

Press release

Mai-Thu Perret
Agua Viva

September 14 – November 9, 2019
Opening Friday, September 13, 6 – 9pm
Gallery hours, Tue – Sat, 11am – 6pm

Galerie Barbara Weiss is pleased to present *Agua Viva*, an exhibition with new works by Mai-Thu Perret. The exhibition's title cites Clarice Lispector's book of the same name, an challenging mediation on time, language and instantaneity by one of the twentieth century's most reclusive literary voices. "I want to possess the atoms of time," the narrator states in Lispector's *Agua Viva*, "and to capture the present, forbidden by its very nature: the present slips away and the instant too." In her own way, Perret's *Agua Viva* tries to access the contemporary moment, not by possessing or holding the instant, however, but by exploring the non-coincidence of the present with itself, its latencies and anachronisms. This orients her archaeology of modernism, which doesn't figure here, as so often in contemporary art, either as the object of a melancholic elegy or the target of relentless criticism. It is questioned about its vanished, unredeemed visions. If our present is the revenge of a modernity terribly gone astray, then Perret's exhibition excavates other beginnings possibly still latent in this very history: tales never told.

Both a marginal, fragmentary archaeology and an archaeology of the marginal and fragmentary, the exhibition traces counter-narratives through the historicity of singular objects forming a constellation. Playing on different utopian codings of the sea in her arrangement of the gallery space, Perret positions the works like dispersed remnants on the ocean floor. With *She throws herself into the universe*, she pays homages to the Polish Constructivist Katarzyna Kobro, one of the signal references for her reworking of the modernist legacy throughout the last years. The architectural model with facing stairs is based upon Lina Bo Bardi's work, as is the white model of the Museu de Arte de São Paulo. An Italian born architect and designer who emigrated to Brazil, Bardi, like Kobro and Lispector, represents a counter-hegemonic narrative within modernism: female, peripheral, resistant to elitist formalism. The presentation of the charged language of geometric abstractionism in such fragile materializations and in a decidedly feminist frame renegotiates the politics to which it seems to be keyed. Universalism might be the defining quality of these visual forms, Perret suggests, but one that is not exclusive of locality, embodiment and particular differences.

Ceramic turtle sculptures—distantly reminiscent of the identification of subsea and subconscious in Surrealism—communicate with the historical citations, letting temporalities and references collide. In a similar vein, two rug paintings with Rorschach test patterns allude to the Modernist exploration of the unconscious and contingency on the most decorative of mediums. Taken together, Perret's constellation is untimely modernist, science-fiction, desperately utopian, urgently contemporary.

A fractal quality is also tangible in the disfigured mannequin. Such figures appeared in Perret's previous works, in intact form, under the title "Les guérillères," borrowed from Monique Wittig's eponymous feminist novel about the attempt by a group of women to take control over society. With its statue-like solidity, the work is evocative of the determinedness required for activism in times of political backlash. Yet in its disfigured state and insistent physicality, it bears witness to the vulnerability of the human body in the face of disaster. Rather than signifying the commodification of the body, the mannequin thereby turns into an emblem for the exigencies confronting feminist art and politics in the present.

The exhibition can be seen as a fragmentary continuation of *The Crystal Frontier*. Begun in 1999, this fictional narrative documents the actions of a group of feminist militants that exiled themselves from patriarchal society to found an utopian community. Over the last two decades, it has underwritten Perret's work across a variety of media as well as her engagement with different literary and theoretical sources.