

BOMB

Artists As Mapmakers: Lena Henke Interviewed by Owen Duffy

Sculpture that connects architecture and the body.



Your Trust and My Trust, 2019, leather, fabrics, Forton, metal, 59 × 98.5 × 7.75 inches each. Installation view of *Lena Henke: My Fetish Years*, Museum für Gegenwartskunst Siegen, Germany, 2019. Courtesy of the artist, Bortolami Gallery, New York, and Galerie Emanuel Layr, Vienna/Rome. Photo by Gunnar Meier.

Lena Henke exudes an animated warmth. When we met in her studio, we discussed her attention to New York's spectrum of architectural and design forms. I was immediately drawn to how her work reveres urban space, but also how it scrutinizes German nationalism, which is ascendant today, alongside so many other chauvinisms. In the interview that resulted from multiple conversations over the past few months, we floated from the mysticism of Hilma af Klint to the history of Germany's Teutoburg Forest and Elder Futhark.

— Owen Duffy

Owen Duffy

I wanted to start off our conversation by discussing your exhibition *My Fetish Years* at the Museum für Gegenwartskunst in Siegen, Germany. Can you share some details about this project, and how it might depart from your previous museum shows?

Lena Henke

Next year it will be ten years since I graduated from the Städelschule in Frankfurt, definitely not enough time for a retrospective, but long enough for a number of nooks and crannies to develop in my practice. This show will delve into some of those fixations and hopefully create throughways between them. The show is tied to an art prize, the Rubenspreis, named after the Flemish painter Peter Paul Rubens. He was born in 1577 in Siegen and died in Antwerp where I also lived for a small period of my life before moving to New York City. The museum in Siegen gave me a whole floor with fourteen rooms to work with. This is a fairly monumental exhibition opportunity for me, and I'm eager to use the maze-like structure to analyze my own recent creative output and create new ways forward. The show will spill outside the museum; sculptures will surround the whole building as well as a twenty-four-hour outdoor projection. As a nod to Lutz Bacher's video of the Empire State building, I will show my archive of photographs of New York City's iconic water towers.

I'm taking a break from my active production in the studio and looking back at my work, how it has changed and developed over the years. The show will be built around my work's relationship with several systems in each topic, such as architecture and urban atmospheres. There is a discrepancy between how I perceived what I was doing in the past versus how I perceive it now, which will be a point of tension.

OD

Your recent exhibition at Bortolami, *Germanic Artifacts*, seamlessly fuses a specific place—the Teutoburg Forest—with various aspects of your working environment in the New York City metropolitan area. Teutonic folklore about the forest comes alive through TriBeCa neon and casts of New Jersey trees. What does this associative way of working offer your practice?

LH

Artists are mapmakers and we can shape space in an independent manner. Making sculpture is about that desire to shape space through decision-making, and seeing how those decisions run up against their confinements. Maybe I am an objectophile—I'm particularly susceptible to the physicality of architecture and spatial relations, and I'm interested in making work that explores that field.

Teutoburg Forest is a historic woodland adjacent to my childhood home. Reflecting on this historical site, in the minutiae of the Battle of Teutoburg Forest in 9 CE, which was the last of the Roman attempts to conquer Germania, helped me understand where I came from. I was a teenage goth and went to the forest there for midsummer rituals. Since leaving Germany more than seven years ago, I became interested in how a historical myth was created there and how the nation sought to invent itself by fabricating history. From there I zoomed into the very small, tiny detailed surface of the bark of the only tree in front of my New Jersey studio, and created a cast of it. These casts hung side-by-side—horizontally—along the wall of the gallery like a fallen tree. Around the time I was creating that show, I was reading *From Fire and Memory: On Architecture and Energy* (2000) by Luis Fernández-Galiano. I was fascinated by the process of "decay and regeneration, art and entropy" as well as the question, "The hut and the bonfire, what came first?" This text, in conjunction with the ingenious simplified living structures of the Germanic tribes, influenced the layout of my show.

OD

This recent project felt infused with elements of mysticism. I feel like we twenty-first century individuals have formed a recently newfound culture around the mystic, as evidenced by the popularity of Hilma af Klint and obsessions with astrology. What's your take on the "mystic"?

LH

My mother studied anthroposophy, so I always had a soft spot for other worldly theories and the relation of spiritual beliefs to psychology. Seeing Hilma af Klint's work reassured my interest. The

seeming contradictions between faith, belief, and tactility interest me. Leonora Carrington's idea that "The task of the right eye is to peer into the telescope, while the left eye peers into the microscope" opens up quite a lot for myself, professionally as well as privately.

OD

Germany, like many other parts of Europe, has experienced a surge of anti-immigrant nationalism in recent years. How might your investigations of Germanness be tied to this?

LH

I connected folkloric iconography with the sculptural works in *Germanic Artifacts*. It was a gesture that subverts long-standing chains of nationalistic and radicalized associations. So much of German history is fabricated and lost to time, so anyone who tries to define the true German character is full of it.

OD

Would you say that you satirize ideals of Germanness? I can't help but think about your self-titled neon work, which illuminates your name in ancient Germanic runes. Is this work connected to Germanic nationalism, nostalgia, or mysticism?

LH

The idea of an essentialized German character really needs to be poked at. I would say that work [*Lena Henke*] subverts mythic, nationalistic usage. It also connotes Chinatown, where I live, with its red and green neon, which advertises many of the neighborhood's restaurants. Elder Futhark, which is the oldest form of runic characters, is usually used for mythic purposes. But at the end of the day it is just a way of writing, and it needs to be de-escalated. That's why I wanted to use it to write something as personalized as my signature. A signature acts as a daily stand-in for so much of what we do. It is the end of a contract, it is the proof of who we are, it gives validity. The signature, in its own way, is a totem.

OD

Since moving to New York, you've become quite the student of the city's history and architecture. How have your studies of such places as, say, Rockefeller Center and Queens, affected your understanding of how we negotiate space and urban landscapes?

LH

There are so many entry points thanks to timeworn urban landscape planners that allow me to analyze and explore how people used to live, or how large-scale urban planning psychologically impacts its inhabitants. And then there is so much space within sculpture to fixate on what fascinates me. The intersection of architectural systems and the body is a recurring motif that I don't think I'll ever move past.

Lena Henke: *My Fetish Years* is on view at the *Museum für Gegenwartskunst Siegen, Germany*, until January 26.

Owen Duffy is the Director of the Yeh Art Gallery at St. John's University in New York.