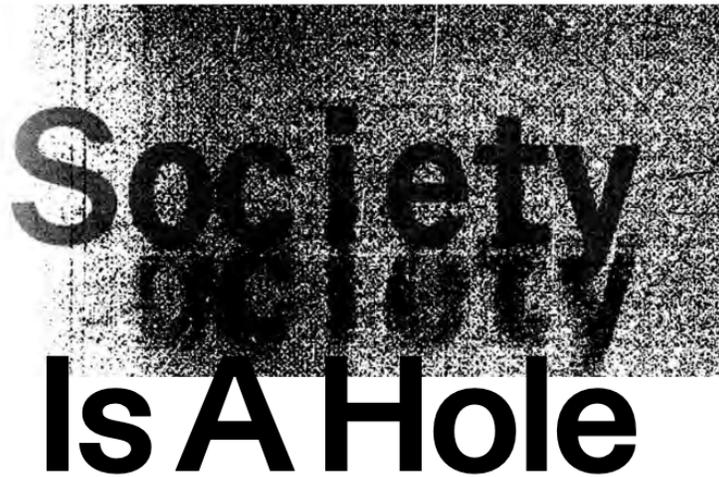


AUTRE



Mai-Thu Perret

Swiss artist Mai Thu-Perret's speculative utopias come in myriad sculptural forms, like an archeological discovery of a better world that never existed. As a viewer, we are left to decipher, examine, decode, and psychologically carbon date its signs and symbology. Through these imagined histories and cosmological arcadias, she conjures hope for a more harmonious, equitable present.



Interview.....Oliver Kupper

Photography...Matthieu Croizier

Oliver Kupper When did you become interested in the societal implications of art-making and art objects?

Mai-Thu Perret Pretty much always. I don't believe that we exist separate from the world we live in. That's a very bourgeois and narrow way of thinking. But I would say I was interested in literature before I was interested in art. As a young person, I was a big reader. If anything, I would have wanted to be a writer, or even a novelist, rather than an artist—maybe because I had some very old-fashioned ideas of what an artist was. When I was a teenager, I wasn't aware that there was so much freedom in art. I always thought that a book or a painting is tied to the place that it comes from; I could never really separate the two. Even as a student, I was very drawn to things that were deeply modernist and formalist, like T.S. Eliot. But then, at the same time, it was the mid-90s, and theory was a big thing when I went to college. So, I was always interested in feminism. I remember we had a Queer Theory reading group, which was a student-led thing because nobody really taught that back then at Cambridge.

OK In the student movement, civil rights, and second-wave feminism of the 1960s, one of the most famous rallying cries was, "the personal is political," which is now criticized. But this idea that we're all personally responsible is a big burden.

MTP If you take it in a very narrow way, it's super limiting and kind of a problem, especially if you mean that it's just going to be about your white, middle-class, cis women problems. That's obviously not good. But on the other hand, I think it's great to be able to think of things on the smallest level to the widest level. That's if you have a more open-minded and wide-ranging reading of that phrase—and that's what it means, that things are connected. You cannot separate for even a minute the tiny things of everyday life that are connected to wider sociopolitical problems. If you read it in a Buddhist way, then that's called interconnectedness.

OK Can you talk about the Buddhist way and how metaphysics enters your work?

MTP I was always interested in reading about metaphysics. I was a typical '90s teenager, you know, listening to alternative rock and rave music, and being very into counterculture. At some point, I read about Buddhism or what in the West are alternative versions of Buddhism, which is more about spirituality than religion. It's also connected to a feeling of familiarity, because my family is Vietnamese and it's a very potent part of our culture. My mother's very staunch, very French. She's Vietnamese but she grew up in France, so she's a perfect product of that left-wing, French, assimilated type of immigrant, and has no interest in it at all. But my grandmother was very attached to Buddhist traditions, and it was always treated as a cheesy thing that grandma did, especially when she went with the old ladies to the pagoda. When I started going deeper into it, it helped me reconnect to that part of my history.

OK A lot of your work deals with the past, but you also connected with your roots for the 2007 project, *An Evening of the Book*, where you worked with a seamstress in Vietnam to recreate the costumes from Varvara Stepanova's Bolshevik-era play.

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MTP *An Evening of the Book*, which was a remake of Varvara Stepanova's 1924 agitprop play, was jointly produced for the Lyon Biennale and The Kitchen in New York. It was a time when I was deeply obsessed with the Russian Revolution; with the fate and the production of artists who went full on into the Bolshevik project and decided to make art for the Revolution of the proletariat. Artists like Lyubov Popova, Varvara Stepanova, [Alexander] Rodchenko, and the poet [Vladimir] Mayakovsky, for example. They decided to abandon easel painting, sculpture and apply their skills to this new society. It was really beautiful. It hadn't turned ugly yet. The artifacts and ideas that were generated were so gorgeous. It was a moment in Russian history when there was a new economic policy, so there was actually some kind of entrepreneurial freedom. Everything crashed when Stalin came to power. These artists ended up either killing themselves or were sent to labor camps. I was also obsessed with the fact that there were only a few photographs of this very cool set design for *An Evening of the Book*, so the project became about my own capacity for reinvention. When I received the invitation for the Lyon Biennale, conceived by Stéphanie Moisdon and Hans Ulrich Obrist, the theme was "The history of a decade yet to be named; of a present that is endlessly arriving." Some people make work about the zeitgeist, but my way of getting in touch with reality is much more oblique. So, my idea was to make something from the past that has immense relevance in this particular moment. And when I was going to Vietnam for a holiday to see my family, I remembered these tailor shops, so I took my monograph on Stepanova and I asked them to replicate ten costumes. That's the first time I reconnected with Vietnam.

OK When did these ideas of utopia and dystopia enter your work?

MTP I have always liked these weird utopian stories, like Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915), which is such a bizarre book, or [the work of] Octavia Butler. My interest in utopia is very literary. It's just a really great tool to look at ourselves; as a thought mechanism to look at what we go through in normal life.

OK This reminds me of your Nasher Sculpture Center show in 2016, *Sightings*, which was inspired by the women of Rojava, a utopian feminist insurgency in Syria.

MTP That was a very unusual project for me, or at least a huge shift, because I'm used to dealing with things that are quite removed by history. Dealing with a current war is not the same as Alexander Rodchenko complaining about losing his teeth and being forced to paint clowns during the Russian Revolution. When I was working on the show, it was exactly like it is now because it was just before Trump got elected. It's like watching a car crash. Everyone was panicking. And then, in Paris, we had the Bataclan terrorist attacks. A friend sent me a propaganda video for this all-female Kurdish resistance movement, the YPJ's [Women's Defense Units], in a region of Syria called Rojava. It showed the everyday life of these women. It was totally fascinating. Everyone was sixteen years old and they came from very poor, rural villages and they seemed so innocent. It showed how they cooked together, how they sang patriotic songs, how they wanted to visit their parents, how they were friends, how they comforted each other. It also showed how they trained to use guns together—but they never showed the war itself. They were only showing everyday life. I was totally fascinated by that. I became obsessed with these girls and just thought they were so beautiful and moving and

Mai-Thu Perret, *Land of Crystal*, 2007. Exhibition view of *Land of Crystal* (2007) at Bonnefantenmuseum, Maastricht, The Netherlands. Photo: Courtesy of Bonnefantenmuseum, Maastricht



probably all going to die. I've always been interested in the idea of monuments to the dead. So, I decided to make this show about them, but the project was never meant to speak for them. It was about sculptural representations of them. I would never have dared to say I knew anything about them in real life because I didn't. I'd spent some time in the Kurdish part of Turkey where I made kilim rugs for a project with an NGO that worked with young Kurdish women, and that was really moving. So, I was sensitive to that place and those people and their history.

OK You mentioned Octavia Butler earlier. This idea of creating these speculative histories is interesting because, in a way, they become sculptural. Odes to a movement, to a people, to the idea of feminist resistance against this patriarchal war machine.

MTP It's one of the things that I get the most inspired by, starting from these places and then trying to make representations of these ideas or conceits.

OK When you're going about creating these speculative histories, you approach materiality in a really interesting way. Nothing seems off limits. Where do you start and end when you're thinking about using media and materials in an exhibition?

MTP Sometimes there's a medium or material that I see and I wait years until it fits. Glass, for example, is a thing I've never really managed to find a good use for—or the right people to work with. But materials are interesting because, to go back to the "personal is political" discussion earlier on, they have a trace of people, of histories, of making. And so, just by what material you select, you're saying something. And somehow the material has to be appropriate to the work. That's why I like things like ceramics, or textiles, because there's so much

history embodied in it, and also because they're so connected to our own physicality—you wear a t-shirt, you eat off a porcelain plate. It's totally connected to us. I was just in Mexico and if you go to places like Teotihuacán and the Museum of Anthropology, most of what is left are ritual ceramic vessels.

OK And your work then becomes sort of archaeological. It becomes a part of discovering through these materials.

MTP As a viewer at a show of contemporary art, it's a bit like somebody has put the stuff in front of you and you have to put it back together and ask questions. What was the use? What is the meaning? What are the rituals associated with the objects? That's one of the things that really attracted me to contemporary art.

OK The idea of rituals is very interesting because we're losing a lot of our ritualistic practices. Society feels less cohesive without rituals.

MTP Rituals are not as communal or group-based as they used to be. If you think of how you build a house in a place like Bali, everything about the plan of the house is imbued with a cosmology; everything has meaning. On one level, it must be problematic, because things are very set. In our world, things are not so set, but we're lacking some sense of ritual. I think ritual is a way of making sense of space and where you are. Although, wearing these stupid Trump ear bandages, maybe that's a weird form of ritual.

OK Modernism was an art movement where this sense of space was imbued with ritual or an idea of a better world, which doesn't seem to exist anymore.

MTP A good house is not necessarily a twelve-room mansion with a four-car garage and a giant projection room. It could be much more reduced and meaningful. So, modernism looks for things that make sense. If you think about Bauhaus, there was something democratic about it: you were building for everyone, you were solving problems for society as a whole. That seems lost in our current era.

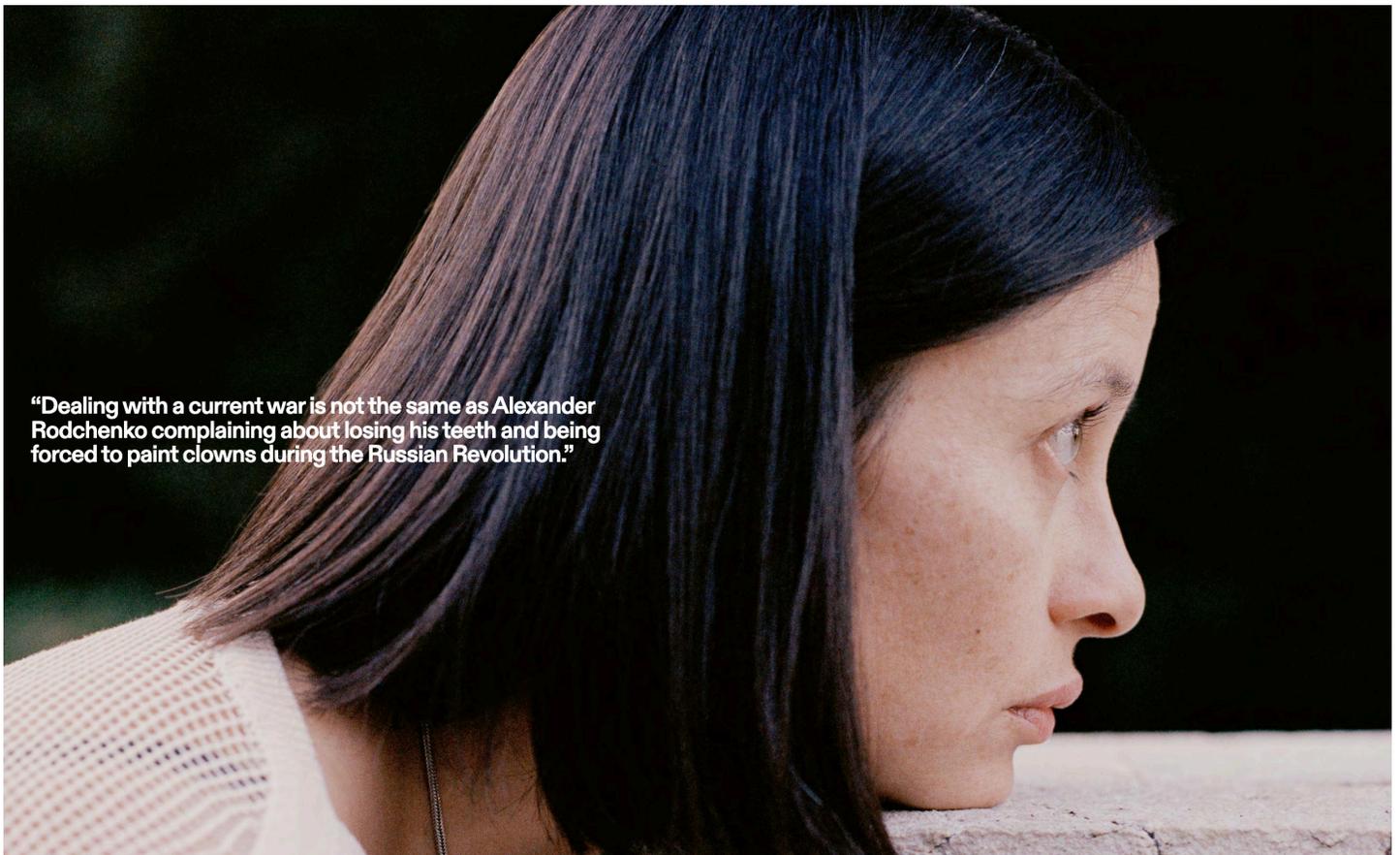
OK What do you think of the failure of modernism; could we not hold on to these democratic ideas?

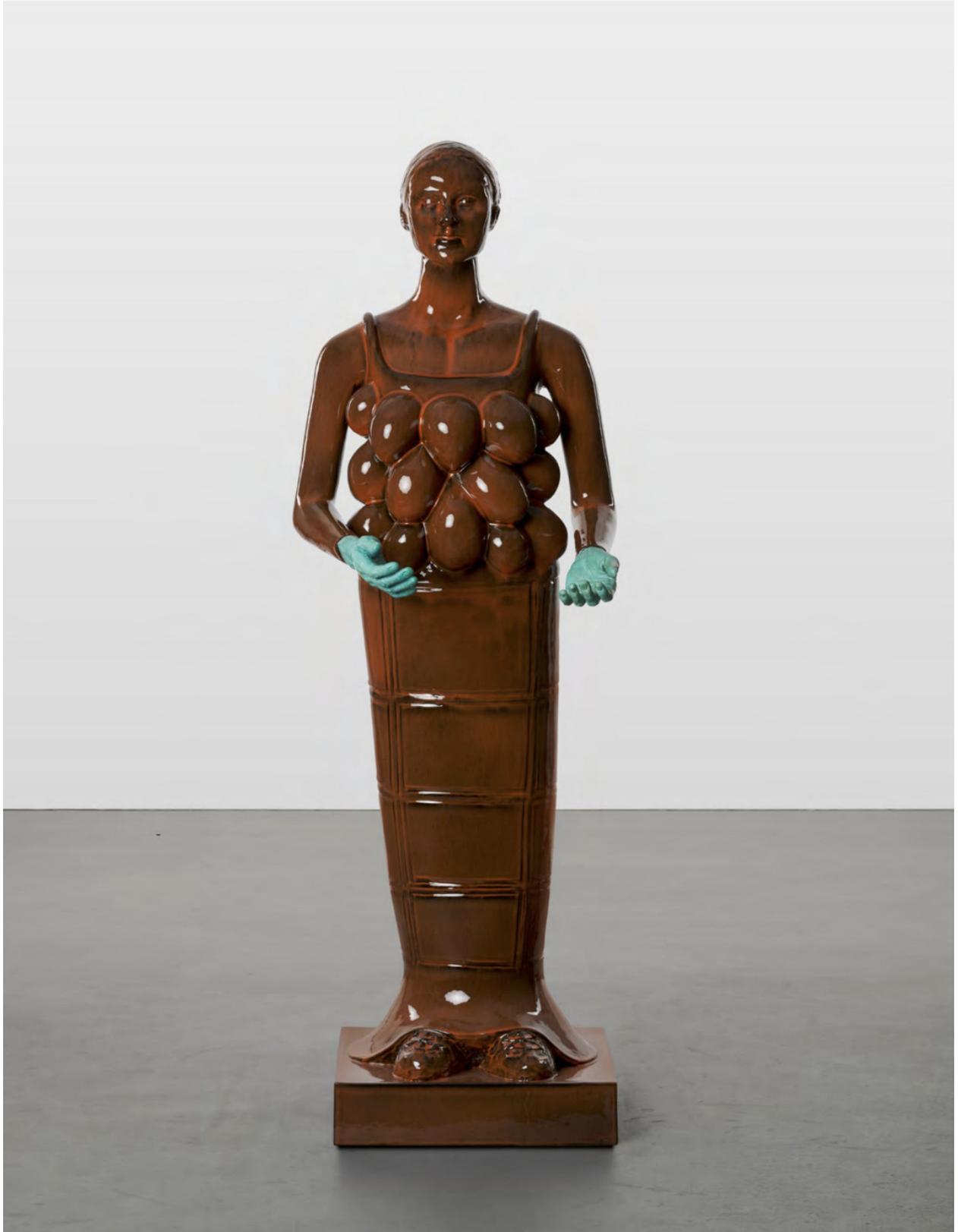
MTP There are elements of modernism that are totalitarian. [Ettore] Sottsass and Memphis were making fun of modernism because it had become mechanical and totally in flow to capitalistic systems of production when it was supposed to be about making life better for other people. So, I think that's part of its failure. It became completely imbricated with the systems of power. People like Le Corbusier—just being desperate to build anything with any dictator. Genius architect, but very problematic. The thing about architecture is that it's very much a power play.

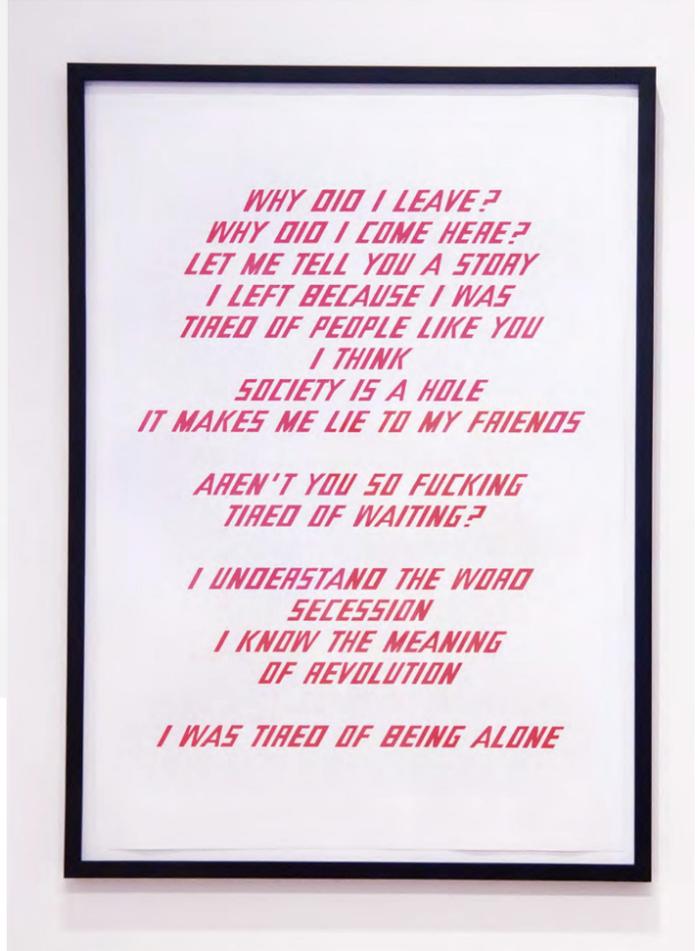


(This page) Mai-Thu Perret, *Les guérillères*, 2017. Glazed ceramic, papier-mâché, wicker, silicone, steel, wire, epoxy, polyester foam, acrylic paint, gouache, synthetic hair, cotton and polyester fabric, bronze, and polyester resin, with steel bases and wool blanket. Installation dimensions variable, approximate installation dimensions: 67 × 258 × 198 inches (170.2 × 655.3 × 502.9 cm). Photo: Brian Forrest, courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery.
(Opposite page) Mai-Thu Perret, *Minerva III*, 2022. Glazed ceramic, 60 1/4 × 23 3/4 × 33 1/2 inches (153 × 60.3 × 85.1 cm). Photo: Jeff McLane, courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery.









(From left to right) Mai-Thu Perret, *Diana II*, 2024. Glazed ceramic, green bronze, 62 1/4 by 17 1/4 by 17 1/4 inches (158 × 44 × 44 cm). Photo: Annik Wetter, courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery.

Mai-Thu Perret, *Do not talk of what goes on in the women's quarters*, 2024. Glazed ceramic, 33 7/8 × 39 3/8 × 39 3/8 inches (86 × 100 × 100 cm). Photo: Mareike Tocha. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery.

Mai-Thu Perret, *Society is a Hole*, 2009. Screenprint on paper, 33 × 23 3/8 inches (83.8 × 59.4 cm). Photo: Courtesy of the artist and David Kordansky Gallery.



OK Can you talk about how mythology is infused in your work?

MTP It's fascinating to look at archeological objects of mythological figures, like Minerva who is a patriarchal goddess of the highest order. She comes fully formed out of the head of her father Jupiter. She's wise, she's the goddess of order, intelligence, cunning, and reason. She's not a very wild female force at all. But at the same time, there is *something* in her that is female. I thought it would be interesting to reclaim her, especially through her relationship with animals. At that time, I read a book by a British writer named Deborah Levy who wrote a three-part autobiography called *Things I Don't Want to Know*. She covers all the different decades of her life. The last volume, *Real Estate*, goes into her sixties. She talks about not owning any property or profiting to the extent that some of her male peers had. There are a lot of reflections about what her ideal house would look like and the ideal situation in which she would write. It's not grandiose, just a room of one's own, like a little garden shed to write in. And she goes on to this long parallel line of thought about goddesses. There's a passage where she's looking at some old crazy lady in London feeding pigeons and she thinks, *maybe this woman is a goddess*—you know, all these Roman goddesses have their companion animals. Minerva has the owl. Artemis has the dogs. So, maybe this crazy woman is just a goddess that's been cut down by the patriarchy.

OK Can you talk a little bit about the upcoming show at David Kordansky Gallery?

MTP The upcoming show has some sculptures that are very much related to that series of mythological figures. It sort of became an ongoing project because these pieces take a long time to make. They're quite complicated. Just before I made Minerva, I made a Diana sculpture based on a figure called Diana of Ephesus whose body is covered by a stack of breast-like protuberances. It's so weird, like a Louise Bourgeois sculpture, and so obviously a fertility symbol. I made a contemporary version of it using some of the molds that I had for the figures from the Nasher Sculpture Center. I'm interested in taking elements of these older works and transforming them into new pieces. They morph and they reappear. The new figures that I'm making are sirens. They're the older incarnation of sirens—not women with tails, but bird women with bird legs. So they're like half bird, half chimeras. They're wearing these outfits that are almost like scales or feathers, and made half from bronze and half from ceramics—an important part of the show are these guardian figures. And then, I'm making a kind of shrine that contains another figure made from the same body but in parts—a pregnant woman that's sort of like a disassembled mannequin. I've made a piece like that, but without the pregnant belly, which for some reason, weirdly, I really wanted to do. She's lying in a tomb and accompanying it are some large tapestry pieces that are made like traditional French tapestries. They're really large-scale reproductions of small watercolors that have been blown up and intricately reproduced in thread.

OK What does it mean to be an artist and a citizen in our chaotic modern world? What is your advice to artists who want to be better citizens?

MTP I think we should be more mindful of others, in general. That's not for artists, that's for everyone. And maybe not to be afraid, because I think we're living in a moment of complete terror. Everyone is afraid. It's not making anybody courageous, and it's sad. It would be great if we could stop being so afraid of the future. ▲