

MAMCO  
GENEVE

AUTUMN EXHIBITIONS 2018  
PRESS KIT

*PATTERN, DECORATION & CRIME*  
MAI-THU PERRET

10.10.2018 – 03.02.2019

OPENING : TUESDAY OCTOBER 9 2018, 6 PM

10, RUE DES VIEUX-GRENADIERS, 1205 GENEVA



## ***PATTERN, DECORATION & CRIME*** ***MAI-THU PERRET***

### **PRESS RELEASE**

**This Fall, MAMCO explores, through a new set of exhibitions on the three floors of the museum, decoration as the true repressed of modernity.**

This Fall, MAMCO examines the “Pattern & Decoration” movement, formed in the 1970s and that enjoyed international success in the 1980s, before fading in the decades thereafter. Most of the artists involved were reacting against the dominance of abstract schools in the post-War era, with a particular opposition to Minimal and Conceptual art. They also criticized the pervasive dominance of Western art and male artists in the context of modernism as a whole. Including an equal number of men and women, the group organized around “pattern and decoration” reconnected with what was widely perceived as “minor” art forms and asserted decoration as the true repressed of modernity.

Referencing ornamental motifs on wallpaper, patchwork quilts, or printed fabrics, the movement opened up Western art of the time to eclectic sources of inspiration : from Islamic decorative art, Byzantine and Mexican mosaics, to Turkish embroidery and Japanese prints, Indian rugs and Iranian miniatures. By creating works that blurred the boundaries between traditional paintings and decorative art objects, the movement’s artists — men and women alike — defined their position at the intersection between artistic disciplines, spearheading a critique of the traditional demarcation between the “fine” and “applied” arts. Finally, by

reviving interest in long-undervalued crafts and asserting the right to bring these techniques out of the domestic sphere and into the public world of art, they held much in common with the Feminist art movement of the 1970s.

“Pattern & Decoration” is justly viewed as an overlooked movement, but it served nonetheless as a springboard for a number of contemporary practices : taking an essentially historical approach, the exhibition aims to re-evaluate the movement and reassess its contribution in light of contemporary art today.

In order to make clear the contrast that the artists in the show “Pattern, Decoration & Crime” brought to the artistic landscape of their era, the third floor of the MAMCO has been rearranged around its collections. There can be found not only the Apartment, which here plays the role of a “period room” from the 1970s, but also new rooms devoted to Dan Flavin and post-minimal art. Furthermore, European artists, who are sometimes less well known, and who were associated with the dominant artistic movements of the 1960s-1970s, such as Fabio Mauri, Gianni Piacentino or Franz Erhard Walther, also benefit from a monographic presentation.

The museum’s first floor is devoted to a retrospective of the work of Mai-Thu Perret, a Swiss artist living in Geneva.

In recent years, Mai-Thu Perret's work has featured in large-scale exhibitions at institutions such as SFMOMA in San Francisco, the Renaissance Society in Chicago, the Chisenhale Gallery in London, the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas, the Kunsthaus in Araau, the Bonnefantenmuseum in Maastricht, and the Haus Konstruktiv in Zurich, but this is her first major exhibition at MAMCO, following her nomination for the Manor Prize in 2011: a singular omission for an artist whose distinctive practice embraces disciplines from sculpture to film, ceramics and performance, referencing multiple sources from 20th-century avant-garde movements to Eastern philosophies, and blending methodologies to draw on her literary studies and her experience as a curator.

At the end of the 1990s, Mai-Thu Perret developed *The Crystal Frontier*, a fictional narrative of a community of women calling themselves *New Ponderosa Year Zero*, inspired by Llano del Rio, a real-life Socialist communitarian project established in the 1910s, in the Mojave Desert. The history of this fictional community is also the primary protocol for the artist's output of objects. Formally, the

works evoke Constructivism and the Bauhaus, movements that saw art as the catalyst for the construction of a new society and the revival of decorative forms often marginalized in the history of art. "I really think," declares the artist, "that men have dominated Western art history, and I am interested in histories that take account of marginal/forgotten figures or realities. I like using my work as a speculative space in which I can imagine alternative histories to come, stories that are still to be told."

Mai-Thu Perret adds new corpuses to her work each year — mannequins, ceramics, textiles, rattan sculptures, neon and more — like the successive chapters in a concrete, existential fiction. She does more than excavate the elements of modernism: she reinstates them in our present context, as narrative "shifters" at disposal to the viewer.

## MAI-THU PERRET

The exhibition is organized by Lionel Bovier and Julien Fronsacq and is supported by the Fondation de bienfaisance du Groupe Pictet.

Born in 1976, Mai-Thu Perret's distinctive practice crosses a broad range of disciplines, from sculpture to film, ceramics and performance, incorporating multiple references (from avant-garde movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to Oriental philosophy) and fusing disparate methodologies culled from her academic literary background and her experience as a curator.

In the late 1990s, her fictional work *The Crystal Frontier* chronicled a community of women under the name 'New Ponderosa', inspired by Llana del Rio, a communitarian, socialist experiment established in the Mojave Desert in the 1910s. The history of Perret's fictional community is also her primary protocol for the production of objects. Her works are inspired by Constructivist and Bauhaus forms—movements which sought a role for art in the making of a new society, and which embraced artisanship and the decorative arts, both often marginalized in the history of Western art.

Year on year, Mai-Thu Perret adds to the concrete, existential fiction of her work, with new 'chapters' (mannequins, ceramics, textiles, wicker sculptures, neons, etc.) that do more than simply excavate elements of modernism: rather, she reinstates them in the present moment, making them available to the spectator as narrative "shifters."

MAMCO exhibition is organized in six "chapters": *New Ponderosa*, *Apocalypse Ballet*, *Evening of the Book*, *Arts & Crafts*, *Garden of Nothingness* and *Féminaire*.

By confronting Perret's work with conventional museum categories (abstraction, portraiture, decorative arts, etc.), the exhibition sheds new light on alternative narrative histories, and the collage of styles and genres so characteristic of Mai-Thu Perret's work.

Mai-Thu Perret's work has been the subject of major exhibitions in recent years, at SFMOMA in San Francisco, the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, London's Chisenhale Gallery, the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas, the Araau Kunsthau, the Bonnefantenmuseum in Maastricht and the Haus Konstruktiv in Zurich, but this is her first large-scale show at MAMCO, following a much smaller presentation in 2011, when she was nominated for the Prix Manor Genève.

### ***New Ponderosa***

The town of Ponderosa, in California, has a population of just 16. Nonetheless, in the late 1990s, Mai-Thu Perret set about collecting and editing an oral history of the community under the title "New Ponderosa." "New Ponderosa Year Zero" is the story of a group of women in their 20s and 30s who choose to follow the activist Beatrice Mandell and create a self-sustaining community in the New Mexico desert. Perret's works derive their form and function from the possibilities and potential of narrative itself. Each text (diary extracts, songs, theoretical notes) corresponds to a speaker (Kim, Beatrice, Marina), a form of address (intimate, or to the community at large), a vision (forward-looking or retrospective), and a

sentiment or state of mind (inward- or outward-looking). Depending on their attribution (to Mai-Thu Perret or a member of the community), the works in the corpus range from utilitarian objects to artistic experiments. Together, they define a new space that eschews conventional hierarchies and embraces artisanship, fine art, literature and the visual arts, delving deep into modern and postmodern social history.

### ***Apocalypse Ballet***

*Apocalypse Ballet* is an installation devised for Mai-Thu Perret's 2006 solo exhibition at the Renaissance Society in Chicago, entitled *And every woman will be a walking synthesis of the universe*. An ensemble of mannequins is arranged to form a history of the body, in spheres ranging from medicine to politics, dance and film. The figures' poses evoke experiments in emancipation from the 1900s (*Lebensreform*, Monte Verità), and 1920s East-West propaganda (in particular, Russia's Spartakiad and American musicals), in which the body is instrumentalized and stripped of its individuality. The figures appear to dance around a giant teapot, itself a display space for small, abstract paintings.

According to the critic Walter Benjamin, the fetishization of the body is enacted by an illusionistic play on form, on a continuous spectrum from body to object, the living to the inert: a form of metamorphosis perfectly illustrated in a print by Jean-Jacques Granville appropriately titled *Apocalypse du Ballet* (1844), which shows wine glasses transforming into pairs of hands, and a dancer (literally) turning into a bobbin of thread.

### ***Evening of the Book***

*An Evening of the Book* (2007) is a film and installation, both produced at New York's celebrated experimental

performance venue, the Kitchen. The film is in three parts—*Holes and Neon*, *The Book and Dance of the Commas*—each projected onto a sheet of paper covered with Constructivist motifs. *An Evening of the Book* is a free adaptation of an eponymous stage work by artists Varvara Stepanova and Alexander Rodchenko (1924), associates of Russia's Constructivist movement who devoted themselves to the production of art in support of the Revolution, from 1920 onwards. Identically-dressed female dancers perform elementary gestures in a kind of moving, living tableau against a plain backdrop alternately filled by a black banner and fluorescent tubes. They are surrounded by props in the shape of commas: punctuation marks essential to basic sentence structure. The exhibition's subtle homage to Milca Mayerovà's danced alphabet (1926) is also expressed in an ensemble of sculptures. Motifs drawn from Constructivism, Minimalism, and modern dance achieve a strange stylistic harmony, as though Mai-Thu Perret sought to trace a fine line connecting ritual, propaganda, and the concept of modernity.

### ***Arts & Crafts***

This section presents an ensemble of items (carpets, wallpaper, tableware, lights) and techniques (ceramics, warp-weighted tapestry weaving, kilim weaving) which are often consigned by conventional museography and art history to disparate categories including the fine, decorative or applied arts, and folk art. The decorative arts encompass the many skilled crafts and disciplines involved in architecture and interior decoration but are distinguished from the fine arts due to their functional nature. The "applied arts" came to prominence with the rise of the modern movements; the term refers to the use of

design and decoration in the production of everyday objects.

Mai-Thu Perret engages with these notionally disparate spheres to emphasize what they include or exclude, and how: the decorative arts retained their hand-crafted character, while the applied arts gave way to industrial production techniques. However, the Arts & Crafts and Bauhaus movements (respectively 1860–1910 and 1919–1933) disrupted the close connection between artisanship and industry, and the registers of authorship and anonymity.

By revisiting motifs and techniques as wide-ranging as kilim rug-weaving, Sophie Taeuber-Arp's *Dada Bowl*, and warp-weighted tapestry weaving, Mai-Thu Perret sheds new light on what these practices have in common and deconstructs the traditional thinking behind their separate classification.

### ***Garden of Nothingness***

In the sole gallery overlooking the outside world, Mai-Thu Perret has designed a space which is simultaneously abstract and narrative, chiming with the symbolic system of Zen that has inspired so many contemporary western artists. A closure, partially obscuring MAMCO's windows, draws back-lit traces of lightning which depict the illumination of *Satori*, or spiritual awakening in Buddhism.

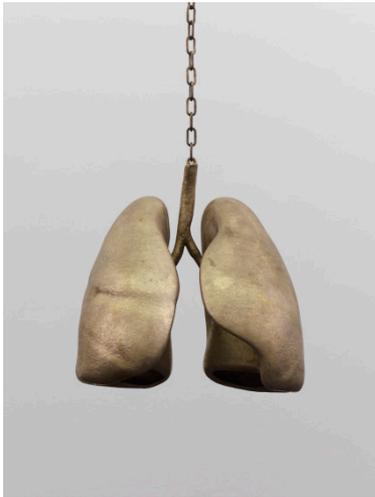
This new production is inspired by the Japanese garden *Ryōgin-an*, created in 1964 in the Kyoto region, which

organizes a spatial succession of stones in greenery, alongside a design using gravel, and a bamboo palisade decked with designs depicting lightning bolts.

The artist has made this enclosure chime with instruments for a possible ritual, an *Eventail des caresses* (Fan of Caresses), featuring a series of bronze bells shaped like human organs, including a uterus, lungs, and a heart. This installation is thus set around the Zen principle of an interpenetration between emptiness and fullness, while also evoking the modern aesthetic of a form of extra-western spirituality.

### ***Féminaire***

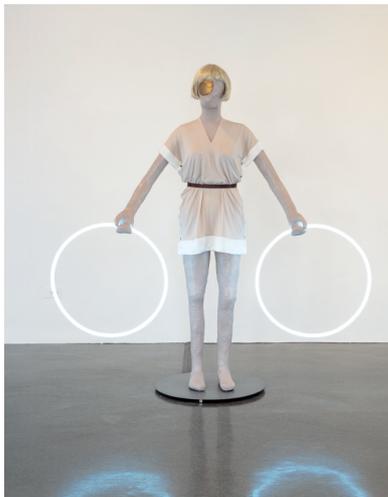
In spring 2017, Mai-Thu Perret staged an exhibition at her Los Angeles gallery under the title *Féminaire*. The show featured two differing displays: an ensemble of ceramics arranged in a grid on a wall, and a procession of female figures across a stage. Entitled *Les Guerillères* (like the 1969 novel by French feminist and revolutionary Monique Wittig) the female group is composed of stylized figures with readily-identifiable accessories (combat fatigues, Ranger Joe's military boots, machine guns). They are directly inspired by Kurdish women fighters who came together to form a resistance force at the beginning of the war in Syria, and were quickly adopted as media icons. At MAMCO the sculptures are shown facing banners that draw on motifs from abstract art and the vocabulary of classical heraldry.



Mai-Thu Perret, *Eventail des caresses (Poumons)*, 2018  
Bronze, variable dimensions  
Collection Mai-Thu Perret  
Photo: Annik Wetter



Mai-Thu Perret, *The Crack-Up IV*, 2009  
Carpet Paintings, acrylic framed in wood  
240 x 180 cm  
Courtesy Blondeau & Cie, Geneva



Mai-Thu Perret with Ligia Dias, *Apocalypse Ballet (The White Rings)*, 2006  
Figure in steel, wire, papier mâché, acrylic, gouache, wig, neon tubes, steel base,  
175 x 165 x 165 cm  
The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, vue d'exposition  
Collection Rubell Family, Miami



Mai-Thu Perret, *Little Planetary Harmony*, 2006  
Aluminum, wood, plaster, latex paint, neon, acrylic on wood, interior paintings (acrylic on wood)  
356 x 643 x 365 cm  
Coll. Aargauer Kunsthaus, Aarau

## INFORMATIONS AND PARTNERS

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and visuals, please contact:

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The Museum is open Tuesday through  
Friday from noon to 6pm, the first Wed-  
nesday of the month until 9pm, and -Sa-  
turday and Sunday from 11am to 6pm.  
Closed on -Mondays.

Regular admission: CHF 15.–  
Reduced admission: CHF 10.–  
Group admission: CHF 5.–

### Partners

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