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Bringing a Sculptural Platoon of Female Soldiers to Life

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by [Alina Cohen](#)



Mai-Thu Perret during a performance of 'o' at the Nasher Sculpture Center (all photos by the author unless indicated otherwise)



Installation view of 'Sightings: Mai-Thu Perret' at the Nasher Sculpture Center (click to enlarge)

DALLAS — In a downstairs gallery the [Nasher Sculpture Center](#), [Mai-Thu Perret](#) has created an enclave for her newest sculptural figures — a band of female militants, plus one dog. Eight distinctly female figures composed of varying materials (papier mâché, wicker, silicon, etc.) sit or stand around the gallery, wielding guns. For the most part, the contrived nature of the sculptures is apparent: the guns are multicolored, translucent plastic, and the bodies' material creates a sense of unreality. But some of the women's features are strikingly lifelike.

For the project, Perret cast two of her friends' faces (artist [Latifa Echakhch](#) and gallerist Laura Ravelli). These works in particular produce an uncanny, unsettling effect. Perret smeared petroleum jelly on the glass wall that separates the gallery from the rest of the museum, emphasizing this division from reality. The sculptural dog is a grotesque creature, an eyeless, brown and red ceramic work that looks vaguely scatological. Through its various components and their staging in the gallery, the exhibition explores the line between authenticity and fabrication, especially in regard to the female form.

Perret's inspiration for these sculptures was very real: the all-female fighter group in the Kurdish region of Rojava in northern Syria, the [Yekîneyên Parastina Jin](#) (or Women's Protection Units). This detail, though emphasized in the literature about the exhibition, seems almost irrelevant when viewing the work. There's nothing in the show to indicate a particular conflict. This adds a layer of strangeness to the figures' positions. They seem to be waiting around, wielding guns to fend off a threat that may or may not

exist. The bright, playful-looking weapons similarly downplay the seriousness of any possible confrontation.

Perret has often worked with fictional material. She's best known for [The Crystal Frontier](#), an ongoing body of work begun in 1999 that revolves around the lives of fictional women who live in an all-female commune in the New Mexico desert called New Ponderosa. With the Nasher exhibition, *Sightings*, she demonstrates a similar impulse to create an all-female society with its own rules. While *The Crystal*



Mai-Thu Perret, "Les guérillères III" (2016, left) and "Les guérillères VI" (2016, right)

Frontier was a major, multiyear undertaking for which Perret extensively imagined an entire history, *Sightings* comes across as more of a start to such a project. The world in which her female fighters live remains ambiguous, somewhere in between the real-life battlefields in North Syria and a realm in Perret's head.

Three separate objects in the exhibition give a bit more context. Two comparatively giant ceramic eyeballs on the floor indicate that someone (or something) much larger is watching the women. One of Perret's large-scale carpets with acrylic paint, in the form of a Rorschach blot hangs on the back wall. Read like a backdrop to a tableau, it suggests that these figures are living in a subconscious space. Together, the carpet and the eyes indicate a larger being and psychology in which all these women exist. One hopes that within the artist's own psyche, these women will continue to develop, as will their world. The exhibition seems like a beginning, a way into the type of large, comprehensive project at which Perret has already proved so adept.

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Mai-Thu Perret, "Orchids grow in the hidden quarters of the palace. Though never displayed, they never cease emitting their fragrance" (2015)

On the afternoon of June 4, Perret staged a performance in the museum, a series of "happenings" that occurred over the course of two hours. Her collaborators included dancer Anja Schmidt, singer Tamara Bennett-Herrin, and musician [Beatrice Dillon](#), in addition to students from the Meadows School at Southern Methodist University. At various points, the performers crawled around the perimeter of the museum, sliding along the railings and down the stairs; dragged each other along the floors; piled on top of each other; and sat in a circle and passed around an invisible object. Dillon sat in a corner of a large gallery, producing percussive beats that provided a steady, rhythmic backdrop. Some students added to the effect with percussion and other subtle sounds.



Performance of Mai-Thu Perret's 'Figures' at the Nasher Sculpture Center (photo by and courtesy Sharen Bradford/The Dancing Image)

The project was commissioned by [SOLUNA](#), the arts and music festival run by the Dallas Symphony Orchestra. The performance drew a full, eclectic crowd to the museum that seemed pleased to follow the artists as they moved throughout the space. Perret and her crew effectively activated the Renzo Piano-designed building, literally pushing its boundaries at some points. Taken together, their actions asked viewers to reconsider the architecture around them and how they were navigating their surroundings.

However, the various happenings seemed so loosely tied together by the program's very ambiguous [theme](#) — the letter/symbol "o" and the writings of the French feminist writer [Monique Wittig](#) — that meaning became especially murky. Perret's work didn't engage in much depth with the two main exhibitions on view at the museum (her own and one of [Joel Shapiro](#)'s works). Given the commission's site-specific nature, disregarding the work that was there seemed like a missed opportunity. Nevertheless, it was a pleasure to watch the dancers — especially Schmidt — move their bodies in challenging, unorthodox ways as the afternoon sun slanted into the building.



Performance of Mai-Thu Perret's 'Figures' at the Nasher Sculpture Center (photo by and courtesy Sharen Bradford/The Dancing Image)

Two days prior, on June 2, Perret, Schmidt, Dillon, and Barnett-Herrin performed [Figures](#), which debuted at the [2014 Biennale of Moving Images](#) in Geneva. On a proscenium stage, the work began as Schmidt animated a doll in a way that, like Perret's sculptures, called into question the divide between human and artwork, reality and fantasy. The expansive, generative power of imagination was as evident here as it was in Perret's exhibition. In the Nasher's gallery at night, the audience saw themselves reflected in the back window, doubled in a ghostly way. The performance haunted, evidencing Perret's power (when she's at her best) to disrupt notions of identity and our own humanity.

[Sightings: Mai-Thu Perret](#) continues at the [Nasher Sculpture Center](#) (2001 Flora Street, Dallas, Texas) through July 17. Performances of [Figures](#) and [o](#) took place on June 2 and June 4, respectively.