



LENA HENKE. MY FETISH YEARS

“My Fetish Years“ is the most comprehensive solo exhibition of Lena Henke, the 8th winner of the Rubens Prize Promotional Award, to date. The Museum für Gegenwartskunst is thus providing an overview of Henke's artistic development since she graduated from the Städelschule in Frankfurt 10 years prior. Numerous new works have been created relating to the exhibition venue in Siegen. In this sense, the exhibition is intended as a look back to the future.

As a whole, Lena Henke's oeuvre combines very different themes, media, working methods and materials: a bright yellow body made of weather-resistant synthetic rubber—as well as a sleeping elephant, playground and post-modern architecture; a sculptural family constellation cast in deep purple rubber—at the same time portraying a collection of figurative 20th-century sculpture, and finally a breast fragment made of sand—symbol of femininity and motherhood.

Lena Henke often arranges her diverse sculptural works in spatial installations. Her interest in spaces, however, is not limited to presentation or intervention in existing architecture; it is also revealed in a broader sense in the appropriation of objects, urban situations and psychological spatial constellations. Recurring motifs include interventions into the classic working methods of sculpture, recourse to anthroposophical methods, often through a biographically motivated approach or the control of “architecture”. In her vocabulary of forms and materials numerous references such as Minimalism or Land Art can be found, which she likes to combine with surrealist motifs. In a subtle way and with a humorous undertone, Henke enjoys infiltrating the patriarchal structures of art history. She explores the ideas of urban planners, landscape architects and urban theorists such as Jane Jacobs, Roberto Burle Marx and Robert Moses. She takes up themes like interpersonal relationships, sexuality and fetishism. Using strategies of intervention, appropriation and control, the artist also examines her relationship to herself and her family environment.

Many of Henke's works are created for specific exhibition situations or are rearranged according to the context. Thus, the Museum für Gegenwartskunst Siegen offers a tour that on the one hand follows the chronology of the works, so reflecting their artistic development and exhibition history. On the other hand, it is conceived so openly that it enables new constellations, site-specific references, and the reproduction of works from overseas.

The early installation “After Hang Harder“ (2016), therefore, is not the outcome of one but of two exhibitions in the art associations of Aachen and Oldenburg. In the sense of a positive-negative process and a “work in progress”, they invert the exhibition space, play with inside and outside with the use of tar, and question the artwork's origin and original in the recycling of individual components. Henke reacted equally impressively to the architectural situation at Braunschweig Kunstverein with “Available Light“ (2016). Along a magenta-coloured balcony surrounding the building, visitors were guided from the closed main entrance to the rear door and the beginning of the exhibition tour was staged in a new way. Similar conceptual considerations also played a role at the Museum für Gegenwartskunst, but in the spaces in Siegen they present themselves in a fresh light.

The Duraclear cuboids of the „Parkchester City Series“ (2014) speak of the tension between interior and exterior space, monumental and minimal gestures, two- and three-dimensionality. Here, the motifs are transformed in two ways. The expansive, symbolic sculptures of Norwegian artist Gustav Vigeland (1869-1943) are transformed into a three-dimensional object via an intermediate photographic stage. Printed in one colour on stiff foil, partly painted and folded into cubes, the floating transparency of the series oscillates between a ghostly information carrier and a simple wall sculpture.

The combination of rounded, organic bodies and hard, angular architecture continues in the sculpture “City Lights (Dead Horse Bay)” (2016). In the style of a three-dimensional city model, like one to be found in Siegen, the bronze work can be read as a representational self-portrait of the artist. Henke's miniature Manhattan on the basis of a horse's head creates a matrix of architectural landmarks, city and garden visions, as well as reproductions of her own works. They include the city's famous water towers (which also run as a photo series across the museum's media façade) or the unrealized LOMAX Highway—long planned by urban planner Robert Moses and finally prevented by activist Jane Jacobs in 1969. These are joined by Henke's works from the “Female Fatigue Series“ or her horse's hooves, but also the “Leaning House“ and the “Orcus Mouth“ from the „Garden of Monsters“ by Vician Orsini (1552-1585) near Bomarzo (Italy), as well as the “Spiral Jetty“ by Robert Smithson (1938-1973). In this way Henke reproduces her very own projection of New York—and consequently of herself as well.

Sexuality and femininity are powerful motifs in Lena Henke's work, whether in the small, fragile sand figurines or the expansive “THEMOVE“ (2018). Here, she transfers this constellation into the room and, through bronze casting, not only places herself into the tradition of a classic sculptural material but also grants the work and the motif an inescapable longevity. This is preceded by a staged selfie with which the artist presents herself almost consuming the phallic Freedom Tower. In the case of “First Ladies“ from 2009, Henke plays with sculptural themes such as the interrelation of pedestal and sculpture, but also with role clichés and the entertainment programme for politicians' wives that accompanies state receptions. “Yes, I'm pregnant!“ is conceived as a comic-like photo love story, whose protagonists, however, are 20th-century icons from the collection of the Museum Glaskasten Marl. Here, Henke deals loosely with art-historical references and such serious topics as teenage pregnancy, female self-determination, and the right to one's own body.

In the sculptural group “Die Kommenden“ (The Coming, 2017), Henke also makes use of sculptures of classical modernism (including Hans Arp, Joseph Jäckel, and Marino Marini) and combines them with her family members' facial features. Previously presented on a classic half-timbered house module tilted to one side—in Siegen, Henke relocates the violet rubber casts and contrasts the portrait busts with a wall-sized reproduction of the painting “The Battle of the Amazons“ (1618, Pinakothek Munich) by Peter Paul Rubens. The painting is captivating for its dramatic-dynamic composition of naked women's bodies fighting on horseback. Henke thus refers to Rubens' birthplace Siegen and the specific award, but also conveys a feminist undertone through her choice of this particular painting showing the warlike Amazons. Place, history, body and family are all brought together again here.

Another link between Henke's residential and exhibition spaces is created by incorporating urban space. New York street signs can be found on numerous street lamps in Siegen's upper city. The artist's word creations, such as “MYUPTOWNABYSS“, connect emotional states

with New York and Siegen. This intervention represents her interest in public space and an expansion of the museum space.

The artistic approaches outlined so far eventually come together in the latest works “My Trust“ and “Your Trust”, both from 2019, and so conclude the exhibition tour in the museum's new building. Based on her earlier occupation with a horse's body (head, hoof) and the use of saddles, two new sculptures have been created. The two hybrid creatures, whose legs end in a human-looking horse's foot, are reminiscent of centaurs. The tongue-like form and the skin-tight cover made of genuine leather also evoke associations with (sexual) fetishes, especially so-called “Pony Play”. However, one should not forget that the word fetish or fetishism originally means belief in animated objects with magical abilities. And indeed, the fusion of a classic column division consisting of horse's hoof, human foot and architectural round arch results in a powerful sculpture which forms a gate through which the observer can pass; the possibility of magical transit, a birth.

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