

BY LEE ESCOBEDO  
WITH INTERVIEW BY JEREMY STRICK

# *She runs horses in lightning*

In their first appearance at Dallas Art Fair, the esteemed Simon Lee Gallery will offer ceramic work by Mai-Thu Perret.



Dallas, be still, the women of New Ponderosa Year Zero see your leisure, your conspicuous consumption, and they will not fight for you. The work of the fictional female inhabitants of artist Mai-Thu Perret's militant conclave guild will be present, at least in spirit, this month. Perret's *Crystal Frontier* narrative, which works as an umbrella for multimedia and multi-disciplinary storytelling for the fictional feminist freedom fighters is more timely under the current Trump leadership. The idea of resistance, as a political notion and a constant vigilance, has become imperative, it seems.

Returning to Dallas since last year's *Sightings* exhibition at the Nasher Sculpture Center, the work of Perret will be included in Simon Lee's booth at the Dallas Art Fair. "For Dallas Art Fair, we will present a focused group of works by six gallery artists from different generations: Angela Bulloch, Claudio Parmiggiani, Gary Simmons, Jim Shaw, Mai-Thu Perret, and Toby Ziegler," said Julia Kelly-Kennedy, Artist Liaison at Simon Lee Gallery. "All of the

works exhibited reflect on the idea of shifting states and transition and the role that perception plays in our relationship to the real. Whether materialized in paint, soot, or ceramics, all the works exhibited embody time and the ephemeral."

For her show at the Nasher, Perret exhibited life-sized figurines, faceless mannequins, dressed in camouflage and wielding colorful plastic guns, silent and stoic, ready for battle. Peering into the spaces, the front glass wall was obscured with a layer of material, abstracting and veiling the collectives' well-laid plans inside.

Jeremy Strick, Director of the Nasher Sculpture Center, spoke with Perret about expanding the dynamics and scale of the artist's performances, the way "insurgency" is complexly incorporated into her work (at times even existing free from the female Kurdish rebels that heavily inspired the work), and where Perret's practice is heading.

**Jeremy Strick:** *I think the work that you produced for the Nasher was somewhat unusual in the way that it sort of directly addressed an actual contemporary situation. Is that right?*

**Mai-Thu Perret:** Unfortunately it seems like it's even more sort of a situation in that it hasn't yet appeared at all. That's actually why we thought it would be a good idea to show these figures again. Because we just thought under the current context it would be interesting to see how they would be read. I imagine people would read them differently today than they even would a year ago.

**JS:** *So this is a situation of the Kurds and the Kurdish fighters and all of the issues all around us. This is something you have continued to follow.*

**M-TP:** I continued to follow it, but I mean in a way I think looking at these figures that this sort of feeling of insurgency is something that you can extrapolate outside of this particular Kurdish narrative. As in where we exhibit the works without explaining what the origin is or what the standing point or inspiration for this was. It could very easily be of the women, or American women or European, which I find quite interesting in a way. You think of the Women's March that just took place. We did an artist's talk at the gallery in London, and it actually happened on the very day that this March took place; it was two days after inauguration day. At the beginning it felt weird because



Above: Mai-Thu Perret, *She runs horses in lightning*, 2016, glazed ceramic, 19.25 x 54.37 x 2 in. Courtesy of Simon Lee Gallery, London. Below: Mai-Thu Perret, *On the coral pillow, two streams of tears. Half longing for you, half resenting you*, 2016, glazed ceramic, 20.12 x 15.37 x 4 in. Courtesy of Simon Lee Gallery, London.







Mai-Thu Perret: Zone installation view at Simon Lee Gallery, London. Courtesy of Simon Lee Gallery, London.

I thought everyone wanted to go to the march, and I wanted to go to the march, not necessarily be at the gallery talking about the work, but it worked out so that everyone, I think, went to the march and then came to the talk. It was quite fascinating in a way to sort of read it in this particular context and to see how the people of London saw it, more in terms of current politics.

JS: *I imagine it can be a curious experience for an artist to have work, not only that addresses a particular situation, but then to have that situation evolve in such a way that it seems to put new focus or new meaning into the work.*

M-TP: It's pretty great for the work; I'm not sure it's really great for...I mean I think it's pretty depressing in terms of the world that we live in and, you know, our future basically. I'm both fascinated and horrified. I think lots of people, lots of artists, and lots of people in the culture would feel the same. But it is true that in these particular works...their meaning keeps on evolving as events evolve. It's quite strange.

JS: *I can imagine it might have been a good, and even a useful feeling, for those who participated in the Women's March to then come to your talk and experience the show and somehow to have that sense of, not closure, but perhaps a moment for another kind of reflection.*

M-TP: Yes, it was very interesting the questions that were asked and what we talked about, because it was this constant going back

and forth between engagement and the idea of retreat or having to protect yourself from current events or current news, and at the same time the sort of drive to be in touch or talking about the current historical or political situations. So like engagement and at the same time a desire for autonomy or disengagement. I think that was really interesting, to me, to see because this is something I think about a lot in the work anyway. I thought about it before the current political turn. This whole thing with the *Crystal Frontier* that I have been working on for quite a long time, it's also a story about stepping out and being more involved in a way. So it was very interesting to see how people brought it up in a very sort of natural way; it was a very interesting conversation.

JS: *I can imagine. Again, so thinking about your show in Dallas, you spent quite a bit of time here in a number of visits. What was the significance of the show to you? How was your experience? Were there any certain particularities to the experience both before and upon the selection?*

M-TP: I guess for me, the specificity of the Nasher collection and the environment that the show was set in. I think it would have been a very different show had I made it for a very different museum. I think it is hard if you are invited to produce something new for a place like this and a place with such an outstanding and specific collection, not to react to it and not to want to work to somehow connect or talk

to specific works that were there. I guess for me that was sort of a very strong thing for the work. I found it interesting to be able to come back to the same place a number of times, in terms of how I interacted with the work. In effect there was a time of planning the show, there was a time of coming to realize the show, there was the opening, and then there was a time to be in the space again and work with it again in a different way with the performances, which I thought was a really great experience because usually you open the show and then you leave. And if you come back, there is another exhibition usually, so I think that was quite special.

JS: *That was very important for the Nasher. You say in most instances, with an artist there is a very intense period of preparing the show and installing it, and then the work remains but the artist is gone. To have you return and produce a new work in the space offered a whole other opportunity for engagement and thinking about and rethinking the work in the exhibition. It was marvelous.*

M-TP: Yes, and also the fact that we ended up working with local people, and you know some of them whom I am actually still in touch with. It also, I think, helped me from a personal point of view, made me meet more people, and have a better idea of what the city was like, than had I just come to install the exhibition. That was very interesting.

JS: *In terms of the work that will be exhibited at the Dallas Art Fair, was there any reflection upon your Dallas experience in terms of what will be seen at the fair?*

M-TP: Simon Lee is coming and they will bring some ceramics. I think it's a nice compliment to what was at the Nasher to see smaller wall-based works. When I did the Nasher show, I really wanted to avoid having lots of things on the wall. Also because in a way I think I was playing with what was going on upstairs, and I thought it was nice to sort of remain within this convention of sculpture. I guess the large covered painting kind of broke that. Still, my original idea was the figures and the sculptures, and then the wall work was thought up as a backdrop in a sort of way. So it is nice to be able to show some of these ceramic works that are a regular part of what I do that wasn't featured in the Nasher show.

JS: *I am curious about titles of your work. One is ceramic and the title is "again this thousand-year-old eggplant root," which is sort of a black field with the eggs on the side. And then the other work is the fan, the red-orange fan, "she runs horses in lightning."*

M-TP: I have always found the space of the titles was something completely wonderful and often under used. I mean there are artists who have great titles, but I have always thought this was a great place that could go somewhere else completely than maybe the work that was on display or that can really orient how you read a work or how you think about it. So I think it is fundamental aspect of an artwork. For the ceramic pieces because it is such a process-based practice, and I made quite a lot of them, but at the same time I really didn't want them to be just untitled. When I began, it wasn't the first year with ceramic, but I think in 2008 or 2007 I decided that I would use a book as a kind of repository, a place in which I would find my titles. I have this book that's called *Zen Sand: The Book of Capping Phrases for Kôan Practice*. It's a book that is like cheat phrases, for Zen monks or students of Zen, and they are basically little phrases, mini poems, almost like haikus, that the students could learn by heart and could respond to a query by the teacher. The query would be a kôan and then they would respond by using one of these lines. This

book is enormous and has endless lists of these great small lines, so I select them from the book, basically. And I like the randomness of it, I like the sort of serendipitous Zen-like magic of it, and of course I think it works very well with this sort of semi-abstract nature of these works as well, but it helps focus the mind on the work, but then at the same time it's not overly descriptive, and it helps not to close down the reading of the pieces. And then with these particular works I was thinking a lot about the shaped canvas when you are painting and how you could play with the ceramics to do things that work in that fashion, but because it is ceramics it reads completely differently than if it were a painting on the wall.

JS: *I found a sort of art historical reference in these works, transformed into a different medium and different dimension.*

M-TP: I think it's very much about very classic modernist abstraction, like Barnett Newman or Ellsworth Kelly, but I think when it becomes ceramic, it becomes somehow so much more earthy. There is a physicality to it that is utterly different than what you would get from canvas. I have always loved abstract painting, while having a lot of problems while making proper abstract paintings. I started out making paintings and always having a very hard time with the result. And so, I think in a way sort of funneling that insecurity or feeling of failure basically into a different material has always been a successful way for me. So whether it's a tapestry or a ceramic, it sort of enables me to deal with these kinds of art historical, classic modes in a way that I would find too problematic to try to replicate or deal with in actual canvas and paint.



With the Dallas Art Fair in its ninth year, it has established itself into one of the country's premier fairs, highlighting Dallas Arts Week, the busiest time for the North Texas arts community. With the inclusion of Simon Lee Gallery in this year's fair roster, Perret's work will return to a city that championed her last major museum show. It's an additional sign of how much the fair has grown in size and scope, incorporating performance with a mid-career artist, whose work is outside the box of the fair's commercial paradigm. **P**