

Interview

MAI-THU PERRET’S MILITIA



Mai-Thu Perret, 2017. Photo: Annik Wetter. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA

Somewhere in the desert of New Mexico lies a commune named New Ponderosa Year Zero. It is autonomous, it is comprised entirely of women, and it is imaginary. In fact, it’s the invention of Switzerland-born artist Mai-Thu Perret, and the premise of her ongoing project, *The Crystal Frontier*. Spanning over 16 years, this narrative has previously inspired exhibitions that showcased ephemera such as diary entries, letters, and artwork supposedly made by inhabitants of the commune. Perret’s new show, “Féminaire,” which opens today at David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles, evokes similar ideas, but emerged from a group far less fictional.

“Féminaire” features a coterie of life-size female figures inspired by the YPJ, also known as the Women’s Protection Unit, an all-female Kurdish militia based in Rojava, Syria. Each sculpture is numbered and titled after *Les Guérillères*, a 1969 battle-of-the-sexes novel by French writer Monique Wittig, where women warriors engage in combat with the patriarchy and emerge victorious—though Perret uses a lowercase “G” for her *Les guérillères*, as if to broaden the scope of the series. The medley of Perret’s inspirations, from New Ponderosa to Rojava and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland* (a 1915 utopian novel about a female society where women reproduce via parthenogenesis) is reflected in the uncanny figures themselves, which are somewhat incongruous. Nearly faceless and in uniform, they are composed of ceramic, wicker, papier-mâché, latex, bronze, and armed with translucent, candy-colored plastic guns. The rifles, however, are not what make “Féminaire” slightly unnerving. Rather, it’s the notion that Perret’s creations, inspired by societies both factual and fictional, don’t feel far from the truth; it’s tempting to speculate which parts of this “utopia” may, or already have, seeped into reality.

Interview caught up with Perret over the phone in March to discuss female militia and the impetus behind “Féminaire.”

PIMPLOY PHONGSIRIVECH: My understanding is that “Féminaire” is a restaging of your solo show last year, which was at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas.

MAI-THU PERRET: In some ways, yes. The show started around the *Les guérillères* figures that were at the Nasher and I decided to add a few works—mainly ceramics. The staging will be very different because at the Nasher, it was almost like the sculptures were in an aquarium. Have you seen pictures of the exhibition in Dallas?

PHONGSIRIVECH: I have, yes. The glass wall...



Mai-Thu Perret, *Les guérillères I* (detail), 2016. Figure in steel, wire, paper mâché, acrylic paint, gouache, synthetic hair, cotton and polyester fabric, bronze, polyester resin and steel base, 74 3/4 x 19 3/4 x 17 3/4". Photo: Annik Wetter. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.



Mai-Thu Perret, *Les guérillères IX* (detail), 2016. Glazed ceramic, steel, epoxy, synthetic hair, cotton and polyester fabric, polyester resin and steel base, 69 x 21 1/2 x 11 3/4". Photo: Kevin Todora. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.

PERRET: Yes, so you basically come down the stairs and arrive facing this glass box, which was the exhibition room, and see the work from afar through this glass box that I had obscured with Vaseline. In this case, I'm going to build a raised pedestal for the sculptures to stand on, so they're going to be on a stage or a kind of monolith. The viewers will be able to walk around them, but they'll be quite towering.

PHONGSIRIVECH: And the show's title is "Féminaire." Could you speak a little bit about its significance?

PERRET: At first I wanted to call the show *Les Guérillères*, both the figures and the title of this amazing Monique Wittig novel from the late '60s. It's a story about a war, an army of women against men—the patriarchy. Not against all men, just against the patriarchal system. It's also about their inventing of a mythical language that is female, so I thought of choosing a word from the novel. In the book, some of the passages include these little girls playing with their "féminaires," [which are] word books but in the female tense. I guess "féminaire" in English would be like "feminary"—as in a dictionary, but female.

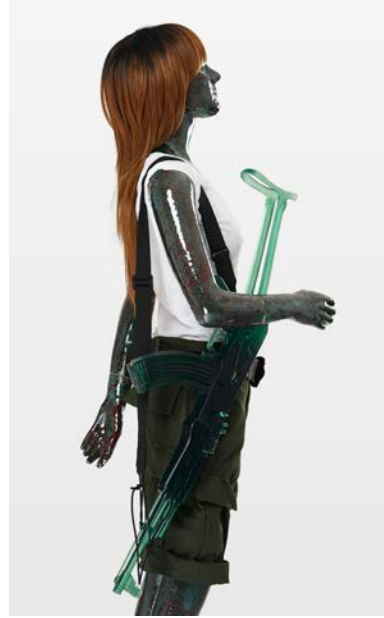
PHONGSIRIVECH: I'm curious about how your fascination—I think you've called it obsession—with the YPJ began? What about them were you so drawn to?

PERRET: A friend sent me a video almost two years ago about the free state of Rojava and the Kurdish female militia. She said it reminded [her] of *The Crystal Frontier*, the story I wrote. It was this very beautiful, very simple propaganda documentary for the YPJ that followed a group of young female fighters. You don't really see them fighting. They talk about fighting and they talk about guns and ISIS and the craze—there's a moment when they talk about the crazed, drugged-out men that they sometimes end up against on the battlefield in a strangely compassionate way. Anyway, it's mostly their everyday life: their organization, how they cook, train together, live together. I started reading more and

Phongsirivech, Pimplo, “Mai-Thu Perret’s Militia,” *InterviewMagazine.com*, May 19, 2017



Mai-Thu Perret, *Les guérillères V* (detail), 2016. Figure in steel, wicker, polyester foam, synthetic hair, silicon, glass, cotton and polyester fabric, bronze, polyester resin and steel base, 37 1/2 x 25 1/2 x 27 1/2". Photo: Annik Wetter. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.



Mai-Thu Perret, *Les guérillères VI* (detail), 2016. Glazed ceramic, steel, epoxy, synthetic hair, cotton and polyester fabric, polyester resin, and steel base, 67 x 27 x 25 1/2". Photo: Mareike Tocha. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.

more about this movement and these women and their tremendous courage in the face of a really horrific situation. What was interesting was that there was this promise of some kind of a very positive social order. Whether or not it was like that in reality, I don't know, but there was something about it that was very hopeful.

PHONGSIRIVECH: That aligns very well with *The Crystal Frontier*.

PERRET: Exactly. There are echoes obviously that I've been working with or thinking about for a very long time. The person who gave me the link shared it with me on Facebook. It's this funny thing; you're sharing videos of cats or random stuff, and then suddenly you don't know what you might watch that'll hit a nerve and become something much more serious.

PHONGSIRIVECH: This reminds me of an interview you did last year when you talk about allowing the narrative of *The Crystal Frontier* to sort of shape your artwork. I think you quoted Sol LeWitt. ["The idea becomes the machine that makes the art."]

PERRET: Yes, and I think it's especially the way artists work today—how you gather information and how information arrives to you.

PHONGSIRIVECH: And so after you watched the YPJ documentary...

PERRET: That was the impetus for making the figures. When I was making them it was the time of the presidential campaign in the U.S. There were also all these terrorist attacks in Europe—Paris, Brussels—so this was very much in the news threatening to become the only thing that people talked about. It was beginning to be really claustrophobic mentally, this fear and paranoia. I felt like these warriors, these women, were much more hopeful.

Phongsirivech, Pimplo, “Mai-Thu Perret’s Militia,” *InterviewMagazine.com*, May 19, 2017



The mind's eye is as bright as the moon, 2017, glazed ceramic. 15 3/4 x 21 x 4 1/4 inches. (40 x 53.3 x 10.8 cm)

PHONGSIRIVECH: And timely. I feel like in the U.S., politics has taken quite a dystopian turn. Although I guess there is a fine line between utopia and dystopia.

PERRET: Right, it's not the most hopeful of times. It's interesting to also look at dystopian and utopian at the same time, side by side.

So, yes, the work started with the YPJ, but it got to be something much more general. I was always a bit nervous about making it only about this particular situation because it's one that I don't know about firsthand. I've been to the Kurdish part of Turkey—I spent some time there making carpets—but it's not my world. I suppose it's not even my fight. It was more of an inspiration, not at all a documentary [or] even representational of them, it's really just inspiration that dovetailed with all my other interests.

I think in the context of the world, you begin to see [the figures] outside of the Kurdish-Syrian story and [instead] just as this female army, which also has resonance in the context of an extremely right-wing government that doesn't believe in women's rights, for example.

PHONGSIRIVECH: Right, a more open-ended signification.

PERRET: I'm also very much about collage on a material level. In the same way that the figures and their origin is a collage of ideas, materially they're a product of collage as well. They're made of jarring materials that don't necessarily go together. Different materiality, different technique. That was really important to me.

PHONGSIRIVECH: And quite Dadaistic.

PERRET: Yes, exactly. That was what I had in my mind. I guess this type of collage was something that the Dadaists used a lot in response to the First World War, for example—taking inspiration from that approach of disjunction as a way to respond to events.

PHONGSIRIVECH: Like recreating or reflecting the world outside?

PERRET: In some ways. [I'm] not trying to realistically represent what's going on in the world or trying to illustrate, but to create this fragmented material reality within the work that mirrors how disjointed the actual the world is. And how brutal.

“FÉMINAIRE” IS ON VIEW AT DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY IN LOS ANGELES THROUGH JULY 1, 2017.