

Galerie Francesca Pia

Mai-Thu Perret

Diana

Opening Friday, April 12, 6–8

April 13 – May 25, 2024

While Mai-Thu tells me about Diana (the Roman goddess) via Zoom, I ponder the Caryatids I saw just days ago at the Acropolis in Athens. The six replicas of the female-shaped columns support and watch over the Erechtheion (an essential part of the structure is the temple of Athena Polias, the goddess of Athens). Five of the original columns are now housed in the Acropolis Museum; the sixth figure was 'brought' to Great Britain by an English lord in 1811. (As I read about this on the Internet, I thought 'stolen' would have been an apter word).

Diana and the Caryatids. Athena. Figures from Greek and Roman mythology. Goddesses and women. Stories that were told and passed on. Obscure life paths. In her research and work, Mai-Thu repeatedly brings female figures into the spotlight. Goddesses and witches. Artists on the verge of being forgotten. Unruly female characters. Mai-Thu is intrigued by the often confusing traditions and speculative attributions. With her works, she creates new stories and establishes new connections. Vessels for new narratives. Diana and the three bronze crabs. The goddess and her unexpected companions.

For her solo exhibition at Galerie Francesca Pia, Mai-Thu situates the ceramic sculpture *Diana II* (2024) in the center of the first exhibition room; the columns in the space flank the figure. Diana (known as Artemis in Greek mythology), the goddess of the moon, hunting and childbirth. The protector of women and girls. Mai-Thu's Diana is an ally of Minerva, whom the artist conceived for her exhibition at the Istituto Svizzero in Rome in 2021. She is a daughter of Mai-Thu's warriors from *Les Guérillères*, a series of sculptures inspired by the real life fighters of the Y.P.J., a female militia fighting for Kurdish independence in the Syrian civil war, and named after the eponymous novel by Monique Wittig (1969). She may also be a companion of Lavinia, the wife of Aeneas, to whom Virgil only dedicates a few lines in his epic poem, but whose story Ursula K. Le Guin relays in her novel *Lavinia* (2008). And finally, *Diana II* is also a sister of Artemis of Ephesus: the yellow alabaster statue (from the 2nd century AD), which Mai-Thu saw a few years ago in the Museo Capodimonte in Naples. Created from a silicone mold, the one Mai-Thu also used for the sculptures of *Les Guérillères*, Diana thus also constitutes a kind of 'rewriting' and a reappropriation of her own practice. Like her sister from Ephesus, *Diana II* also dons pouch-like objects around her neck, which scholars have interpreted as either the breasts or scrotums of bulls; in both interpretations, they represent fertility. Mai-Thu's hands (those of the Neapolitan Artemis are the result of an 18th century restoration) are bronze casts of her own hands, and Diana wears sneakers on her feet. Mai-Thu's goddess is simultaneously a product of both the past and the future. She is a kind of cyborg, who also tells of the fear of unruly figures in patriarchal times (yesterday, today). The two neon works are based on Sophie Taeuber-Arp's wooden relief *Coquilles et fleurs* (1938). For Mai-Thu, the organic forms are also an allusion fertility and—

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in their symbolic nature—also are connected with her research into symbols and their legibility. At the same time, they are a kind of appropriation, perhaps a repositioning or transposition, of Sophie Taeuber-Arp, who has been declared an exception in the male-dominated (and male-written) genealogy of art history, as well as, perhaps, the narratives concerning the world itself. “A vast amount of what we learn, we learn as story,” writes Ursula K. Le Guin in her short essay *What Women Know*. And she continues: “Women transmit the individual stories, men transmit the public history,” i.e., the stories. The “fireside tales,” The stories told by Diana, Minerva, Lavinia or the caryatid abducted to England. “Histories that tell us who we are and who we belong to.” The stories of unexpected companionships, of the bees, crabs and birds that accompany us. The ceramic work *The Lion Teaches the Cub by Making It Lose Its Way* (2023) is reminiscent of a baroque ornament. At the same time, Mai-Thu tells me the cord wrapped around the ceramic plate is a reference to the so-called coil technique, the basic technique for constructing ceramic vessels from long rolls or coils of clay. Containers that may hold seeds, dried herbs and collected berries. Ursula K. Le Guin’s story *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* brings us back to the stories. Not with ‘killer stories,’ but with life stories. With the carrier bags and jars that contain wild acorns and tales. I think Diana may well know what I mean.

– Gioia Dal Molin