

Mai-Thu Perret's Original Sin

Building on the feminist themes of Deborah Levy's 'Real Estate', the artist's solo exhibition at Istituto Svizzero celebrates women relegated to the side-lines of history



In the third volume of her autobiography, *Real Estate* (2021), writer Deborah Levy reflects on the literary treatment of female characters who 'acted on their desires' but were then 'cut down [...] their existence retold to dilute their power and undermine their authority'. Like Levy, Mai-Thu Perret is concerned with the stories of women relegated to the side-lines of history. In her current solo exhibition at Istituto Svizzero – titled 'Real Estate' in a nod to the American author and the Italian word for summer (*estate*) – Perret animates the eclectic, early 20th century Villa Maraini with the voices of similarly 'cut down' women, weaving a fluid feminist tale threaded through with elements of Eastern mysticism.



Mai-Thu Perret, *Eventail des caresses (Coeur)*, 2018, bronze, 20 × 17 × 24 cm. Courtesy: the artist, Simon Lee Gallery, London, and Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin. Photo: Ela Bialkowsk

The exhibition begins in the lush grounds of the villa. *Eventail des caresses* (Fans of Tenderness, 2018) is a trio of exquisite bronze sculptures – subtitled *Utérus* (Uterus), *Poumons* (Lungs) and *Coeur* (Heart) – hanging from the pergola beams. Hollowed out with pendulums inside, they chime when the wind blows, much like Buddhist hanging bells. Together, these vital organs comprise the female body – elevated here to a mystical level – thereby setting the tone for the rest of this woman-focused show. The first gallery space presents a series of eight black ceramic animal masks, *With an Unbounded Force (Black)* (2019), which look down at us with menacing or defiant stares. The work forms part of Perret's research into the treatment of women through the lens of witchcraft. According to folklore, witches would turn into animals on the sabbath. The masks represent this transformation as well as the dehumanization these women faced during the witch hunts. The witch as a fairy-tale bogeywoman reclaimed as a feminist icon is picked up again in *Abnormally Avid III* (2019), a glazed ceramic work on the floor of the villa's former dining room: glossy green-red apples lie scattered from a white wicker basket, some of them bitten into. Alluding to women's traditional role as gatherers (never hunters), they are also an obvious reference to the poisonous apple from the Brothers Grimm's *Snow White* (1812), as well as to the forbidden fruit Eve ate in the biblical Garden of Eden.



Mai-Thu Perret, *Abnormally avid III*, 2019, glazed ceramics and steel, 35 × 48 × 36 cm. Courtesy: the artist, Simon Lee Gallery, London, and Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin. Photo: Ela Bialkowsk

In the winter garden, the soft melodies of poet and singer-songwriter Tamara Barnett-Herrin's sound installation *THE SUBJECTIVE FACTOR* (2022) play on a loop. In this collaborative piece, lullabies alternate with spoken word poetry probing themes of motherhood, domesticity and the trope of 'disobedient' women. The room is empty except for a glass barn owl with a penetrating stare perched on the window ledge (*Louise*, 2022). This acts as prelude to one of the most impressive works in the show, *Minerve* (2022): a 150 cm glazed ceramic statue of the Roman goddess of wisdom, war, justice and art, whose companion was an owl.

Located in the ladies' parlour, this contemporary take on Minerva is directly based on a monumental statue (c. late first century BCE), housed in Palazzo Massimo. Here, the deep magenta statue bathes the room in a red glow, while its serene facial features are those of a young woman of Euro and Afro decent based on the artist's sister-in-law. She is surrounded by group of small, blown-glass birds – a nod both to the superbly preserved Villa Livia frescos (c.30–20 BCE), which depict a lush garden inhabited by a variety of birds, as well as the 'cut-down goddesses' Levy sees in the form of older women who feed birds in cities across the globe. By making her goddess an everywoman, complete with long acrylic nails (*Claws*, 2022) displayed in the parlour's cabinet, Perret both demystifies the goddess trope while elevating and reclaiming the role of ordinary women.

Mai-Thu Perret's *'Real Estate'* is on view at Istituto Svizzero, Rome, until 26 June 2022.