







Mai-Thu Perret:

# I Know the Meaning of Revolution

BY CHLOE CHU

Installation view of *Black Balthazar*, 2013, birch plywood, rattan core, and water-based paint, 123 × 115 × 30 cm, at "Egalitarian Elite," David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, 2014. Photo by Stefan Altenburger. Courtesy David Kordansky Gallery.

# AT THE EDGE

A blazing asteroid hurtles across the sky, alarming three dinosaurs who stand immobile as devastation looms on their horizon. The tyrannosaurus, mouth agape, exclaims, “Oh shit! The economy!!” A Covid-19-era internet gem, this meme’s witticism strikes home as the pandemic’s death toll rises daily while world leaders wring their hands about shrinking GDPs. Clearly, our priorities are all wrong. If we were to cast our myopia in a more generous light, however, it might look like our fault is that we are hopeful creatures. We believe we will survive. The optimistic among us view existential crises as opportunities to not only right our wrongs but to improve our lives. I, for one, have found myself asking the question: how can we rebuild societies so that they are better than before? Are we at the crossroads between utopia and dystopia?



*Society is a Hole*, 2009, screenprint on paper, 83.8×59.4 cm. Courtesy David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.

My questions about what “utopia” might mean today led me to the practice of Mai-Thu Perret. For over two decades, Perret has created artworks that parallel her continually morphing fictional text *The Crystal Frontier* (1999– ). The story is set in the desert of southwestern New Mexico, and revolves around a commune of women who are seeking ways of living that are beyond the alienated capitalist and patriarchal modes of Western neoliberal society, with the eventual view of admitting males into their eden. The disgruntled proclamation of the silkscreen print *Society is a Hole* (2009), emblazoned in a blocky, fuchsia font, reveals the impetus behind the commune’s formation: “Why did I leave? / Why did I come here? / Let me tell you a story / I left because I was tired of people like you / I think / Society is a hole / It makes me lie to my friends / Aren’t you so fucking tired of waiting? / I understand the word secession / I know the meaning of revolution / I was tired of being alone.”

A self-professed bookworm and literature graduate, Perret cites as inspirations for *The Crystal Frontier* the works of numerous writers, chief among them the novel *Herland* (1915) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, in which a group of men discover and assimilate into an all-female realm where there is no violence or social discrimination. The artist’s fictive premise was equally shaped by English duchess Margaret Cavendish’s *The Blazing World* (1666), a piece of proto-science fiction about a young woman whose monarchical rule over a universe populated by talking animals is aimed at creating harmony and egalitarianism.

That the women of Perret’s narrative retreat into a remote, seemingly barren corner of the globe is also no accident. By basing their revolutionary activities in the desert, Perret places them within an age-old utopian tradition. Speaking to curators Paula van den Bosch and Giovanni Carmine in an interview published in her 2008 book *The Land of Crystal*, Perret observed: “The American West has always been a refuge for misfits and idealists, an endless number of people went there to ‘start again’—from real organized communities like Llano del Rio, founded by a communist candidate to the United States presidency in the Mojave Desert in 1917, to originals and artists like Agnes Martin who lived and painted in the solitude of the New Mexico desert.”

The name of the town that *The Crystal Frontier* women establish, New Ponderosa, is a play on Ponderosa, the all-male ranch in the western television series *Bonanza* (1959–73). The figurative sculptures that Perret has produced as part of the project represent the commune’s members, while she imagines her paintings, tapestries, textiles, ceramics, drawings, and texts as the women’s creative outputs. Together, these pieces illustrate life in New Ponderosa.

# REFLECTIONS OF STIFLED FUTURES

Early in Perret’s development of the series, the women’s quest for non-capitalist and non-patriarchal lifestyles leads them to the history of Soviet Constructivism. Their research is reflected in the installation *Perpetual Time Clock* (2004), a device that guides the community’s days, while abolishing “the mechanical breakdown of time by the watch,” as Perret writes in *The Land of Crystal*. Comprising a ring of eight discs arranged around a central circle, each painted with a graphic symbol, the clock denotes “essential activities” such as “sleeping, making art, riding and caring for horses, meditation and yoga practice, reading and study, all the different types of agricultural work, the exploration of the unconscious, and various sports.” The icon depicting a paintbrush crossed over a hammer most clearly evokes the Constructivist’s vision “to make workers into artists who actively create their product, to turn the mechanistically working human, the working force, into creative workers,” as painter Vladimir Khrakovsky explained in a 1921 lecture.

Yet, Soviet Constructivism as a real-world revolutionary agenda was dead in the water by the late 1920s. The final blow came from the proponents of Socialist Realism, ushered in as the official art by Joseph Stalin’s regime in 1934. Addressing this, Perret told Bosch and Carmine: “The radicalism of the 1920s fascinates me because it is a liminal moment, a road not taken. When you look at Constructivism you have the embryo of a kind of revolutionary art [that] doesn’t go much further because the revolution turns back on itself and becomes totalitarian.”

The failure of past utopian figments to propel and sustain collective revolutions, then, is the foundation of *The Crystal Frontier*. It is precisely this characteristic that gives Perret’s exploration its edge. In her dialogue with Bosch and Carmine, the artist quotes a line that Karl Marx wrote to Friedrich Engels late in his life: “We are the enemies of utopia for the sake of its realization.” Over half a century later, philosopher Theodor Adorno repeats Marx’s seemingly paradoxical note in his book *Negative Dialectics* (1966). Adorno argues that although the two authors of *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) believed in the possibility of a more ideal society, utopia was not in their rhetorical arsenal because the notion is a potentially dangerous distraction, discontinuous



Photo of the performance *Figures*, 2014, at Biennale de l’Image en Mouvement, Centre d’Art Contemporain, Geneva, 2014. Photo by Annik Wetter. Courtesy the artist and Simon Lee Gallery, Hong Kong / London / New York.



*Perpetual Time Clock*, 2004, acrylic paint on wood, 240×240 cm. Photo by Annik Wetter. Courtesy the artist and Simon Lee Gallery, Hong Kong / London / New York.

from real-world conditions. Adorno later concurred with Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch’s suggestion that “the essential function of utopia is a critique of what is present,” and maintained that the value of utopia is located in its abstract nature, which negates whatever exists in reality.

Perret appears to agree as much. She demystifies the utopian experience in the diaries of *The Crystal Frontier* members, who record mundane details on “cow shit and farming troubles.” The narrative eschews idealization. In a timetable of activities from *The Land of Crystal*, one psychonaut tripping on magic mushrooms logs at 5:15 pm: “Anxiety, I suddenly think about my mother.” Though she renders scenes of New Ponderosa in her artworks, Perret makes no attempt to hide that these installations merely form a simulacrum of a utopia. “In actuality there is very little that is practical about my work,” she reflects, “it is quite far from activist art experiences that show how one can build houses from recycled materials, or that kind of ‘real world’ problematic. The work is very clearly situated within the realm of art, of the symbolic. In this sense it is quite naively preoccupied with the need for a better world, if only as an inarticulate yearning for something different.”

The acknowledgement that her works are unable to truly give form to utopia is embedded in the projects themselves, most prominently in the performance *Figures* (2014). The 20-minute production is based on Japanese *bunraku* theater, where the performers are visible on stage alongside the life-size dolls that they wield, which contrasts with Western puppet shows that maintain the illusion that the puppets are real. One of the stars of Perret’s show is a mannequin with a white, stuffed fabric body and silicone face attached to a wig. At the beginning of the event, a dancer mirrors the puppet’s position on the floor before scooting behind it and slowly bending its arms into a series of different shapes. The puppeteer, here, could stand for Perret manipulating her characters. Moments of transition, such as when the dancer changes the prop’s face and hair, unfold on stage. The most telling gesture comes from Perret herself, when she steps into the center of the performance area with a typewriter, and proceeds to tap away at the keys—a nod to *The Crystal Frontier*’s origins.



# WHAT THE NON-PLACE TELLS US ABOUT HERE AND NOW

Admittedly, at first, I felt rudely reminded by Perret’s work that utopian ideals remain chained to the world of fiction. How then can a utopian imagination still be constructive? Perhaps a chimera such as *The Crystal Frontier* is valuable because it reveals the superficiality in how we picture utopia—and, if we follow Adorno’s thinking, how far away we are from it.

This comes through in *Les Guérillères* (2016). Comprising a ceramic dog and mixed-media sculptures of women outfitted



Installation view of *Les Guérillères*, 2016, mixed-media sculptures, dimensions variable, at “Féminaire,” David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, 2017. Courtesy David Kordansky Gallery.

with camouflage gear and plastic guns, the series was inspired by the propaganda videos of the Kurdish Women’s Protection Units (YPJ), part of the armed forces of the de facto autonomous region in northern Syria, Rojava, which promulgates gender parity in its military and government. Perret recalls coming across the YPJ just after the 2015 Paris terrorist attacks. “It was a very depressing, very dark time in Europe. I watched these videos and these women were so beautiful and so full of hope. I became obsessed with them and decided to make this work about them.” The propaganda films show the women going about their daily chores as part of the brigades. Accordingly, in *Les Guérillères*, there is no fighting—the women are simply standing or sitting. The critique here has less to do with the movement itself and more to do with how these scenes are but fragments of the on-the-ground realities of the female troops, who have had to combat numerous enemies, including ISIS, since 2011, and whose freedoms have become ever-more precarious following the recent invasion of the Turkish armed forces.

Besides gesturing to the rose-tinted glasses that color our imaginations of alternative societal models, Perret pulls existing oppression squarely into view. One such issue that Perret tackles is the fragmentation of female subjectivities. The first puppet she made for *The Crystal Frontier* project, *La Fée Idéologie* (2004), is a crudely constructed papier-mâché marionette dressed in the artist’s old charcoal-gray sweater and jeans. Laid flat on the floor, its limbs were connected by black wires to the ceiling. In a 2018 interview with artists Paulina Ołowska and Maya Chamaa, she explained: “The idea was that the puppet represented everything the women in the community had run away from or didn’t want to be anymore—and actually what it was, was me . . . There is the natural urge to reclaim this alienated image of oneself because the doll is this passive woman that doesn’t move, react, have will power, doesn’t have an agenda and is manipulated by this god-like figure who is usually a puppeteer and normally expected to be a man.”

Perret’s critique of the conditions of women extends back throughout *The Crystal Frontier*. In the earlier *Apocalypse Ballet*

series (2006), for example, a quintet of papier-mâché figures, with painted pinkish skin and short bobs, put on a static recital. One of them holds a red neon hoop above her head, while the others toy with similar, illuminated circles, their poses based on the joy-filled images of the 20th-century, back-to-nature Lebensreform movement, Russian propaganda, and American musicals—hollow representations of freedom. At their debut, at Berlin’s Galerie Barbara Weiss in 2006, the troupe was accompanied with the two-panel screen-print *Letter Home (After A.R.)* (2006), based on a 1924 letter that the founder of Russian Constructivism, Alexander Rodchenko, wrote to his wife, the artist Varvara Stepanova, after his first trip to Paris. “The woman as object fabricated by the capitalist West will be its downfall. Everything about them is fabricated: the hands, the postures, the bodies. There are dozens of theaters where naked women spend the entire night walking about the stage silently . . . They don’t speak, they don’t dance, they don’t move. And even now I couldn’t possibly tell whether it is exactly ‘nothing,’ or whether they are ‘objects.’” In this context, the dancers of the *Apocalypse Ballet* can be understood as manifestations of the women Rodchenko encountered, stripped of any sense of agency and merely mirages of liberated subjects.

At its second rendition, hosted later in 2006 by The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, the *Apocalypse Ballet* was accompanied by a hut-size silver teapot. Visitors could step inside the enlarged vessel to view miniature abstract paintings inspired by Constructivism and tantric art—two disparate genres Perret brought together because of their uncanny formal resonances, demonstrating the type of art the women of New Ponderosa make. “One of the things that I like to do is to play with scale,” Perret explained during our conversation. This applies to the scale of body parts, as with the bosu-ball-like eyes placed on the ground at her 2016 solo show, “Sightings,” at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas, or the scale of objects like the giant teapot, and the supersized tulip lamps—odes to designer Isamu Noguchi’s playscapes and the schemes of Metabolist architects—at her 2020 solo exhibition “News from Nowhere” at Simon Lee Gallery in Hong Kong. Perret explained that such manipulations of scale create surreal effects. When I pressed her about the importance of this quality in her work, she furthered: “I think the most interesting thing about surrealism is that it speaks the truth about our relationship to our bodies and our surroundings. It has to do with dreams and nightmares and the unconscious—how our minds determine how we relate to ourselves, our bodies and the bodies of other people.” By inviting audiences into a dreamlike scenario, Perret foregrounds the alienated, irrational aspects of our being, thus prompting us to confront what we have banished from the conscious plane of our minds.



Installation view of *La Fée Idéologie*, 2004, mixed-media sculpture, dimensions variable, at “Yvonne Rainer Project,” Centre d’art contemporain de La Ferme du buisson, Marne-la-Vallée, 2014. Photo by Aurelien Mole. Courtesy the artist and Simon Lee Gallery, Hong Kong / London / New York.



*Apocalypse Ballet (Neon Dress)*, 2006, figure in steel, wire, papier-mâché, acrylic, gouache, wig, five white neon rings, steel base, 175 × 160 × 160 cm. Photo by Jens Ziehe. Courtesy the artist and Simon Lee Gallery, Hong Kong / London / New York.



Installation view of *The lantern's gone out! The lantern's gone out! I*, 2019, glazed ceramic, 72 × 48 cm, at “News from Nowhere,” Simon Lee Gallery, Hong Kong, 2020. Courtesy the artist and Simon Lee Gallery, Hong Kong / London / New York.

# ME, HER, IT, UTOPIA

Perret’s works have at times veered from *The Crystal Frontier* narrative. At her 2019 Spike Island solo exhibition, “The Blazing World,” Perret dissected the societal treatment of women through the lens of witchcraft. The works were based on her studies of the paralleled emergence of capitalism and the “unruly woman” archetype in early modern Europe, anchored in Marxist scholar Silvia Federici’s history, *Caliban and the Witch* (1998). In Perret’s explanation, Federici argues that “the witch hunts and the systematic persecution of strong, independent women were not a footnote to the history of the period but rather a fundamental force in the destruction of the commons and the disciplining of the peasantry into a servile workforce for the capitalist system.” At the show, a basket of glossy ceramic apples, *Abnormally avid* (2019), alluded to society’s stereotypes of women as gatherers and not hunters. At the same time, it brought to mind the poisoned fruit that Snow White consumes, and thus the witchy subversion of this expectation. Elsewhere in the exhibition, a biscuit-colored ceramic doll house, *A Magnetizer* (2019), was a reference to how girls are primed for motherhood from a young age, as well as evoking the enchanted gingerbread house that Hansel and Gretel are lured into. A life-size withered tree stump that looks like an inverted uterus, *Superpotent* (2019), suggested fertility as an essential feature of womanhood.

The witch as a figure of the night, and, by association, alterity, is encapsulated in *Mirror Logic* (2019), a tapestry hung at the far end of the exhibition hall with multicolored circles abstracting lunar positions, while conjuring the etymological connection between “menstruation” and the Greek “mene,” meaning moon. It was paired with a trapezoid-shaped mound, based on the *kogetsudai* (moon-viewing platform) of Zen gardens, which are designed to reflect moonrays.



Installation view of *A Magnetizer*, 2019, glazed ceramic, 63 × 63 × 42 cm, at “The Blazing World,” Spike Island, Bristol, 2019. Photo by Stuart Whipps. Courtesy the artist and Simon Lee Gallery, Hong Kong / London / New York.



Installation view of *Abnormally avid*, 2019, glazed ceramic, copper wire, and plastic, basket: 35 × 48 × 36 cm and 14 apples: between 5–9 cm each, at “The Blazing World,” Spike Island, Bristol, 2019. Photo by Stuart Whipps. Courtesy the artist and Simon Lee Gallery, Hong Kong / London / New York.

The gallery became a stage for the performance *The Blazing World* (2019), in which dancers, donning animal masks, enacted ecstatic rites reminiscent of legendary sabbath gatherings, further elaborating on the convergence of woman with other. “Doing all this research,” Perret told me, “one of the things that always came up was the proximity between the witch and the animals. [According to folklore,] witches were transformed into animals during sabbath. The judges that were persecuting the witches would also turn them into beasts. Basically, they were women but were not really human. The animal masks represent this transformation.”

Perret employs the lives of animals as metaphors for womanly experiences elsewhere in her oeuvre. The pair of wicker sculptures, *Balthazar* (2012) and *Black Balthazar* (2013), depict the donkey from film director Robert Bresson’s affective masterpiece *Au Hasard Balthazar* (1966), centering the suffering of the animal. As she explained: “The symbolism of the donkey is fascinating because they’re images of labor and humility. They’re work animals, they have not been valued, and they have none of the manly and positive associations that you have with the horse. The value of the donkey reflects society’s valuation of women. And this is why the donkey is such an important allegory in Christian art, for example. The donkey is meek, poor, works hard, and is unloved, and is therefore closer to God.”

Another animal metaphor, for humanity and its search for the ideal, appeared in “The Prairie,” Perret’s 2013 solo show at Zurich’s Francesca Pia gallery. There, a stuffed fabric whale replete with mini, wooden teeth was suspended from the ceiling over beds of lumpen, ceramic coral reefs, the enigmatic marine world serving as a cipher for *Moby Dick* (1851) and the attempts of men to conquer the titular figure in Herman Melville’s novel. “For as this appalling ocean surrounds the verdant land, so in the soul of man there lies one insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, but encompassed by all the horrors of the half-known life. God keep thee! Push not off from that isle, thou canst never return,” Perret drew from Melville. Perret’s practice has allowed her to journey to the paradises of many people, their visions refracted through the subjectivities of *The Crystal Frontier* women. Perret attributes her method of encyclopedic research to her affinity for Zen philosophy, where the quest for enlightenment is equated with pursuing an “openness to the world and not a projection of your own story, your own individuality.” In seeking out utopia, she has braved the choppy waters and “horrors of the half-known life,” not for a bounty but the journey itself.



Installation view of “The Blazing World,” at Spike Island, Bristol, 2019. Photo by Stuart Whipps. Courtesy the artist and Simon Lee Gallery, Hong Kong / London / New York.



Photo documentation of *The Blazing World*, 2019, performance at Badischer Kunstverein, Karlsruhe, 2019. Photo by Lisa Bergmann. Courtesy Badischer Kunstverein.



*Leviathan II*, 2013, canvas, leather, metal loops, wood, coconut fiber, and cord, 60 x 240 x 50 cm. Photo by Gunnar Meier. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Francesca Pia, Zurich.