

Mai-Thu Perret

“And every woman will be a walking synthesis of the universe”



Complete with encrustations

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The Renaissance Society at The University of Chicago
April 30–June 11, 2006

The Renaissance Society

at The University of Chicago
5811 South Ellis Avenue
4th floor
Chicago, IL 60637

Museum Hours

Tuesday - Friday: 10 am - 5 pm
Saturday, Sunday: 12 - 5 pm
Closed Mondays
www.renaissancesociety.org

Mai-Thu Perret

April 30 – June 11, 2006

Opening Reception: Sunday, April 30, 4:00-7:00pm

Featuring a talk with the artist from 5:00-6:00pm

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at The University of Chicago**
5811 South Ellis Avenue
Chicago, Illinois 60637
Phone: (773) 702-8670

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Alice Still Lives Here

Modernity is synonymous with progress, especially when progress assumes the form of a historical narrative. Modernity, however, is not simply a historical narrative; it is a master narrative. As such, it is the grand story uniting all other stories that taken together represent the state of the world as we try to comprehend where the present moment came from and where it might be going. Both the changes and the rate of change experienced over the past two and a half centuries have earned Modernity a reputation as a condition of permanent revolution. The pursuit of an ideal social order has generated numerous blueprints, some calling for violent change. Central to any enlightened discussion about improving the human condition is uplifting the status of women. Not surprisingly, the belief in the social, political and economic equality of the sexes was literally born in the spirit of revolution. If feminism proper has a date of origin then it's 1792 with the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's treatise *The Vindication of the Rights of Women*, which was written in her native Britain where debate about the French Revolution, then in its third year, was vigorous to say the least.

Over the course of the next century, Wollstonecraft's text became one amongst many that lay the foundation for what, by the Twentieth Century, became a movement conscious of itself as an historical continuum. Working across successive generations, feminism came to encompass concerns ranging from securing fundamental legislative equality to reflections on the very nature of being. Beginning with Wollstonecraft's text, feminism has become a comprehensive language of critique and social change, one co-extensive with the Modernity as a historical master narrative.

According to the work of Swiss artist Mai-Thu Perret, feminism, as a distinct tradition of self-empowerment, is a master narrative in its own right. For the past few years, Perret has been writing *The Crystal Frontier*, a fictional account of a feminist commune founded by five women in the Southwestern United States.

In no way, shape or form a finished document, *The Crystal Frontier* consists of diary entries by its female protagonists who reflect on the lives they left behind, the reasons they left, and their personal hopes and hardships in pioneering a utopian community. Perret, who studied English literature at Cambridge, is more interested in character development than setting. *No More City*, an extract from *The Crystal Frontier* featured at the beginning of this exhibition, reveals the escapist impulse motivating the women. Whereas one journal entry may be reminiscent of Willa Cather, another may come across as the delightfully convoluted, ideological rant of a disgruntled graduate student frustrated by her inability to translate, say, Monique Wittig into a meaningful "praxis."

The Crystal Frontier is a master narrative insofar as it is a grand story generating other stories, which in the case of Perret take the form of sculpture. Whether they are large banners, folksy hand-crafted ceramics, a bunny coop, papier-mâché mannequins, a slightly oversized Constructivist tea set, or altered modernist furniture, nearly all of Perret's work is derived from *The Crystal Frontier*. Perret's heroines follow a routine of work, leisure, and self-improvement through therapeutic exercises in self-expression. For money, they sell crafts. The creation of a fictitious world, one replete with hand-made crafts, gives Perret a great deal of latitude in the artistic vocabularies she chooses to exploit. Whether drawing on Russian Constructivism or Judy Chicago, Sonia Delaunay or Jorge Pardo, Katy Schimert or Andrea Zittel, Perret engages the visual arts as a readymade language whose elements, re-fashioned in her hand, are deployed toward ends stranger than the sum of either their literary or visual sources.

A *Uniform Sampler* (2004), one of Perret's most ambitious works, consists of five, life-sized papier-mâché figures that were made for an art fair, a setting where her crudely crafted mannequins were meant to conflate viewing art with shopping. Their featureless faces are each covered with a large color dot that becomes the source of an intriguing estrangement by effacing an already absent personage. Whatever individuality these figures could be said to possess is in their clothing, which, as it relates to *The Crystal Frontier*, was theoretically crafted by the story's characters. In reality, their clothes were designed by Ligia Dias, a Paris-based designer whom Perret has also enlisted for the *Apocalypse Ballet*, a new suite of five figures on view at The Society.

In the *Apocalypse Ballet*, Perret's and Dias' admiration of Constructivist and Bauhaus decorative arts—ceramics, textile, jewelry and furniture design—is evident in the costume design where any elegance is reserved for the edges of a generic and less than utilitarian square-cut dress. When placed on Perret's action figures, which are performing simple gymnastic poses while holding neon hoops, the reference to Constructivist dance and theatre performances becomes even more apparent. After choosing an element from *The Crystal Frontier* to realize as sculpture, Perret brings additional visual and literary references to bear upon the object, as is the case with *Apocalypse Ballet's* title and the neon hoops, respectively based on a well-known illustration by the 19th-Century French caricaturist J.J. Grandville and the finale of Busby Berkeley's 1943 film *The Gang's All Here*.

Perret's work is first and foremost anachronistic. Although *The Crystal Frontier* is set in the present, nothing could be more frozen in time than the idea of establishing a feminist commune. If anything, *The Crystal Frontier* is a trope for exhuming not just a recent past but any and all points along the historical continuum of feminism. In Perret's alternate universe, however, feminism does not serve to comple-

ment utopian thought. It is, rather, the other way around. Utopian thought is accountable to feminism. Functioning as a master narrative coextensive with Modernity, feminism becomes a binding agent for utopian thought, be it grounded in fact or fantasy. Perret can reference utopian aspirations as expressed by the Soviet avant-garde or as expressed in Grandville's proto-surreal illustrations parodying a 19th Century world in which a burgeoning materialism would seem to make anything possible. Tellingly, the other component of the exhibition is an enormous, round, aluminum clad teapot (12 feet in diameter). Replete with a door, viewers are invited to enter the teapot in which Perret has hung drawings purported to be those of *The Crystal Frontier's* female protagonists. The immediate impression is that viewers have indeed entered Lewis Carroll's Wonderland.

The Crystal Frontier is a world in which historical contradictions have been annulled so that a project such as socialism, which sought to dissolve gender distinction, can rub shoulders with the objectification of women as exemplified in the work of Busby Berkeley, or Vanessa Beecroft for that matter. But Perret's work is not frozen in time; it is time frozen. Modernity as a historical process of dialectical change is being brought to a halt with its contradictions intact. In this respect, a fixation with the 1960s and 1970s as exhibited in the work of Perret and numerous of her contemporaries is symptomatic of the extent to which the rhetoric of alternatives belongs to a disavowed past where artists have been looking for the glimmer of a future that doubles as something other than our present. Under the pressure to reconcile a previous era's aspirations with the current moment, history appears warped so that Carroll's Alice has no scale relative to the historical gains women have made on the one hand and a hopelessly reified femininity on the other. Alice could very well be ten feet tall. But she could also be in chains just as easily as she is in Wonderland.

Related Events

Concert Matthias Kaul with Ensemble Noamnesia

Tuesday, May 2, 8:00 pm
FREE

Kaul's recordings of solo percussion by the likes of James Tenney, Alvin Lucier, and Vinko Globokar should be enough to make anyone take note. This not to mention his work with L'Art Pour L'Art and other musicians and composers such as John Zorn, David Moss, Carla Bley, Malcolm Goldstein, Mauricio Kagel, Hans Werner Henze, and Joachim Hesperos. But over the last ten years his own reputation as a composer has grown with two large commissions from the IMD in Darmstadt and the Bavarian State Opera. No stranger to The Society, Kaul will perform solo works and will be joined by various members of Ensemble Noamnesia. This concert has been sponsored by the Argosy Foundation Contemporary Music Fund. This concert will take place in the gallery.

Staged Reading Alice in Bed

By Susan Sontag
Performed by Trap Door Theatre
Directed by Dado
Wednesday, May 17, 8:00 pm

University Theater
The Reynolds Club
5706 S. University Avenue
FREE

Lewis Carroll's mad teaparty is the surreal setting for Sontag's *Alice in Bed* in which Alice James, the brilliant, invalid sister of William and Henry James, is counseled by Emily Dickinson, Margaret Fuller and other historical and literary predecessors. The play's combination of bitterness, resignation, wit, morbidity, and longing directly invokes the self-representations in Alice James' diary, forcefully raising questions about the social and familial constraints that bind intelligent women and limit their scope of achievement. The reading will be directed by Dado, the recipient of the 2005-2006 Michael Maggio Directing Fellowship at The Goodman Theatre, and performed by Trap Door Theatre, a company widely acclaimed as one of Chicago's finest particularly with respect to experimental work. This event is coproduction between The Society, University Theater and FOTA, and is supported by a UChicagoArts grant from the Arts Planning Council. This performance is FREE and open to the public.

Concert Works by Marta Ptaszynska and Kotoka Suzuki

Performed by Ensemble Pinotage
Wednesday, May 24, 8:00 pm
FREE

Ptaszynska and Suzuki are two of the University's prized music faculty. Both have international reputations as their works have been commissioned and performed by leading musical talents at festivals throughout the world. Trained as a percussionist, Ptaszynska's career spans almost 40 years during which she has written a complete spectrum of work both in terms of style and instrumentation. She has received numerous awards including First Prize from UNESCO in Paris at the International Rostrum of Composers for her string orchestra piece, *Winter's Tale* (1985). Suzuki composes for both instrumental and electro-acoustics as well as for dance and film, with a keen interest in combining visual element and sound. He has been increasingly engaged in producing collaborative audio-visual works. Her honors include a DAAD residency in Berlin (2001-2002), first prize at the 30th Bourges International Electroacoustic Music and Sonic Art Competition in multimedia category (IMEB) (France), and Musica Nova International Electroacoustic Music Competition Honor Prize (Czech). Their compositions will be performed by *Pinotage*, an ensemble formed in 1998 that includes mezzo soprano Julia Bentley, harpist Alison Attar, and guest flutists Molly Barth and Mary Stolper. This concert will take place in gallery.

Concert The Chicago Luzern Exchange

Josh Berman, cornet
Keefe Jackson, tenor saxophone
Frank Rosaly, drums
Mark Unternahrer, tuba
Wednesday, May 31, 8:00 pm
FREE

In the best way imaginable Chicago war-rants having a "sound," especially given the city's rich history of improvised music. This quartet embodies just how much the likes of The Association for the Advancement of Creative Music (AACM) has become our cultural bricks and mortar in a general rather than a monumental way. With the exception of Swiss tuba player Unternahrer, the other three are secure staples on Chicago's music scene having received Delmark's imprimatur for their 2005 release *Several Lights* which was released to wide critical acclaim. The short improvised tracks run the gamut from a wandering, happenstance harmony to a spikey, guttural, but never abrasive cacophony. They shine, simmers, and slur but above all they are open and free. This concert will take place in the gallery.

Reading Lyn Hejinian, poet

Thursday, May 11, 5:30 pm
FREE

Social Sciences Building
Room 122
1126 East 59th Street

Lyn Hejinian is among the most prominent and dynamic of contemporary American poets. As a poet, essayist, and translator, she is the author of numerous books of poetry, including *The Beginner* (Spectacular Books, 2000), *Happily* (Post Apollo Press, 2000), *The Cold of Poetry* (1994), *The Cell* (1992), *My Life* (1980), *Writing Is an Aid to Memory* (1978), and *A Thought Is the Bride of What Thinking* (1976). In 2000, the University of California Press published a collection of her essays entitled *The Language of Inquiry*. Her honors include a Writing Fellowship from the California Arts Council, a grant from the Poetry Fund, a Translation Fellowship from the National Endowment of the Arts, and a Fellowship from The Academy of American Poets. She lives in Berkeley and teaches at the University of California. This event is FREE and is co-sponsored with Poem Present.

Concert Klaas Heckman, bass saxophone

Fred Lonberg-Holm, cello
Vernyan Weston, piano
Friday, June 9, 8:00 pm
FREE

To describe Heckman, Lonberg-Holm and Weston as seasoned improvisers is an understatement since they're more the meat and potatoes of the matter. Which is not to say they aren't spicy as much as to say they are solid. Between them the list of where and with whom they've played amounts to just about everywhere and everybody. Nothing out of bounds, nothing off limits, there won't be a fire next time because there will be nothing left to burn once they're through. This event will take place in the gallery and is FREE.

Mai-Thu Perret has received generous support from the Elizabeth Firestone Graham Foundation; Fondation Nestlé pour l'Art; Pro Helvetia, Arts Council of Switzerland; the Swiss Benevolent Society of Chicago; the Consulate General of Switzerland in Chicago, and a UChicagoArts grant from the Arts Planning Council.

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