

Arts & Life

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ART



Photos by Nan Coulter/Special Contributor

The exhibition by Swiss artist Mai-Thu Perret, who is pictured above through a glass panel coated with petroleum jelly, is part of the Nasher's "Sightings" series.

Women at arms

Nasher exhibit's female guerrilla fighters part of a merging of modernism, feminism

By DANIELLE AVRAM
Special Contributor



Les Guérillères I, part of Perret's exhibition, stands in front of *Agoraphobia I* at the Nasher.

In the Rojava region of northern Syria lives an army of approximately 50,000 civilian fighters known as the People's Protection Units. Primarily comprising local Kurdish people, the units are a guerrilla army that serves as the first line of defense in combating the Islamic State.

Within the army is a roughly 10,000-strong female faction known as the Women's Protection Units, or Y.P.J. Dressed in fatigues and armed with machine guns, the women of the Y.P.J. have proved themselves to be both a strong military presence and a voice for gender equality and feminist principles in a region where females are heavily repressed.

Their influence extends beyond the region through media coverage, an active social media presence and a website, which describes them as "a basic military and national force centered on democratic society, ecology and women's freedom."

These female fighters form the basis for Swiss artist Mai-Thu Perret's exhibition currently on view at the Nasher Sculpture Center, part of the "Sightings" series.

Backed by a large Rorschach-meets-Pollock-style painting, the show features eight female figures that mimic the look of the Y.P.J. fighters, replete with militaristic garb and AK-47s, two large ceramic eyeballs and a ceramic dog. Although directly inspired by the Kurdish liberation movement, the characters in this particular installation are also a spinoff of Perret's years-long project "The Crystal Frontier."

Begun in 1999, "Crystal Frontier" is a

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Nasher exhibition part of larger art project

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multidisciplinary series documenting life in New Ponderosa, a fictitious all-female commune in New Mexico. The project exists in a variety of forms — literary texts, performances and functional and artistic objects created by the women of the commune — and brings together elements of art history, feminist theory, real-life issues and Perret's own work, with new iterations of "Crystal Frontier" referencing previous ones.

A coating of petroleum jelly covers the windows of the lower-level gallery where the installation is housed. It creates a hazy, dreamlike effect that distances the work from

Plan your life

■ Mai-Thu Perret's *Figures* is at 8:30 tonight;
■ *O* is from 2 to 4 p.m. Saturday, Nasher Sculpture Center, 2001 Flora St., Dallas. Both events are free, register to attend at nashersculpturecenter.org/engage

the real world and underscores the desires of communes, which propose to function as the utopian antithesis of everyday society.

The figures are created from various materials such as ceramic, wicker and papier-mâché, which Perret employs for their perceived feminine associations, and range from basic mannequins to startlingly lifelike cre-

ations. Presented in relaxed poses — one woman is fixing her hair, another sitting on the ground next to a pet dog — the figures are caught in quiet moments between battles, when life returns to a vague normalcy and simple acts like sitting still may regroup a person in a sense of her own humanity.

The large-scale ceramic eyeballs are a nod to historical art movements like surrealism and dada, playing with the perception of scale in relationship to the life-size figures and interrupting the commune's narrative. The painting functions as a sort of flag that plays upon the psychology of emblems and the perceived ideologies they

embody.

In addition to the installation, Perret will present two performances in conjunction with the Soluna International Music & Arts Festival. The first event is a restaging of her performance piece *Figures*, which was first presented at the 2014 Biennale of Moving Images in Geneva and features a life-size puppet animated by the movements of a dancer. The second performance is a newly commissioned piece titled *O*, which takes the form of a series of musical and dance happenings throughout the Nasher space. Both blend Perret's myriad interests in modernism, feminist theory, utopian values and historical and contemporary events to create visceral experiences that place the viewer in an unsettling space between the real and the surreal.

Danielle Avram is a curator and writer based in Dallas. She is currently gallery director at Texas Woman's University.



Nan Coulter/Special Contributor

Mai-Thu Perret's "Sightings" exhibition at the Nasher evokes images of female guerrilla fighters in Syria. It's part of a years-long project called "The Crystal Frontier."