading, as I know that nothing could be further from a Japanese monk's mind than my feminist musings), this was an interesting connection to the way witches are often represented as living in wild places such as moors or forests. I thought that the metaphor of the garden (i.e. a space where nature is brought in) was a generative way of thinking about the installation, even if in the end what you see is just the barest hint of it.