

# Lena Henke: *Ice to Gas*



— by Cristina Sanchez-Kozyreva

*Dreamscapes,*

*from New York to Lisbon*

In his *Interpretation of Dreams*, published in 1899, Sigmund Freud proposes that studying dreams offers an effective tool for unpacking the unconscious activities of the mind. He suggests writing down all that we can remember, without instant-judgement, but relying on a natural, creative human penchant for associative ideas and descriptions. In doing so, we are able to reveal even the oddest fragments of narratives. In fact, the dreamer herself is the only one who can approximate an interpretation. Nothing is linear with dreams, their elucidation being as personal as the dream itself. Dreams have been a primary source material for the Surrealists, who openly included them as part of their artistic process, but also for many other artists before them, and after. New York-based German artist Lena Henke is one of them. Disclosing that the idea for this show came to her from a dream, and following her unconscious string of imagery, Henke created *The Holy Trinity or Three Points In Time* (2020), a large installation that takes over the front space of the gallery. Greeting the visitor: a red steel and forton (an architectural material used for outdoor ornaments) baby sculpture (representing the artist) faces the entrance door. It is connected in its back by a black cord (or wire) that is attached to a Hills Hoist yellow drying rack (representing the artist's mother), and the rack is connected to a large black and yellow utility pole (representing her father), both in iron. The black wires, which interconnect in the air above the rack and the pole, form a dark cloud impression above the child's figure. She's turning her back to the scene formed by her parents, and seems to be edging away.

The whole, not unlike a film set or a diorama, makes sense the way a dream does, where people we know can be represented by an idea, an object, somebody else, or even a situation. The sculpture of the infant was made to the artist's likeness when she was three years old. The child's right leg, like a prosthetic pirate leg, is a model of the Chrysler building upside down, and instead of her left hand, she has a horse hoof. Henke moved to New York, where she lives and works now, but in Germany, when she was a kid, she grew up on a farm, with horses. Elements of New York and horse hooves are recurring autobiographical leitmotifs in her work. The infant seems to be on the run, crystallised, as sculpture does, in a moment of precipitated fleeing. More than therianthropic (part human, part animal), this child merges with architecture too, in the style of Greek-Italian painter de Chirico, a reference Henke accepted in previous works. In this exhibition, she tenderly refers to the sculpture as a mini-her, a cyborg, robotic especially because of the Chrysler prosthesis. The holy trinity is here a familial one: the child (the sculpture), the father (multifunctional utility pole) and the mother (open drying rack). And these images come with some recognisable social constructs: static domestic realm for the mother, fixed but itinerant sign of industrial and economic advancement to represent the father, as well as many attachments (societal emotional, appearances?) in between (cords). To my knowledge, Henke has a sibling, but accuracy when working with dreams and surrealistic metaphors is far from a necessity.

## The installation projects Freudian undertones in a surrealistic creative expression.

It is also a little uncomfortable. Is this monochrome handicapped child-skyscraper-horse even safe? Perhaps it doesn't matter. The three elements of the installation seem familiar together—probably for the cords, and the yellow colour common to the pole and the rack—but it is also awkward. More than a holy family, it could be that the installation is about continuation and life moving forward, no matter the hurdles. The baby, attached to the mother-rack by a black cord the artist calls lifeline, is looking far away, right hand reaching up, hopeful or determined, as if moving away from the structure and moving forward to something else. This way, it is time in motion.

In the gallery's second room, several modular pedestals are arranged diagonally from one wall to the other. A visual homage to one of Lisbon's historical baroque architectural infrastructure, the 18th-century Águas Livres Aqueduct, the installation comes with mirrors placed at each end, and ceramic sculptures all along on each plinth. This simplified representation of the aqueduct's outline with mirrors creates an infinity mirror effect, a smart visual illusion that makes it look infinite on both extremities. Visible in parts, the characteristic arched monumental silhouette of the aqueduct is a landmark of the Portuguese capital. Hints to de Chirico's architecture-infused dream paintings—abundant with classic but simplified architectural elements, notably arches in public piazzas—come to life with the terracotta colour of the plinths. Their simplicity evokes both vastness and solitude in what could have been an empty room (except for some superfluous small ceramic tiles on the walls, blue and white *azulejos* with bird and hooves motifs, *Untitled 1, 2, and 3*). On each plinth stands one of Henke's ceramic sculptures. Among those, an off-white form that resembles a horse hoof titled *Spreading its waters over the marble city!* (2020), in relation to the aqueduct, for it collected and transported water across Lisbon through kilometres using gravity. Another reference is brought by *The poetry of fresh water!* (2020), where two blue hybrids between horse hoof and canalisation face each other. Nearby, *No more colds, no more bronchitis* (2020), represents two interlaced horse hooves with a cord winded around them in pale yellow ceramic; and, in *Lisbon 39° in the shade* (2020), two darker blue, twisted, tube-like forms bend in front of each other. The ceramic has the polished aspect of tiles, the same finish that can inhabit interiors or exterior spaces, a concept very characteristic of Lisbon—a city known for its tiles in public squares as well as the interiors of churches and accommodations. The scale here is approachable, contrasting with the first room where we have been disorientated to some extent. This interest for the aqueduct spans from the artist's interest in water. The ceramic objects are common to her work and can draw from various elements including foot fetish. In contrast with the museum-like independence of the first installation, the series of ceramic sculptures on their plinths reminds me of an assembly line, especially because of the alignment,

and the infinite mirrored reflections. But unlike on an assembly line, each ceramic comes from a malleable form, and thus column-shaped or tube-like, they are ultimately idiosyncratic (yet they seem easy to grab).

Like a series of suggestive riddles, associative speculations may be necessary to find cohesive meaning in this two-fold presentation. There are those ideas we attribute to the artist's psyche, and those that come from the constructions of our own inner world. Not one single lecture would do, which is reflected in the eccentric exhibition text the artist provided to accompany the show: perhaps it is describing a trance, certainly it has the tropes of a dream. In any case, it seems full of significant keywords. Part of living in a modern urban environment is to make ours the landmarks that surround us. Images could be our teacher, a way to understand and reorganise the world. Fragmented thoughts and ideas infuse Henke's interest in urban planning and city development, creating a place where urban design can be the creator of aesthetic meaning. As a result, it seems constructing mental landscapes in a gallery space could be done with city-large dimensions in mind, yet it also can be comprised of memories, fantasies, and personal interests.

Lena Henke (<http://lenahenke.com/>)

Galeria Pedro Cera (<https://www.pedrocera.com/exhibitions/lena-henke-ice-to-gas/>)

Cristina Sanchez-Kozyreva is an art critic, curator and writer. She is a regular international contributor to art publications such as Artforum, Frieze, Hyperallergic, and other publications including the South China Morning Post. She was the co-founder and editor-in-chief of Hong Kong-based independent art magazine Pipeline that ran print editions from 2011 to 2016 where she curated thematic issues with artists, curators and other art contributors. She has a Masters degree in International Prospective from Paris V University.

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Lena Henke: *Ice to Gas*. Exhibition views at Pedro Cera Gallery. Photos: Bruno Lopes. Courtesy of the artist and Pedro Cera Gallery.