

## Mai-Thu Perret

## Minerva

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Minerva, a countess from Ticino and a Roman villa. These intriguing motifs are just some of the themes of Mai-Thu Perret's new exhibition. The artist, who made a name for herself at the start of her career with a penchant for storytelling, draws on history. With *Minerva*, Mai-Thu Perret has created a cult that is as secular as it is modern, combining archaeology, repetition and sisterhood.

*Minerva* is a sculpture, a bronze cast created following an exhibition in 2022 at the Swiss Institute in Rome, in the villa known as 'Maraini'. Unlike the famous Villas Ada or Madame, which pay tribute to female patrons, Maraini is the surname of the owner Emilio, who lived there with his wife Carolina Maraini-Sommaruga. Carolina's aristocratic status was likely to support the social ambitions of her husband, a man who made his fortune in the sugar beet industry. The couple certainly worked together to design the Villa as the setting for their social project. Carolina, a countess from Ticino, left little trace of herself in this noble residence, and not much more in history. With no portrait, no biographical account, assigned to the domestic sphere, forgotten in the wings of the bourgeois social apparatus, Carolina had to wait a century for Mai-Thu Perret to decide to pay tribute to her with this sculpture. In Roman mythology, Minerva, Athena in Greek, is the goddess of wisdom, crafts and military tactics, as opposed to the brutal courage of Mars. Women and poets of the 19th century recalled that Minerva was a figure at the crossroads of beauty and knowledge.

For Mai-Thu Perret, the epiphany took place at the Museo Nazionale Romano – Palazzo Massimo, where a strange Minerva, a late Roman sculpture, is kept. Chryselephantine in various marbles, with richly detailed drapery, the missing face has benefited from a modern reconstruction. It is in fact a replica of another Minerva on display next door in the same museum. Its paradoxical presence led the artist to draw inspiration from it to represent Carolina Maraini-Sommaruga, this 'personality' without history or representation.

The eyeballs of the Palazzo Massimo's Minerva were originally inlaid with stone of different colours. With a modern face and patchy eyes, the Minerva seems to be wearing a mask. Absent from herself, this is how Mai-Thu Perret decided to commemorate the Countess, drawing on a history of ancient sculpture marked by the circulation of models, the test of time and eclecticism - all phenomena that test modern certainties such as formal unity or the status of author. The artist has appropriated ancient sculpture by means of a scan made by an amateur with a smartphone and shared on the Internet. The scan, a contemporary method of reproduction, is now the subject of debate. Although this lightweight instrument can produce a highly accurate file, some museums do not allow it. Recently, however, activists have used it to identify potential spoliations. Thanks to modern technology, and in the absence of a portrait of the Countess, Mai-Thu Perret has substituted the modern face with that of her sister by marriage. In this new work, the artist feeds a complex network of historical threads where major and minor, domination and emancipation intersect. The Villa behind the project is now the Swiss Institute, a country that has recently been examining its history and its links with colonialism. Emilio Maraini, for his part, has been trading in an alternative product to a colonial commodity. Finally, the artist's Afro-descendant sister-in-law gives *Minerva* a new face.

For Michelle Perrot, women have long been absent from history and the stories we tell about them, 'doomed to the obscurity of an inescapable reproduction, they were outside time... buried in the silence of an abyssal sea'. With *Minerva*, Mai-Thu Perret uses mythological history to mark the absence of Carolina Sommaruga, and beyond that, the missing history of minorities.

-Julien Fronsacq

### About the artist

Mai-Thu Perret was born in Geneva in 1976, where she currently lives and works. Her approach to art offers the possibility of understanding how bodies are the implicit protagonists of artistic creation, and how feminist narratives and counter-narratives can be used to reflect on the world in utilitarian, symbolic and mystical ways. Perret has been the subject of numerous solo exhibitions in European and international institutions such as Istituto Svizzero, Rome (2022); Le Portique - centre régional d'art contemporain du Havre, France (2020); Musée d'art moderne et contemporain (MAMCO), Geneva (2019); Badischer Kunstverein, Karlsruhe, Germany (2019); Spike Island, Bristol, England (2019); Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas (2016); Le Magasin, Grenoble, France (2012); Haus Konstruktiv, Zurich (2011); University of Michigan Museum of Art, Ann Arbor (2010); San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (2008); and Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago (2006). Recent group exhibitions include &, curated by John Armleder, Musée d'art moderne et contemporain (MAMCO), Geneva (2022); *New Time: Art and Feminisms in the 21st Century*, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, California (2021); *The Musical Brain*, High Line, New York (2021); *New Age, New Age: Strategies for Survival*, DePaul Art Museum, Chicago (2019); and *Like Life: Sculpture, Colour, and the Body (1300-Now)*, Met Breuer, New York (2018).

Her works are included in the permanent collections of the Centre national des arts plastiques, Paris; the Collection Aargauer Kunsthaut, Aarau, Switzerland; the Fonds national d'art contemporain, Paris; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; and the Migros Museum of Contemporary Art, Zurich.

### About the author

Julien Fronsacq (born in 1975 in France, lives and works in Geneva) is a Chief curator and Deputy director at MAMCO Geneva and an art critic.

He co-curated with Lionel Bovier Mai-Thu Perret's retrospective at MAMCO in 2018 and previously dedicated to the artist an article in *Parkett* in 2008.

He holds a Master of History of Art and Museology from Ecole du Louvre and of History of Art from Sorbonne University. He has been assistant teacher at the Ecole du Louvre and teacher at ECAL/Ecole cantonale d'art de Lausanne in Fine Arts Bachelor. He previously has been a curator at Palais de Tokyo, Paris.

### Artwork details

*Minerva*, 2024  
Bronze  
153 × 60 × 85 cm / 60 × 23 5/8 × 33 inches

*Vast rumbling thunder and not a drop of rain VI*, 2023  
Glazed ceramic  
26 × 45 × 58 cm / 10 × 17 3/4 × 23 inches

*Fire is hot without needing the sun, wind is cool without needing the moon*, 2024  
Glazed ceramic  
48 × 37 × 11.5 cm / 19 × 14 1/2 × 4 1/2 inches

*Masses of flowers, swaths of brocade*, 2024  
Glazed ceramic  
48.5 × 38 × 14.5 cm / 19 × 15 × 5 1/2 inches

*A burner fragrant with incense and a pot of tea*, 2024  
Glazed ceramic  
50 × 38 × 6.5 cm / 19 3/4 × 15 × 2 3/4 inches

*She swallowed up the mountains, the rivers, and the great earth*, 2024  
Glazed ceramic  
46 × 35.5 × 14.5 cm / 18 1/8 × 14 × 5 1/2 inches