

Maija Peeples- Bright's Anti- Hierarchical Utopias and the Art of World- Building

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Maija Peeples-Bright painted a rare self-portrait in 1996, herself in the center of the composition and her dog immersed in his own reality behind her. In it, she holds a paintbrush in each fist, between ringed fingers with pink-painted nails. A leopard, with a second head in place of a back paw, stretches across her long-sleeved, fitted shirt while parrots and blossoms fill the surrounding space. The artist grins as she stares straight at us, her expression as slightly mischievous as the painting's title, *Oh Maija, Oh Maija*, which sounds like a lightly chiding sigh. In its lack of self-seriousness, the portrait recalls Maria Lassnig's agile, expressive paintings of herself (the artist holding a bunny or sleeping with a tiger). But Lassnig's self-parody tilted toward abjection, while Peeples-Bright looks comfortable, well-adjusted, and just fine in her vibrant, animal- and pattern-filled realm. Her signature, written in looping cursive across the arm of an easel that extends out of the frame, reads "Maija Peeples"; she had yet to add the Bright.

Catherine Wagley

The artist has changed her name five times throughout her life: from her birth name to a married name, to the name of her dog, to a second married name, and finally to the hyphenated name she still uses. This kind of changeability is unusual, even stigmatized—I remember watching *The Cool School*, the 2008 documentary about Ferus, the (overly) acclaimed Los Angeles gallery, and seeing art historian Shirley Neilsen's name changes imposed on her by the filmmakers via white onscreen text; her marriages and their endings were never explained in a way that gave her agency. For decades, female artists have clung, understandably, to their own names—Lee Krasner and Helen Frankenthaler never used their husband's names professionally, and *still* they were accused of riding on the coattails of their male partners. The systemic pressure to safeguard "a name for yourself" makes Peeples-Bright's refusal to conform feel all the more deliberate, defiant, and—to me—attractive.

But even if I am correct to read a certain refusal into Peeples-Bright's life and work, I have to admit that I am always looking for this and that I want something from it. I want to live in a different, more liberated world than the one most of us find ourselves caught in, and I want art to help me find it, even as art worlds themselves have again and again proven to be fully committed to a hierarchical, confining, and capitalist reality.

Peeples-Bright's work resists this reality by almost entirely ignoring it, immersing fully in a rapturous, distinct style that has deserved more market attention than it has received over the decades (but is also so appealing because it does not bow to market forces). The artist's name shifts—visible across the work in her recent exhibition, *beautiFOAL*, at Parker Gallery—are the most dramatic variable in half a century of paintings and ceramics that otherwise remain remarkably consistent. There have been no distinct phases, no shifts from abstraction to figuration (à la Philip

1. Jerry Carroll, "A Beastly Victorian," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, July 27, 1968.

2. Gordon Bowen and Linda Bowen, "Memories of Monte Capanno 1970," last updated November 9, 2004, <http://www.montecapanno1970.com/>.

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Maija Peebles-Bright, *Oh Maija, Oh Maija* (1996).
Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 30 inches.
Image courtesy of the artist and Parker Gallery,
Los Angeles. Photo: Noam Rappaport.

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Top: Maija Peebles-Bright, *Giraffe Gibraltar with Gecko Gypsies and Geraniums* (1979). Oil on canvas with wood frame, 51.5 x 68 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Parker Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Paul Salvesson.

Bottom: Maija Peebles-Bright, *Mountain on Wheels with Cat Canoeist* (2018–2019). Acrylic, glitter, fur, plastic claws, elastic bands, fabric, wood, and plastic reflectors on canvas, 30 x 40 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Parker Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Paul Salvesson.

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Guston); no divergences from pattern to experiment with photo and video (à la Howardena Pindell). The exuberance that manages to at once be entirely sincere and tongue-in-cheek has been there since she finished graduate school in the early 1960s. So, too, has the textured maximalism, the fixation on animals and patterns, the alliteration in her titles, and the stylized, child-like flatness to her aesthetic (achieved and maintained with a calculated consistency that would allude any actual child). Consider one densely-packed painting in the main room of the Parker Gallery show, *Giraffe Gibraltar with Gecko Gypsies and Geraniums* (1979), wherein lanky, spotted giraffes float inside a red-orange terrain like fruit stuck within Jell-O, even the blue sky chock full of delicately rendered, impossibly consistent vertical white clouds.

This fixation on fullness, and the meticulous world-building that Peeples-Bright performs on canvas, has also spread into her life. She hand paints her own clothing and, in the late 1960s, with the help of then-husband David Zack, she painted a late 19th century Victorian home in the Filmore District of San Francisco. As with her paintings, this overflowing vision felt coherent and inspired (radical perhaps but not frenzied): she used every color available from the Dutch Boy paint group, each detail on the exterior a different color, painted beasts surrounding the ceiling light fixtures (“not exactly the Sistine Chapel, but nice,” read a photo caption in the *San Francisco Chronicle*³), and painted her dog Woof W. Woof in the study. A large alligator climbed up the exterior entryway. Sometimes friends—and even strangers—would stop by to help paint, stepping into the colorful utopia for brief stints. There was another, albeit short-lived, utopia that hatched inside the house. In 1970, Maija and David, a literature professor, made plans with students and friends for a collective learning and living experiment in Italy. Students remember Maija cutting oxtails for soup as the group talked. The group of 31 indeed went on to form a learning community at the castle of a former

contessa, called Monte Capanno, near Perugia, Italy. While there, they shared responsibility for heating the building, finding food, and building curriculum. It lasted just six months, and a website devoted to archiving the project is knotty with contrasting, complicated views (about how, purported liberation aside, chores were still a woman’s work; about infighting and the paranoia that kept the project from being all it could have been; about Maija being “SO STRANGE” but a great cook²). The masterpiece of a house in San Francisco didn’t last either: after their separation, the couple sold it, and its rainbows fell victim to California’s growing conservatism and bland 1980s taste. But in Peeples-Bright’s paintings, the promise and possibility of non-conforming environments, and the kind of living such environments encourage, persists untethered.

I think about non-conformity a lot, and sometimes imbue the label with a certain undeserved purity. Though in fact, conforming—or refusing to conform—tends to be a messier reality in art and especially in life. This summer, I read poet Bernadette Mayer’s *Utopia* (1984), slowly, at night and in the morning, as if it were my bible and I just needed a daily verse or two to lift my spirit. At first, I thought I liked Mayer because she rejected recognition and dismissed the validation of the literary world. In the book, she says things like, “It doesn’t matter who I am in the utopian tradition I am no one, no woman no man no person....”³ But as I continued to read her essays, poetry, and letters, I began to notice more frustration. In a 1978 poem, she called artists and poets, “Tenants of a vision we rent out endlessly.”⁴ Mayer felt stuck, too—her annoyance with careerism didn’t lead to liberation. Yet her art does offer something of a model for refusal or escape: in *Utopia* especially, she funnels her anger into the imagining of a dreamland modest enough to feel almost achievable, where “there are no cage-like places, ... all windows can open, places open out onto other places, hallways are generous, there is no rent....”⁵

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3. Bernadette Mayer, *Utopia* (New York: United Artists Books, 1984), 13.

4. Bernadette Mayer, “Essay,” in *A Bernadette Mayer Reader* (New York: New Directions Books, 1992), 52.

5. Mayer, *Utopia*, 27.

6. Lucy Lippard, “Escape Attempts,” *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (1973; repr., Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

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Mural by Maija Peeples-Bright in the Rainbow
House (San Francisco, California).
Image courtesy of the artist and Parker Gallery,
Los Angeles. Photo: Robert Arneson.

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The Rainbow House (San Francisco, California)
on the cover of the July 1969 issue of *Art and Artists*.
Image courtesy of Parker Gallery, Los Angeles.

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In the utopias of Maija Peeples-Bright's paintings, worlds in which absurdity, delight, and curiosity are allowed to thrive together without hierarchical tension, the escape already seems to have happened—there are few traces of a former, less ideal world. This utopian model, far less modest than Mayer's, would feel unfeasible if not for the example of the Rainbow House. The fact that the artist once turned her sensibilities and “beasties” (as she calls her painted creatures) into an immersive, physical environment in which people gathered makes her world-building feel surprisingly plausible and tangible (even as the Rainbow House predated the difficulty of owning present-day real estate in San Francisco). Usually, an inclusive, all-together quality characterizes her painted worlds, as in *Mountain on Wheels with Cat Canoeist* (2018–2019), which is among the newest works in the Parker Gallery exhibition. In this painting, the symphony of mammals are nearly all composites of other animals, humans included. The canvas bulges and sparkles; no space remains empty. Leopards pop up out of water and curl inside canoes; giraffes with multi-colored, collaged fabric for spots adorn the mountain—which indeed rests on wheels—and small, repetitive penguins and bats fill the background. The repetition that characterizes her paintings contributes to the sense of a complete universe—like when you perform the same task for so long that the task becomes a conduit for a different kind of imagining. For instance, with *Mountain on Wheels*, the leopards and leopard spots are so omnipresent that it's impossible to fixate on just one, instead you are swept up in the overall leopard motif. These paintings demand full presence; they feel like escape hatches from a world of cultural production that equates a kind of skeptical distance and aloof self-importance with desirable intelligence.

The notion of escape has been a theme in art discourse over the past half century. Lucy Lippard famously wrote of dematerialized art as a kind

of “escape attempt,”⁶ artists attempting to vacate a market- and cache-driven world by making the unmarketable. But, of course, as soon as such objects became on trend, the market came calling. In his 2016 book, *Tell Them I Said No*, Martin Herbert narrates the lives of artists who tried to escape art world expectations by either ceasing to make, ceasing to show others what they'd made, or rigging the system as to be in control of its demands. Charlotte Posenenske, for instance, made interactive, modular, and vaguely industrial sculptures that she would invite viewers to rearrange as they saw fit. But then she turned to the sociological study of employment and industrial labor, focusing specifically on assembly line work after art failed to provide the transformative effects she sought. Her dropout was only noticed—and then mythologized—decades later, when her work began to resurface in exhibitions. At the time, however, her choices mostly had to do with how she wanted to live, choosing to do work that she felt could more directly draw attention to, and perhaps help remedy, social inequalities.

In a 2018 talk with curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, the artist Luchita Hurtado, who died just shy of 100 this August (and knew everyone from Salvador Dalí to Leanora Carrington to the Guerrilla Girls) joked about how artists get mythologized. “I live again!” she laughed, after Obrist recounted her many recent exhibitions, after the commercial art world “rediscovered” her in her 90s and rewarded its discovery by staging survey shows at galleries and institutions.⁷ She also pointed out, after Obrist asked her to recount meetings with Duchamp and other famous artists, that no one ever knows who will be remembered by history and that it is silly to speak in such terms. She had worked her entire life, sometimes feeling self-protective of her output (as when she painted self-portraits of her legs and feet while in her closet, in part because it was the only place she, a mother of three boys, could be alone) and sometimes not. Her work, not its reception, was the evidence of that commitment, and

7. Luchita Hurtado in conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist (Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery, March 11, 2018).

of the explorations she had made (with imagery, spirituality, and language). She, too, built a world: a quieter, more changeable one than Peeples-Bright's world, but you can fall into her paintings and feel held in a reality that demands presence and that values minutiae and uncertainty for their own sake.

Like Hurtado, Peeples-Bright has always made art, and she has not always been lauded as heavily or as widely as other members of the California Funk scene in which she came up (e.g., Roy De Forest). But it's nearly impossible to appreciate and take in all Peeples-Bright is doing if you're busy thinking about the complexities involved in the reception of an artist in correlation to art world merit. There's also little room for skepticism in the menageries that she creates. Their biggest, most impressive refusal then is the refusal to be anything other than fully-realized worlds, thriving, teeming, perfectly crafted—refusing to let human pettiness have enough air to survive, Peeples-Bright instead choosing to live among her beasties.

One earlier painting, *Goose Lady Godiva* (1969), is a rare instance in which a human figure—a fleshy, queenly female on horseback, whom I am reading as an embodiment of human-designed pecking orders—takes up disproportionate space in comparison to Peeples-Bright's flocks of animals. The animals surrounding the figure seem amused and unconvinced by her pompous and hierarchical prominence in the composition—the many laughing, floating cats are seemingly just waiting for her to pass out of the frame so they can carry on with their mischief.

Catherine Wagley writes about art and visual culture in Los Angeles.

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