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Spike Island

133 Cumberland Road, Bristol BS1 6UX
0117 929 2266 / www.spikeisland.org.uk

Mai-Thu Perret
The Blazing World
19 January to 24 March 2019
Preview: Friday 18 January, 6–9pm



Spike Island presents *The Blazing World*; a major new commission by Swiss artist Mai-Thu Perret.

The practice of Mai-Thu Perret intertwines diverse traditions such as Modernism, the Arts and Crafts movement, and Eastern spiritualities. In 1999 Perret created *The Crystal Frontier*, a fictional all-women commune who opted out of contemporary capitalist society and settled in the New Mexico desert. The story of this autonomous community provides the framework for Perret's interest in radical feminist politics, and the objects she presents often masquerade as the 'hypothetical production' of the women inside *The Crystal Frontier*. Perret's continually expanding fiction explores how both personalities and objects function within the social systems they inhabit, the nature of utopia, and the compelling power of revolution and ritual.

The Blazing World is a major new commission extending upon Perret's interests in feminist politics and the occult. A new body of ceramic sculptures are either associated with the imagery of the witch in fairy tales (the apple, the home and the farm), or with animal masks, alluding to the transformation of witches into animals or the possibility of being possessed by other subjectivities. The idea of transformation – both conceptually and materially – is central to the exhibition where ceramic material plays a fundamental role owing to its wide-ranging anthropological significance, inherent tactility, and dependence upon the transformative role played by fire.

These ritualistic sculptures are positioned alongside textile banners and a spoken word recording by singer-songwriter Tamara Barnett-Herrin, punctuating a large-scale theatrical stage set which carries the haunting sense of something yet to come. While Perret's ceramics convey a domestic scale, this staging evokes an imagined landscape, a sacred garden composed of three abstracted motifs (a tree, a ramp and a cone), and borrows its minimal aesthetics from early Avant-garde stage designs and Japanese Zen gardens.

In *The Blazing World*, Mai-Thu Perret provides a new horizon for the understanding of her practice. By referencing the figure of the witch, she recalls the persecution of women in the Early European Modern period, when witchcraft and Satanic worship became an expression of peasant and working class rebellion, as feudal society transitioned towards capitalism. The deep psychic entanglements of this archetypal figure – as a perceived threat to fertility, reproduction and patriarchy – continue to live on in society's myths and fairy tales. By drawing parallels between domestic crafts such as ceramics and the Zen garden, which is often dedicated to the moon – a female planet par excellence – Perret underlines how the fraught relationship between craft and gender continues to unsettle.

**Performance: Mai-Thu Perret
Wednesday 20 March, 7pm**

A performance activating the sculptural elements of Mai-Thu Perret's exhibition and playing with the ongoing cultural relevance of the witch as fairy tale bogey woman, feminist icon, and working class heroine. Developed in collaboration with Perret's students at the Workmaster program, Labzone and Geneva School of Art and Design (HEAD – Genève), and with UK singer-songwriter Tamara Barnett-Herrin.

Image: Mai-Thu Perret *Figures* (2014) Performance at the Biennale of Moving Images, Centre d'Art Contemporain, Geneva, Switzerland. Photograph courtesy Annik Wetter

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For further information and high resolution images please contact Jane Faram, Communications Manager at Spike Island on jane.faram@spikeisland.org.uk / +44 (0)117 9292266.

Notes for editors:

- Mai-Thu Perret was born in 1976 in Geneva, where she lives and works. She is known for her multidisciplinary practice encompassing sculpture, painting,

video and installation. Perret has created a complex oeuvre which combines radical feminist politics with literary texts, homemade crafts and 20th century avant-garde aesthetics.

- She studied English at Cambridge University and was a participant in the Whitney Independent Study Program. In 2011 she won the prestigious Zurich Art Prize and the Prix Culturel Manor. She is the recipient of the 2018 Paul Boesch Award.
- Her recent solo shows include: MAMCO, Geneva (2018); Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas (2016); Le Magasin, Grenoble (2011); MAMCO, Geneva (2011); Aargauer Kunsthhaus, Aarau (2011); Swiss Institute of Contemporary Art, New York (2011); University of Michigan Museum of Art, Ann Arbor (2010); The Aspen Art Museum, Aspen (2009); San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco (2008); The Kitchen, New York (2008); and The Renaissance Society, Chicago (2006).
- Mai-Thu Perret's work has featured in numerous group shows, including the Centre d'art contemporain, Geneva (2014) ; Swiss Institute, New York (2014); Musee d'Art Moderne, Paris (2013); Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, Michigan State University, East Lansing (2013); Museum of Contemporary Art, Denver (2013); Centre Pompidou, Paris (2012), CCS Bard Hessel Museum, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY (2012); Kunsthalle Bern, Bern (2012); ILLUMInations (curated by Bice Curiger), 54th Venice Biennale (2011); and Haus der Kunst, Munich (2010).
- Mai-Thu Perret's exhibition is supported by Swiss Arts Council Pro Helvetia and Stanley Thomas Johnson Foundation. Perret's performance is supported by Geneva School of Art and Design (HEAD – Genève).
- Spike Island is an international centre for the development of contemporary art and design. It is a place where artists and the public can meet, enabling audiences to engage with artists' research and production. Within the 80,000 square foot building, Spike Island offers visitors a year-round programme of exhibitions, events and activities in the central gallery spaces, as well as providing working space for artists, designers and creative businesses.
- Spike Island is a partner of Tate as part of the Plus Tate network.
- The gallery is open Tuesday to Sunday, 12–5pm. Entrance is free.

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