

# AUTRE

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## Working In Real Time: An Interview With Multi-Disciplinary Artist Mai-Thu Perret

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Text by Adam Lehrer, photographs by Annik Wetter



Swiss multi-disciplinary artist Mai-Thu Perret understands that the most interesting artwork lives within the viewer's mind, as an impression, memory, or dream, as much as it lives within the space that the art is presented. "I think the memory one carries of a work of art after one has left it behind, whether by turning the page or leaving the room in the museum is almost as important as the object itself," said Perret in an email.

That isn't to say that her work lacks aesthetic dazzle, however. Her recent exhibit at the David Kordansky booth at Frieze New York, for example, was one of the standout presentations of the fair. Through her brightly colored Roschach ink blot paintings and her female figurine sculptures, Mai-Thu communicates a narrative. But that narrative is best brought to life through the mental processes of the installation's viewer. Perret loves poetry and writing, having received a BA from Cambridge University, but she is most concerned with creating the settings and the landscapes of the narratives of her art works as a point of genesis for the creation of art objects. The weaving together of these disparate ideas within the space often becomes the burden of the viewers, facilitating a challenging yet intellectually rewarding interplay between the artist and the viewer.

Perret is fascinated by the idea of the utopia, or, a unique landscape with a set of ideals that would theoretically facilitate a revisionist art history. Perret envisions a utopia in which the ideals and creativity of women and marginalized groups are as much a part of the conversation surrounding art history as those of men. Perhaps Perret's best known and most labored over work, entitled *The Crystal Frontier*, is most exemplary of this idea. *The Crystal Frontier* is an imagined utopia of women living in the desert in New Mexico. Perret has built on the idea of *The Crystal Frontier* over her career, imagining its artifacts and furniture and fashions. *The Crystal Frontier* not only poses an fascinating conceptual narrative, but

also has proven to be a place of contemplative creativity for Perret; one in which she can return to as a renewable source of inspiration.

Perret's most recent exhibition at Nasher Sculpture Center, *Sightings*, builds upon *The Crystal Frontier* while connecting it to a real world community considered by Perret to be the kind of utopia that she has been imagining in her work. This utopia, a secular Kurdish community in the Syrian region of Rojava, champions female leaders and implements democratic ideals in a war-ravaged country. Perret has made eight human figures representing the women in all-female militia groups in the area.

At SOLUNA, Perret presented a performance entitled *Figures* in which a life-size marionette (whose body is animated by dancer Anja Schmidt) and a dancer enact an Indian mystic, a 19th-century American Shaker, a 1950s computer programmer, an Artificial Intelligence, and a journalist. At first, the dancer and puppet are separate entities, eventually merging and leaving the stage to make way for the journalist on a typewriter, played by Perret. In the style of Japanese puppetry known as Bunraku, there is no illusion concealing the fact that this is a fictional work. You can see the stage manipulations in real time. Perret asks that you accept her ideas as art without concealing the fact that this is anything other than art. Once again, Perret sets up the narrative's background, leaving room for the viewer's imagination to complete the piece.

Perret answered some of my questions about her ideas and work over email, discussing the narrative structure in her art, revising history to incorporate the ideas of the marginalized, and the majesty of the desert.

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***ADAM LEHRER: When learning about the premise for Figures, I couldn't help but think about the Crystal Frontier. In the Crystal Frontier, women are living away from society, but forming their own society. In Figures, women are leaving their bodies through trance. It made me think of the idea that an alternative society can be a type of freedom, but liberation from the body is the ultimate freedom. Were you at all thinking along these lines when conceptualizing Figures?***

MAI-THU PERRET: I wasn't really thinking about the Crystal Frontier when I was putting together Figures, but there are definitely a lot of common points and references. I've always been interested in ways one can leave one's self and identity behind. These ideas of trance and mysticism are definitely connected.

***ADAM LEHRER: Your work often deals with this questioning of the manner in which art and culture is consumed, do you think that the theoretical utopias you explore could ever be possible considering the almost hyper-capitalist mentality of the contemporary art market?***

MAI-THU PERRET: There is no place for this type of thinking within the art market, but the market is not the be-all and end-all and I think there are lots of people trying to find alternative ways of living and making art today.



**ADAM LEHRER:** *In these projects, like the Crystal Frontier, does this entire world live in your imagination before you create the objects? Or do the specific objects and sculptural manifestations present themselves through the process?*

MAI-THU PERRET: It's always a process, very little is fixed in advance. I set-up a broad set of parameters and then I construct what comes within it.

**ADAM LEHRER:** *Did you ever consider writing literature? Your sense of*

*story and narrative is really astounding even in terms of conceptual artists.*

MAI-THU PERRET: I did when I was a student, but I was useless at constructing a narrative. I've always been better at imagining atmospheres or situations rather than proper stories with a beginning and an end. The open-ended space of the exhibition, where you can combine objects and moods to create a larger whole that the viewer passes through and pieces together in their minds, is probably more suited to this way of thinking. I've always been interested in experimental writing and poetry, and sometimes I think I will try to write again at some point.

**ADAM LEHRER:** *It seems that your sense of "the utopia" is broken down into various different utopias; a choice of utopias if you will, as opposed to one all-encompassing utopia. As you said in an interview with the White Review, the Crystal Frontier's utopia's reasons for excluding men is different than Plato's for excluding artists. Am I at all accurate in these assumptions?*

MAI-THU PERRET: Yes, I think that's pretty accurate. The idea behind the all-female environment was to create a space where the dominant and habitual paradigm could be reversed in order for new possibilities to emerge, rather than a desire for exclusion.

**ADAM LEHRER:** *Your work deals with the history of avant-garde within art, do you feel that this history has often been biased towards men and are you hoping to break down that history within your work?*

MAI-THU PERRET: I definitely think that the history of art, like Western history as a whole, has been male-dominated. I'm interested in revisionist histories and histories that focus on forgotten or marginalized figures and realities. I like to use my work as a kind of speculative space to imagine different futures or untold stories.

**ADAM LEHRER:** *You have discussed the idea of a desert as an ideal space or utopia because it's outside the world, but do you ever recall being drawn to the desert aesthetically?*

MAI-THU PERRET: I absolutely love the desert, and the Crystal Frontier narrative was definitely born from my encounter with the American West. Deserts, like islands, are incredibly meditative places, and

they can also be hostile and inhuman. I think this feeling of a geological space, where men are minuscule in relation to the immensity of the landscape, and where time is counted in millions of years rather than in human life spans, is important to the work.

***ADAM LEHRER: Is it ever difficult to find the balance that allows your use of text and narrative to emphasize but not overshadow the viewer's appreciation of the objects you create and present?***

MAI-THU PERRET: I'm very aware of the fact that if you give a lot of information to the viewer you risk cutting them off from the actual experience of the work and leading them into seeing only the things you have been talking about. That's one of the biggest problems with wall texts and all the didactic paratexts one encounters in museums. When I present text, it's usually in an attempt to subvert these institutional prompts and open other spaces of thoughts that the viewers can hopefully dive into. My text works are usually fictions that complicate the reading of the works rather than provide explanations for them.

***ADAM LEHRER: In an interview with John Armleder, you discussed the manner in which people see art shows on the Internet, and how the experience is diminished. Do you purposefully try to create art than needs to be experienced in person in opposition to this notion?***

MAI-THU PERRET: I don't think I create art specifically to counter the mediated reality of the screen worlds we inhabit today, but of course I think of my work as something that must be seen directly and which must almost be touched with the eyes to be really seen. That said, I love looking at art in books, and what's fascinating about art is that it exists both in the mind and in real space.

***ADAM LEHRER: For Figures, what drew you to Bunraku and the idea of singer and musician sitting on stage as character and puppet?***

MAI-THU PERRET: I've always loved the Asian forms of theater, like the Balinese puppet show or the Noh theater, where there is no backstage and no attempts at hiding the structures that support the experience of the performance. When I discovered Bunraku, I was amazed by the fact that the viewer's attention was constantly moving from puppet to manipulator, and by the strange relationship between the living and the inanimate this created. At times in Bunraku you can get so immersed in the movements of the puppet that [the puppet] seems more real than the people manipulating it, and I wanted to work with this idea. I was also drawn to the very special place the voice occupied in Bunraku, since the voice of the puppet is dissociated from it and clearly emitted by the singer who sits on the sidelines. It's not about illusionism; it's about the way that the spectator assembles all these separate elements in his/her mind.

***ADAM LEHRER: How did the experience of creating a narrative through performance and experience compare to that of creating a narrative through objects and examining those objects?***

MAI-THU PERRET: In performance you are working in real time. What you create is instantly erased by new movements or actions. It's a very different type of memory and attention.

***[Sightings: Mai-Thu Perret](#) will be on view at the Nasher Sculpture Center until July 17, 2016.***