

Mai-Thu Perret Real Estate

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Istituto Svizzero

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Art, Solo exhibition

Mai-Thu Perret

Real Estate

Istituto Svizzero, Rome

In early March, Mai-Thu Perret sends me an email with a link to the essay *Every Exit Is an Entrance* by Anne Carson. Mai-Thu Perret writes to me that the text is important for the exhibition as well as for her ideas about houses. Anne Carson, a writer and philologist, turns her attention to the “good sleepers and those who are not”—so I also feel addressed. She relates a dream about her childhood home, “the dream of a green living room”, and the strange feeling she has towards this room in her dream, that she had “caught” the green living room while sleeping: “I had entered it from the sleep side. [...] it was and remains for me a consolation to think of it lying there, sunk in its greenness, breathing its own order, answerable to no one, apparently penetrable everywhere and yet so perfectly disguised in all the propaganda of its own waking life as to become in a true sense something *incognito* at the heart of our sleeping house.” This passage, describing the house as a body, a sleeping body, moved me. I often dream of my childhood home, and as I write these lines, I am looking out of the window of my small apartment in Zurich (which I still consider home, despite my life in Rome). I think about the links between the domestic sphere and concepts of femininity analysed in feminist discourses and about our need to have a place we call home, also in terms of property and “real estate”—especially for a woman. “I imagined a house in which I could live and work and think at my own pace, but even in my imagination, this home was blurred, undefined,” writes Deborah Levy in her ‘living autobiography’ *Real Estate*.

Mai-Thu Perret calls her exhibition at the Istituto Svizzero in Rome *Real Estate*. Besides the artist’s sly double entendre, since the Italian word *estate* means “summer”, this title is also and especially a reference to Deborah Levy’s book. It occupied Mai-Thu Perret during her preparations for the exhibition and accompanied me through the last weeks of the past year. Mai-Thu Perret’s solo show in Rome embarks on a reflection on houses, on domesticated and undomesticated spaces, on the female figures who inhabit and animate them, and on their significance for notions of femininity. Specifically, it is two houses, or rather, two villas in Rome, which Mai-Thu Perret deals with. On the one hand, there is Villa Maraini, today the seat of

the Istituto Svizzero in Rome. Built in the historicist style in the early 20th century, the villa was the home of the Maraini family, a husband and wife who prospered from their sugar production company. While the career of Emilio Maraini is well documented, the life of Carolina Maraini-Sommaruga remains nebulous. It is almost as if her figure has disappeared among all the marble columns, stucco ceilings, and wallpapered walls. In her 1971 novel *Malina*, written in Rome, Ingeborg Bachmann describes how her female protagonist vanishes into the wall: “It’s a very old wall, a very strong wall, from which no one can fall, [...] from which nothing can ever be heard again.” The other villa is the ancient Villa Livia, which dates back to the 1st century BCE and was the home of Livia, the wife of Emperor Augustus. The frescos from the Villa Livia are now preserved in Palazzo Massimo in Rome and depict an enchanted garden populated by birds and other animals. In *Real Estate*, these things come together in a free, associative form. With sculptural works, ceramics, textile works, a new sound work, and drawings, Mai-Thu Perret unfolds a kind of topography in the spaces of the piano nobile at Villa Maraini, where she interweaves numerous references from literature, art and cultural history, Far Eastern spiritualism, and feminist theory. Referencing the two villas—Villa Maraini and Villa Livia—she raises questions about the contrasts between inside and outside, nature and culture, and the negotiation of gendered spaces and the manifestation of power and class in architecture.

In the pergola in the garden, three bronze-cast organs welcome us: *Eventail des caresses* (Fans of tenderness)—heart, uterus, and lungs. With its cavity and a pendulum reminiscent of Buddhist temple bells (which chime in the wind and herald a ritual with their sound?), the uterus stands proxy for the female body. On the veranda, Mai-Thu Perret has installed the ceramic sculpture, *She lured the golden warbler down from the willow branch*, which resembles a fountain where four small birds quench their thirst. Its title refers to a meditative, enlightening practice in Zen Buddhism—a recurring theme for Mai-Thu Perret. In the first exhibition room, we are confronted by eight black ceramic animal masks. *With an unbounded force (black)* is what the artist calls this work, which was created in the context of her research on witches. Witches were said, Mai-Thu Perret researched, to turn into animals. And the witch, writes feminist philosopher Silvia Federici, is “the embodiment of a world of female subjects that capitalism had to destroy: the heretic,

the healer, the disobedient wife, the woman who dared to live alone [...]” In the work of Mai-Thu Perret, the witch might be the unruly sister of the women the artist describes in her ongoing series since the late-1990s, *The Crystal Frontier*: women who venture to live together in a non-capitalist, non-patriarchal, manless commune in the New Mexico desert. Or perhaps the witch is the sister of Minerva, whom we meet later in the exhibition. Audible in the adjacent winter garden is the sound work *THE SUBJECTIVE FACTOR*, which Mai-Thu Perret commissioned by singer and poet Tamara Barnett-Herrin. We hear lullaby-like singing and a poetic dialogue based on conversations between Mai-Thu Perret and Tamara Barnett-Herrin about the domestic sphere, unruly women, and the French author Marguerite Duras and her essayistic, autobiographical text, *La Vie matérielle*—in which she reflects, among other things, on all the houses she has inhabited in her life. Collaborations are very important to Mai-Thu Perret. Her co-creative approach is sometimes obvious, as with this sound work, but at other times it is less visible, taking the form of a repertoire of voices and images that accompany the artist. Her textile work in the next room also links to the idea of a resonating space. The large tapestry *Vertical-horizontal composition* is based on a gouache by the Swiss artist Sophie Taeuber-Arp (1889-1943), who developed radical horizontal and vertical visual compositions starting around 1915 and was one of the pioneers of Constructivism. Mai-Thu Perret often addresses the Arts & Crafts and Bauhaus movements in her work. In the narratives she weaves and the imagined sisterhood of her figures, we can draw connections between the textile and ceramic works with expressions of female self-empowerment—also in terms of production conditions, since these techniques enable(d) women to earn an income. In *Untitled*, the hand that is painted on wood above the fireplace is a reference to Mai-Thu Perret’s research on hands, which she has been pursuing for some time and is the basis for the large neon work at the entrance to the Istituto Svizzero garden. The artist explores the symbolic importance of the hand in Tantra, an Indian philosophy that dates to around 200 CE. She is also interested in the hand as an ancient visual motif—Stone Age cave paintings not only depict hunting scenes but often feature handprints or hand reliefs, which, according to anthropological findings, were made by women. For Mai-Thu Perret, the hand continues to stand

for the knowledge that is inscribed in the body and can still be considered not only a symbol of work but also of art-making.

The watercolour drawings in the next room were all produced during the months of the pandemic. Mai-Thu Perret compares the equally silent and immediate act of drawing with writing—another important aspect of her artistic work. For her, drawing is an intimate gesture that shapes her thoughts. This perspective makes me think of sentences by Caroline Emcke: “I write as if I were mumbling: quietly, more to myself than to others. [...] Writing helps one think more precisely. It is intimate.” The space with Mai-Thu Perret’s drawings also has an aura of intimacy, causing us to take pause and contemplate.

Hanging high above in the magnificent staircase of Villa Maraini are the two painted Japanese paper lamps of the work, *Space is the place*. Evoking celestial bodies—moons or stars—they form a prelude to the next exhibition room, where a landscape of water lilies in different sizes spreads out before our eyes. At the same time, my gaze wanders to the lush garden vegetation behind the large windows. Mai-Thu Perret created the ceramic water lilies (*The merging of all into one – this cannot be grasped*, as she calls them) while exploring the work of Roberto Burle Marx (1909-94), who had a decisive influence on Brazilian modernism as a landscape architect and plant collector, and collaborated with the architect Oscar Niemeyer, among others. Roberto Burle Marx’s gardens are like abstract paintings; he referred to garden design as ‘painting with plants’. At his nursery in southwest Rio de Janeiro, he cultivated—or domesticated?—tropical plants. In the context of the exhibition *Real Estate*, the water lilies also make me think of property and desire. Deborah Levy writes: “My real estate had become bigger, there were many rooms, a breeze blew through every window, all the doors were open, [...]. Outside the unreal grounds, butterflies landed on bushes of purple lavender.” At the same time, the large ceramic water lilies are reminiscent of domesticated nature (exactly!), evoking the contrast between nature and culture, inside and outside, cultivated throughout the history of Western culture. Near the fireplace, there is another ceramic work, *Abnormally avid III*—a basket and apples. The poisoned apples from the fairy tale about Snow White come to mind and—like the black animal masks—connect to Mai-Thu Perret preoccupation with the figure of the witch.

Now the witch, a wild and per se undomesticated figure, meets the idealised figure of the bourgeois housewife in the magnificent former dining room of Villa Maraini. It makes us aware of how spaces are gendered and how female figures are characterised according to stereotypes.

In the last exhibition room, we encounter another female figure. It is Minerva—the Roman goddess of wisdom, tactical warfare, shipbuilding, and art. She is also the guardian of wisdom and protector of artisans, and, later, of poets and teachers. Her companion is the owl; her Greek counterpart is Athena. Mai-Thu Perret met her *Minerve* at the Palazzo Massimo in Rome—the same place where the frescoes from Villa Livia are on view. The seated figure dates to the late 1st century BCE or the early 1st century CE. Mai-Thu Perret cast the sculpture in ceramic from a 3D scan of the statue she found online and gave it the face of a female acquaintance of European and African descent. It is also a nod to the old women who feed pigeons, whom Deborah Levy spies in many cities and describes as figures somehow lost in a patriarchal historical narrative: “Yes there she is, she is one of those cut-down goddesses who has become demented by life.” The moulded glass pigeons and other birds keep the *Minerve* company. Sun shines obliquely into the space, and its light reflects in the secret glass bar, where the lady of the house may have kept her liquor. I think of Anne Carson’s dormant green living room and I whisper ‘ciao’ to the *Minerve*.

Gioia Dal Molin, March 2022

Quotes from:

Ingeborg Bachmann, *Malina*. Frankfurt a.M. 1971. English translation by Philip Boehm, New York 1990/2019.

Anne Carson, *Every Exit Is an Entry (A Praise of Sleep)*, in: *Decreation: Poetry, Essays, Opera*. New York 2005.

Caroline Emcke, *Ja heisst ja und... Ein Monolog*. Frankfurt a.M. 2019.

Deborah Levy, *Real Estate*. Dublin 2021.

Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation*. New York 2004.

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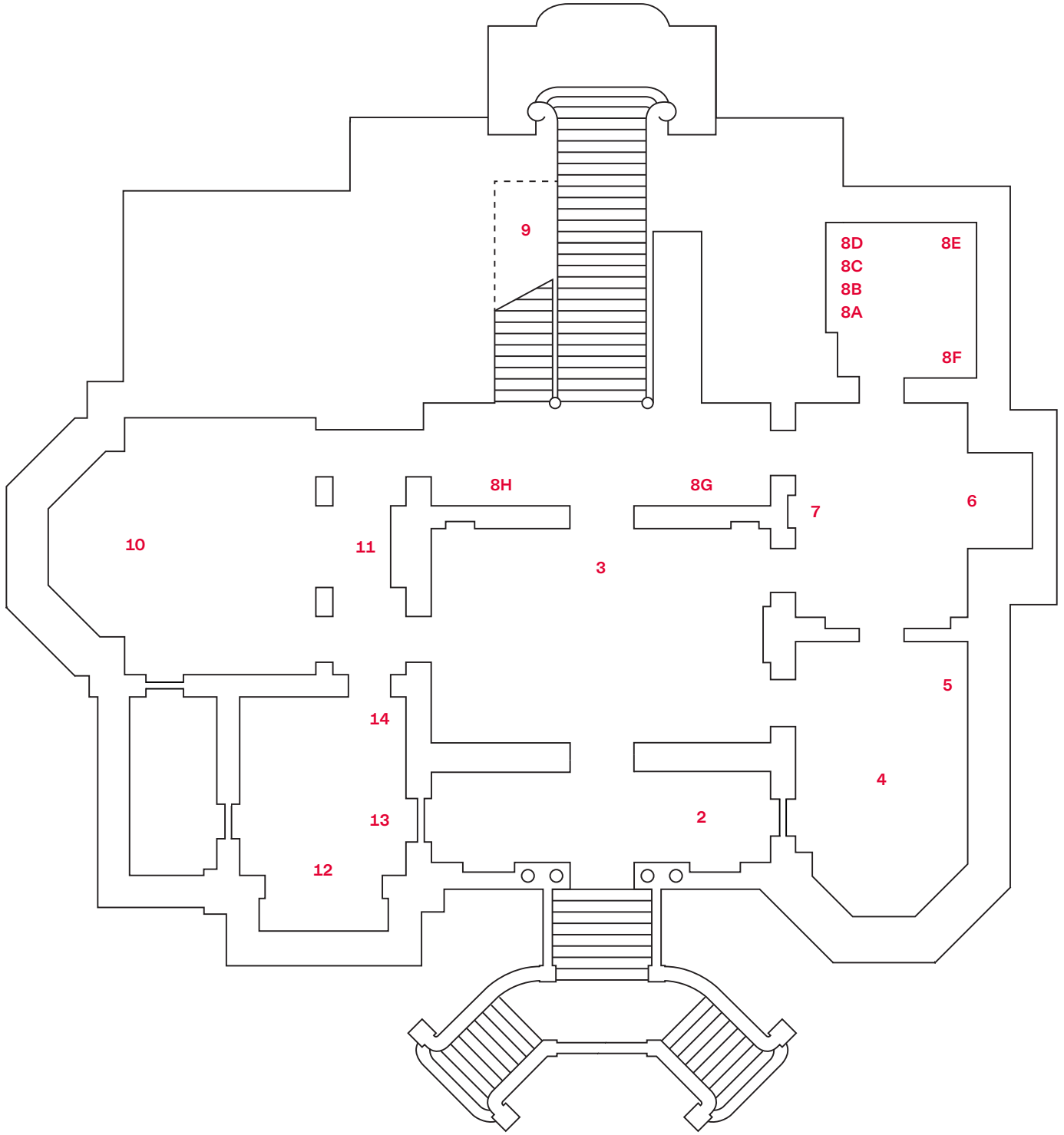
Biography

Mai-Thu Perret (born 1976) lives and works in Geneva. She has exhibited in major Swiss and international institutions such as Badischer Kunstverein, Karlsruhe (2019); Spike Island, Bristol (2019); MAMCO, Geneva (2019); Musée d’art moderne et contemporain, Geneva (2016); Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas (2016); Le Magasin, Grenoble (2012); Haus Konstruktiv, Zurich (2011); University of Michigan Museum of Art, Ann Arbor (2010); San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (2008); and the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago (2006). Perret’s work is in the permanent collection of institutions worldwide, including the Centre National des Arts Plastiques, Paris; Collection Aargauer Kunsthau, Aarau; Fond National d’Art Contemporain, Paris; Migros Museum of Contemporary Art, Zurich; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; and Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.

Mai-Thu Perret Real Estate

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1 (PERGOLA)

1A

Eventail des caresses (Coeur), 2018,
Bronze, 20 × 17 × 24 cm

1B

Eventail des caresses (Utérus), 2018,
Bronze, 26 × 11 × 22 cm

1C

Eventail des caresses (Poumons), 2018,
Bronze, 36,5 × 45 × 52 cm

2

*She lured the golden warbler down
from the willow branch*, 2021,
Glazed ceramic, 68 × 54 × 54 cm

3

With an unbounded force (black), 2019,
Glazed ceramic, 30 × 30 cm, 8 pieces

4

THE SUBJECTIVE FACTOR, 2022
by Tamara Barnett-Herrin
Sound installation

5

Louise, 2022
Blown glass, approx. 45 × 25 × 25 cm

6

Vertical-horizontal composition, 2015
Haute lisse hand woven wool tapestry, 300 × 200 cm

7

Untitled, 2006
Acrylic and acrylic gouache on plywood,
45 × 35 × 1.3 cm

8

8A

Sans Titre, 2020
Watercolour on paper, 18.9 × 27 cm

8B

Sans Titre, 2020
Watercolour on paper, 18.9 × 27 cm

8C

Sans Titre, 2021
Watercolour on paper, 27 × 19 cm

8D

Sans Titre, 2021
Watercolour on paper, 27 × 19 cm

8E

Sans Titre, 2021,
Watercolour on paper, 37 × 28 cm

8F

Sans Titre, 2021
Watercolour on paper, 23 × 30.5 cm

8G

Sans Titre, 2021
Watercolour on paper, 30.5 × 22.9 cm

8H

Sans Titre, 2021
Watercolour on paper, 29.7 × 21 cm

9

Space is the place, 2020
Japanese paper lamps, acrylic paint, led bulb,
115 × 115 cm

10

The merging of all into one–this cannot be grasped, 2020
Glazed ceramic, variable dimensions, 10 pieces

11

Abnormally avid III, 2019,
Glazed ceramics and steel, 35 × 48 × 36 cm

12

Minerve, 2022
Glazed ceramic, 150 × 120 × 100 cm

13

Untitled (Birds), 2022
12 pieces in blown glass, approx. 16 × 12 × 12 cm each

14

Untitled (Birds), 2022
Blown glass, approx. 16 × 12 × 12 cm