

MAI-THU PERRET  
Portrait of a woman

Innsbruck

Sep 24 – Nov 26 2022  
Opening Sep 23, 18 – 21h

In her solo exhibition "Portrait of a woman", the Swiss artist Mai-Thu Perret presents new ceramics, textile works and works on paper that open up a frame of reference from mythology, art history as well as arts and crafts. Her works are characterised in particular by an actualisation of the numerous references, which can be read as a feminist counter-narrative, questioning symbolic, utilitarian and gender-specific material values.

The centrally presented ceramic sculpture "Minerva II" (2022) stands for the Roman goddess of craftsmanship, wisdom and the fine arts. Perret used an antique statue from the Palazzo Massimo in Rome as a model, of which she made her own version in ceramic using a 3D scan. In this, she supplemented the life-size body of the original figure from classical mythology with a new face, coming from Perret's sister-in-law, who is of half European half African origin. A present-day transformation of the ancient deity takes place, combining different body fragments and time horizons, whereby Perret refers to the transformation of images of femininity. The surreal blue colouring of the sculpture simultaneously introduces a level of abstraction that questions clear attributions or a real location of the figure. As a symbolic accompaniment, the Minerva is flanked in the exhibition by a ceramic owl, also glazed in blue.

Since 2003, Perret has been working with ceramics for numerous series of works, a material that is characterised by its immediate modelling qualities and use for many everyday objects. With a group of new ceramic works, the artist shows different variations of vessels, vases and bowls. She uses a construction technique without a potter's wheel, which becomes particularly comprehensible through the circular layering of clay in "If this were the offspring of a phoenix, it would not be hanging around in those places" (2022). Clearly visible fingerprints also reveal the process of production and design. Presented together as sculptural objects in space, they give the impression of a landscape due to the colours of the glazes and the occasional decorative elements of birds. In addition, a series of watercolours shows other types of vessels: The glasses and mugs belong to a tea ceremony and recall one of Perret's most famous works, the walk-in teapot "Little Planetary Harmony" (2006).

The tapestry "Vertical-horizontal composition" (2015) shows a geometric pattern in the colours turquoise, peach and black and is a tribute to the Swiss artist Sophie Taeuber-Arp (1889-1943). Her reference work bears the same title and was created almost exactly one hundred years earlier. During Taeuber-Arp's professorship of the textile class at the Zurich School of Arts and Crafts (1916-1929), she taught with the conviction that art, design, craft, and everyday life could be combined in a creative way – an approach that is also echoed in Perret's works. For the three metres high tapestry, Perret first made a small gouche, the brushstrokes of which are still recognisable in the hand-woven version. The drawing process and brushwork are particularly prominent in the pieces woven with silver thread, adding a personal, gestural accent to the geometric composition. Perret already explored rhythmic geometric abstraction in early works, such as her paintings on plywood, as well as Constructivism and Bauhaus design.

The title of the exhibition can also be associated with the well-known novel "The Portrait of a Lady" (1881) by Henry James. The artist studied English literature at Cambridge University before turning to the visual arts. Literary texts, however, remain an important point of reference for her works, which are best understood against the background of a narrative written by Perret herself: "The Crystal Frontier" (1999) describes how a small group of women from the city follow the activist Beatrice Mandell to a remote commune called "New Ponderosa" in the New Mexican desert. Individual text fragments form a multi-perspectival, associative and unfinished story that deals with critiques of capitalism as well as feminist and utopian issues. An essential activity for the members of the group is the production of hand-craft objects, which allows the fiction to be directly transferred into reality with the objects in the exhibition space.

Some of the works presented in Innsbruck were previously exhibited in Mai-Thu Perret's solo exhibition "Real Estate" (2022) at Istituto Svizzero in Rome.

Text by Madeleine Freund