

City of ladies: A cartography of female imagination

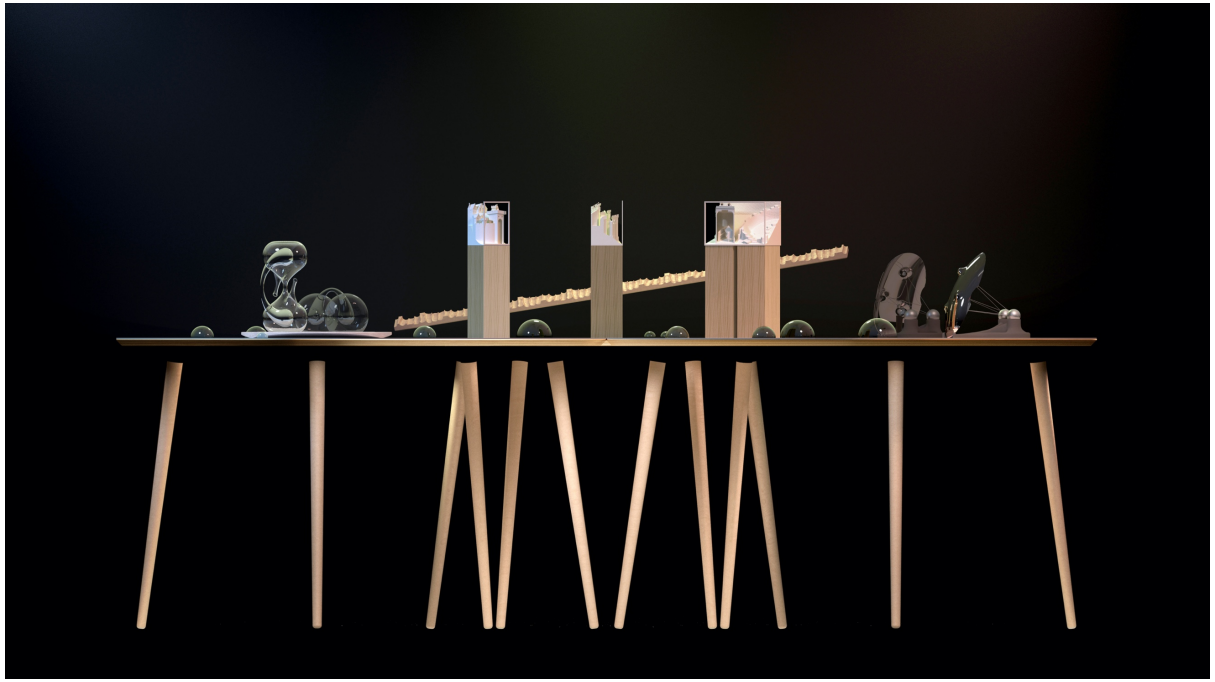
In *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1405), medieval author Christine de Pizan describes the construction of an imaginary city, a utopia, built and inhabited by women. Conflating the act of building with compiling stories of notable female figures from fiction and history and erecting a thesis against misogyny, her work has been seen as a proto-feminist manifesto. Entitled *City of Ladies*, my research project, culminating in an installation and a film, is a cross-disciplinary study of Christine's text bringing together architectural design with Medieval studies. My study builds upon existing scholarship on the relationship between image and text in Christine's work and proposes an innovative, design-led remodelling of the architectural and urban allegory portrayed in her text by focusing on the under-explored accompanying illuminations, which display the allegorical city in three stages of completion. The term 'illumination' from the Latin *illuminare* (to light up) refers to the glow of the miniature illustrations embellished in silver, gold and bright mineral pigments, which adorned manuscripts pages made out of vellum, specially treated calf skin. In Christine's book, three virtues – Reason, Rectitude and Justice – each offer her a gift, a measuring device – a mirror, a ruler and a vessel – and take turns to advise her on the construction of the city in three chapters. My interpretation of the text in *City of Ladies* spatially, materially and thematically reconstructs the physical object of the manuscript and features a blossoming of the pictorial city from two dimensions into three. The fleshing out of the illuminations in miniature three-dimensional models and my interpretation of Reason's mirror, Rectitude's ruler and Justice's vessel, as new instruments for reimagining and remodelling the city are displayed in a radial arrangement of three tables, corresponding to each book chapter and its first page illumination. The tables are laid with whole skin vellum sheets painstakingly illuminated in gold, white gold and silver, with diagrams and circular nodes marking the placement of all the installation elements connected by a network of pencil markings. These radial plans of the allegorical composition of the utopian city resemble the earliest surviving maritime navigation maps known as 'portolan charts'. The development of these maps in medieval Europe, during Christine's time, coincides with the invention of the magnetic compass and although their exact use is not fully understood they are noted for their high cartographic accuracy. Drawn on whole skins of vellum, like the table covers in the *City of Ladies*, they feature characteristic 'windrose' networks of rhumb lines, which emanate

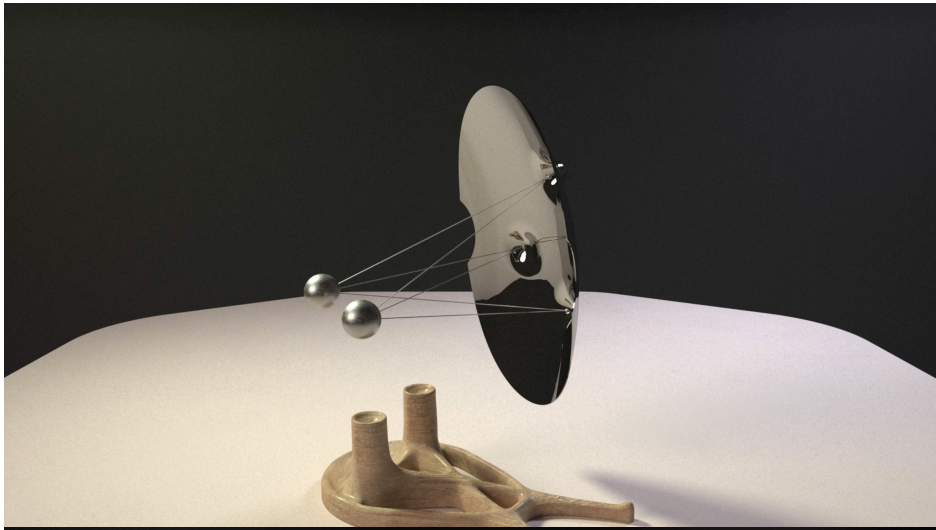
from a circular arrangement of compass roses representing the direction of the winds. The resemblance of my drawings to the portolan charts is complemented by my interpretation of the virtues gifts into objects resembling navigational devices, such as the sextant, the parallel rule and the hourglass.

Christine's desire for a city conceived and built by and for women expressed in her text dating more than 600 years ago remains unfulfilled. What will our cities look like in 600 years from now and how much will women be involved in shaping them both physically and intellectually? *City of ladies* constitutes a speculative cartography for exploring female imagination and sets the allegorical coordinates towards the future feminist utopian city.











Penelope Haralambidou, City of Ladies: A cartography of female imagination, 2021
1016 x 1200mm
Giclee print and gilding in standard gold, 22 carat, on Hahnemühle Bamboo paper.
Photography: John Cruwys.
Price: £1500

The drawing maps my reading of *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1405), by medieval author Christine de Pizan, where she describes the construction of an imaginary city, a utopia, built and inhabited by women. Originally drawn on three separate whole skins of vellum, the etched marks are here digitally superimposed on the same surface forming a constellation that resembles 'portolan charts'. The drawing constitutes a speculative cartography for exploring female spatial imagination and sets the allegorical coordinates towards the future feminist utopian city.