

Women on the Plinth

Khaki green “is one of the trendiest colors this season,” wrote H&M press officer Ida Ståhlacke in 2014. She was responding to accusations that the brand had modeled its new khaki jumpsuit after the Kurdish all-female militia, People’s Protection Units (YPJ). Any resemblance to YPJ fatigues was merely coincidental, Ståhlacke asserted, as H&M detractors took to Facebook: “It’s terrible that H&M use the ISIS war against Kurds to make money,” one posted.¹

It’s easy to see both sides: in going for rebel chic, the fashion corporation could have accidentally gone too far, and a female militia used to being condescended to could certainly be annoyed by seeing their look—rather than their fight—appropriated. H&M should be “inspired by [Kurdish women’s] bravery & sacrifices” rather than their clothes, suggested another detractor,² though it’s difficult to imagine what else H&M, a fast fashion brand, could do with bravery as inspiration (“donate that money” suggested another commenter).

For her recent show at David Kordansky, artist Mai-Thu Perret took inspiration from the YPJ’s bravery, as well as the utopian promise she read into their very existence as women living communally while opposing ISIS. None of the elaborate mannequins in Perret’s Kordansky exhibition wore jumpsuits, but a few wore khaki green jackets, as they stood stoically on a chest-high white plinth. “[T]here was this promise of some kind of a very positive social order,” the Geneva-based artist told *Interview Magazine* weeks before her Kordansky

show opened. She had just seen documentary footage of the militia, likely that in which soldiers carry the flag-covered casket of their comrade before describing feminist role models (Rosa Luxembourg, Joan of Arc) and framing their combat as beneficial even to globalized countries in which neither women’s lib nor democracy have quashed inequality. Continued Perret, “Whether or not it was like that in reality, I don’t know, but there was something about it that was very hopeful.”³

Perret’s figures were posed as if in one of Annie Leibovitz’s power women photoshoots for *Vanity Fair*: some seated, some standing with legs apart, one arranged next to her perky brown ceramic dog, all facing forward. Their limbs are made of various materials, from glazed ceramic to wicker to silicon to papier-mâché. The women hold rifles made of colored plastic, have synthetic hair, and wear impeccably well-styled clothing, much more complex than anything H&M would stock. One woman with long red bangs wears a clean white shirt, sleeves rolled under, tucked into belted green cargo pants rolled up just past the knees. Her black sneakers, made of glazed ceramic, shone.

Material lushness has always been part of Perret’s visual, tactile narrative of feminism and rebellion. In 1999, she began making work loosely informed by a fictional feminist separatist commune that she invented, her sculptures standing-in for these women’s handiwork and ideologies. The first time I wrote about Perret’s work in 2011, I compared her smoothly bumpy ceramic wall sculptures and Rorschach-informed paintings to shag rugs in abortion clinics in the

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1
Mai-Thu Perret, *Les guérillères II*
(2016). Papier-mâché, steel, wire,
acrylic paint, gouache, synthetic hair,
cotton and polyester fabric, bronze,
and polyester resin, with steel base,
68 x 29 x 27 inches. Courtesy of David
Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA.
Photo: Brian Forrest.



2
 Mai-Thu Perret, *Féminaire*
 (2017) (installation view). Image
 courtesy of David Kordansky
 Gallery, Los Angeles, CA. Pho-
 to: Brian Forrest.

3
 Mai-Thu Perret, *Les guérillères III*
 (2016). Papier-mâché, steel,
 wire, acrylic paint, gouache,
 synthetic hair, cotton and
 polyester fabric, bronze, glazed
 ceramic and wool blanket,
 37.5 x 70 x 33 inches. Image
 courtesy of the artist
 and David Kordansky Gallery,
 Los Angeles, CA.

1970s. I felt a connection between her craft—always tasteful and openly indebted to both modernism and pattern and decoration—and efforts to make women feel comfortable, not shameful, about difficult choices.

The relationship between materiality and content in her just-closed show at Kordansky is more complicated to unpack, however. Her fictional militia intentionally referenced a real one, and yet was so attractively ensconced in its white-walled setting as to feel safely distanced from reality. As an idea and image, the sculpted feminist rebels were seductive. They're also part of a zeitgeist—art and pop about feminist resistance and radicality within dystopian futures. But how does such art speak into or alongside urgent political actualities? How does white-cube-feminism coexist respectfully with those on literal front lines?

When Perret debuted her mixed-media militia at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas last March, the press release described this new work as relating the artist's "interest in utopian societies to the recent development of a secular Kurdish community...in the Syrian region of Rojava." The statement—not Perret's own words—uncomfortably reduced the distance between the YPJ and Perret's invented New Mexico commune, "New Ponderosa," whose name evokes a hippie furniture store. At one point in the narrative that Perret wrote about her commune—titled *The Crystal Frontier* (the same name novelist Carlos Fuentes gave his 1995 collection about blurry U.S.-Mexico borders)—the women of New Ponderosa discuss one member's trust fund, which has been supporting them for some time. The trust fund, while as fictional as the women who rely upon it, suggests dependency on previous traditions and the comfort

they provide, making narrative space for the subtle, lyrical subversions of modernism that often occur in Perret's work. When dependent on tradition, it's smarter to subvert it than reject it wholesale.

The title of Perret's Kordansky show, *Féminaire*, comes from the small books carried by the female warriors in Monique Wittig's 1969 epic *Les Guérillères*, a protest novel by a French feminist and theorist who participated in academia while resisting its rigidity. Perret titled her sculpted militia women *Les guérillères*, too, each not only loosely inspired by the YPJ but also a vague homage to Wittig's fighters of patriarchy. Wittig's warriors, who sing while they fight, treat battle as a sensual experience. They make time, between sieges, to anoint each other with sandalwood oil or sit on piles of leaves, holding hands, because they must not "abandon the collectivity."⁴

Intimacy and euphoria seem as crucial to their strategy as stealth and weapon training. Their *féminaires* discuss gynecological anatomy and its connotations (often spelling out the functions of the clitoris and labia), but the women resist anatomical essentialism (the "vulvas with their elliptical shape" must not be compared to "suns, planets")⁵ The biological facts of their gender are more incidental than the social factors that necessitate their battles against male dominance.

The one drawing titled *Féminaire* (2017) in Perret's show resembles a diagram, an oval at its center with illegible text and symbols in and around it. The gallery press release points out that it looks like an exhibition poster, and it does—an inexplicit, aesthetically pleasing advertisement for something vaguely feminist. On the wall adjacent to the poster, opposite the women on the plinth, hung

1. Tom Wyke, "H&M apologises after being accused of modeling £15 khaki outfit on uniform worn by Kurdish female fighters battling ISIS," *Daily Mail*, Oct. 6, 2014, <http://dailym.ai/1rXFF1>.

2. "Rebel Sell: H&M apologizes for Kurdish female fighter-inspired jumpsuit," RT.com, 7 October 2014, <https://www.rt.com/news/193764-hm-apologizes-kurdish-outfit/>.

misshapen ceramic rectangles with narrative titles. Finger-prints puncture all sides of *The mind's eye is as bright as the moon* (2017), a crimson-colored ceramic slab that looks as though it has been repeatedly clawed at. Perret indeed took a go at each of these ceramic rectangles with bare hands, viscerally obstructing their geometry without ruining it altogether.

This is the kind of work Perret is best known for: materially and art-historically savvy objects hovering halfway between decoration and dissent. “The danger remains that these loose references...threaten to repeat rather than negate the fashion impulse Perret critiques,” art historian Hannah Feldman pointed out in 2006. “Her Constructivism, for instance, could be someone else’s Design Within Reach Bauhaus-style knockoff.”⁶ In the cloistered conversations that happen within the art world, this hovering is often okay, sometimes even provocative. But once one references the YPJ in an exhibition in a country newly under the leadership of an openly misogynistic president, hostile to helping Syrian refugees, the conversation shifts. Here such open-ended gestures could seem politically wishy-washy, even offensive.

Perret is not, in my opinion, criticizing the fashion impulse as much as using it, to give a sensory form to an in-between space where radical politics run up against constraints of capitalism and conservatism. Even radicals have internalized these constraints (note that New Ponderosa members make money by selling their handiwork). But never before has Perret built an army—in the past her mannequins have been more impressionistic, even wearing white and dancing around an oversized teapot in one installation.⁷

Other artists are also attempting to insert thoughtful, hopeful

representations of radicals into the Western milieu, some using Perret’s very same resources. In 2015, artist Beatriz Santiago Muñoz made *That which identifies them like the eye of the Cyclops*, a film that attempted to restage Monique Wittig’s *Les Guérillères* in a small Puerto Rican community. In one part, the women hold colored Plexiglas up to the landscape, as if holding a bow and arrow, working on a signaling system to tell colleagues to come back or to call for reinforcements. Muñoz’s narrative, less explicit than Perret’s, turns resistance into a series of small gestures, poetic but also pragmatic.

Perret, in contrast, built the whole army, though one with members who don’t seem to know how to wield their weapons to reshape their Western context. They, like many of her previous sculptures, stand-in for the desire for a freer, more sensual, egalitarian and progressive world—though in their photo-shoot-ready poses, they manifest the shortcomings of this approach even more forcefully. They’re limited by convention, too familiar to threaten the state of affairs. They articulate, whether Perret meant them to or not, the inability to break the form that keeps us from breaking free, still internalizing the moves of a system we’re resisting.

5. Ibid., 37.

6. Hannah Feldman, “Desert of the Real,” *Artforum*, Summer 2006.

7. Mai-Thu Perret, *And Every Woman will be a Walking Synthesis of the Universe* (2006). The Renaissance Society, Chicago, Illinois. (The title of this show came from the 1920 *Futurist Manifesto of Women’s Fashion* by Vincenzo Fani.)

3. Pimpoy Phongsirivech, “Mai-Thu Perret’s Militia,” *Interview Magazine*, May 19, 2017, <http://www.interview-magazine.com/art/mai-thu-perret>.

4. Wittig, Monique. *Les guérillères*. New York: Viking Press, 1971, 35.