

Tsai, Sylvia, "A League Of Their Own: Conversation with Mai-Thu Perret," *ArtAsiaPacific*, August 5, 2014



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## A LEAGUE OF THEIR OWN: CONVERSATION WITH MAI-THU PERRET

BY SYLVIA TSAI



Portrait of Mai-Thu Perret. Courtesy Annik Wtter and Simon Lee Gallery, Hong Kong.

*For the past 15 years, Swiss artist Mai-Thu Perret has been building on the ongoing project "Crystal Frontier" (1999– ), based on a multidisciplinary narrative about a group of women who move away from mainstream society to create a feminist commune, called New Ponderosa Year Zero, in the desert of southwest New Mexico. Inspired by various selections of literature, the fiction behind "Crystal Frontier" has resulted in a multitude of ephemera—from letters and diary entries to ceramics, textiles and furniture—that chronicle the women's experiences in their colony. Over a cup of hot water, Perret's preferred drink of choice, ArtAsiaPacific sat down with the artist before her debut at Simon Lee Gallery, Hong Kong, to talk about the notion of utopia, her latest work inspired by Enzo Mari—one of the great Italian designers of the late 20th century—and the current state of "Crystal Frontier."*

***You began "Crystal Frontier" in 1999. Can you explain the concept of the project and what led you to the idea of an all-female utopia?***

At the time there were two things: I was interested in ways of making art using some kind of narrative filter, and I was also interested in [a form of] conceptual art with a rule-based system for directing a practice. I referred to people who used narrative in this way, such as Liam Gillick and also Jim Shaw, whose "Dream Drawings" series (1992–96) is allegedly based on his dreams, which allows for his works to be open and complex. In terms of the content [of "Crystal Frontier"], I went to the American southwest quite a few times and was impressed by its desert. The desert is both a literal and mental place—it's a very good shortcut to an imaginary space. In history, there's a lot of people who moved to the desert in the US to secede from mainstream society. For example, during the 1920s, there was a colony of artists who lived in Taos, New Mexico, including Georgia O'Keeffe and DH Lawrence. There were other models of this, such as Monte Verità in Switzerland, which was a colony in the 1900s that was based on principles of vegetarianism, free dancing and nudism, among others. All of these ideas went into how I conceived "Crystal Frontier." In history, as soon as modern cities came into existence, you had people who wanted to escape it and create a separate, rural utopia. Yet in the Middle Ages, when there weren't many big cities, this idea didn't make any sense. Although these communities look for ways to get back to nature and a move away from modernity, it is, ironically, one of the most modern concepts of society.

***Does the fictional utopia of New Ponderosa Year Zero necessarily have to be only for women? What is the reason for excluding men? In many ways, this community reminds me of the novel Herland (1915), by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, where the absence of men results in a freedom from traditional gender roles and war, and thereby nurtures an***

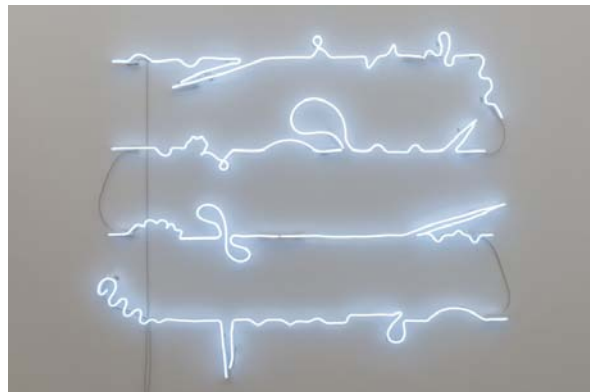
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***egalitarian society. Was this piece of literature among those that inspired "Crystal Frontier"? What other literary sources is this work a reference to?***

I have always been interested in feminist art history and literary theory. It has inspired me to imagine the world differently, or different from the way it functions in the mainstream. There are so many forerunners to this: Herland, for example. I love Herland and think it's such a funny and strange book. There's also Ursula K. Le Guin, the American science-fiction writer, who wrote a number of books trying to imagine an alternate society from all kinds of perspectives. In *The Dispossessed* (1974), there's an anarchist community or society on a separate planet. There's also a really beautiful novel called *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), which is about a planet where there is no gender. They are humans, but somehow they have mutated and are different. Over the course of their hormonal cycle, they either become male or female at a particular point, and they can mate and reproduce, but gender doesn't exist. The main character of the novel, who is a man, is completely confused and makes all kinds of assumptions about society based on his male perspective, which leads him to chronically misread what is happening on this foreign planet. So those two novels are part of the many influences and ideas. It's really a speculative thing—this process of turning the world upside down. And in "Crystal Frontier," the community is all female, but they can come and go freely and have contact with the outside world. It's not a total secessionist kind of thing. There's a text [in the project] in which one of the women says that she wants to rebuild the whole world to be all-female and egalitarian, and once they have managed this, and to live with fair exchange among each other, they'll allow men in.

***Can you speak about your latest installation at Simon Lee? Should viewers see this as part of "Crystal Frontier"?***

At this point, I don't really know anymore. But I don't really bother with setting things so clearly in relation to "Crystal Frontier." I've wanted to give the work a little bit of space in its story, also because it turns out that though the narrative is interesting, it can filter the way people interpret the project—to the extent that I feel that it can prevent viewers from really looking at the work. This was not the original intention, so I've wanted to let the interpretations be more open and let the viewers make the decision. But of course, it's very easy to see how the various works of the series link up. There's continuity in the choice of material, in the [use of the] female figure and in the inclusion of an Enzo Mari bed. Mari had the whole idea that consumers could reclaim the objects that are around them by learning how to make them, which allows for people to be more critical and empowered in relation to industrial and consumer society. This is very close to what the women from "Crystal Frontier" are trying to do.



**MAI-THU PERRET, *A Tolerable Straight Line (Shandy II)*, 2014, neon, 170 × 200 cm. Courtesy Simon Lee Gallery, Hong Kong.**

***Enzo Mari's furniture designs also focus on the essential elements of form. How does his approach correspond to your own philosophy or that of your practice?***

I'm very much a formalist. I'm very interested in the shape that things take and what that says [about it]. It's very difficult to make art if you're not interested in form. When a friend gave me the Mari manual *Autoprogettazione* (1974), I experienced such a strange feeling—it's like I knew it had existed somewhere but had just never found it before. What struck me about his designs, from the perspective of form, is how close they are to things you see in Constructivism. If you look at the designs by Aleksandr Rodchenko (1891–1956), for the Soviet Pavilion at the 1925

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Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, where he created a worker's clubhouse with very simple chairs and a set of furniture that could take on different purposes, you see that everything is clearly delineated and has very basic form. For me, the Mari designs are reminiscent of Rodchenko's designs and that particular way of constructing things. I've always been really interested in Constructivism as a formal moment, but also as a historical moment in terms of what the artists were trying to do and what they went through. Obviously, it's a story that ended quite badly. Mari is also a designer that is very political and thinks very critically about what it means to be a designer. As a Communist in Italy during the 1960s, this position sat uneasily with working for furniture companies and in designing corporate, capitalist and mass-produced objects. I find that contradiction really fascinating.

***And by creating the Autoprogettazione, Mari brought his design back to his own vision and philosophy.***

Exactly. I think that was the idea. In the introduction of the book, he says that if people start to make furniture themselves, they will be able to understand all the other furniture around them better and will be more critical of the designs that are constantly being forced upon them by manufacturing companies or other designers. So, in a way, it's about making the consumers less of a consumer and more of a critical thinker in regards to the choices being offered to them.

***With your texts and objects in "Crystal Frontier," are they based off of the qualities of one particular protagonist from New Ponderosa Year Zero? Or should they be seen as items made by one collective entity?***

When I began, the story was very much about making work. It was also about designing a machine for becoming an artist. Now, I feel that the work has gained enough autonomy. There's enough work out there that it almost makes itself. This plurality of voices, these different strands of narratives exist on their own. But it was always more about the multiplicity of characters. When I was writing the story [for "Crystal Frontier"], there were characters that had different urges. For example, one was more of a writer, the spiritual leader of the group. But even though they all had their own personalities, the artworks were never assigned to a particular person.

***By creating this narrative of a utopian community, do you intend to establish a distance between yourself, the creator, and the actual objects? Or do you see yourself in an omniscient position?***

I haven't been writing [the narrative for "Crystal Frontier"] for quite a while, so with that being said, what I find great about writing is that you can become all these different people. I wouldn't say that I'm not trying to be personal, because at the end it all comes from the different seeds of my experiences. That's what is completely fascinating about being a human. You can be so many different things and so contradictory, yet at the same time be so bound to this entity as one body, one sensory system, one way of perceiving the world. When you're a writer, you're definitely in a position where you can shift and project yourself onto something else.