

# Lena Henke - Babysteps into Masochism

## December 9 – January 30, 2020/21

“Just some flesh caught in this big broken machine.” (Nine Inch Nails)

Getting closer via what is far away: King Ludwig II of Bavaria, who will always look like Visconti's Helmut Berger in *Ludwig* (1973), walks through a huge open hole into a gargantuan cabin in which half-naked soldiers are sprawled around a tree, sleeping and unscathed. The king, full of pent-up desire, is invisible to them. Outside it's freezing cold; inside huge fires are blazing. Everything is dripping with sweat. Waiting beyond the frame, also invisible, and wearing a blindfold, is Leopold von Sacher-Masoch. Otherwise he works in Vienna and takes a female nom de plume, calling himself *Zoë* (“animal soul”) *von Rodenbach*. He is waiting for the mysterious Anatol—also a pseudonym, said to be that of the king, who “devours” the books of the celebrated author.

He, too, must not see the king. Where absolute power enters the sphere of his subjects on tiptoes, leaving footprints that the snow swallows optically and acoustically, the invisibility of this power—which is otherwise based on visibility—expresses more than the transgression of the border between ruler and ruled. There is also a desire, an unfulfillable yearning—here, of course, entirely among men—to be a subject, an object, and submit to the will of another. A desire to give up absolute control, whether as monarch or within patriarchal society, for the sake of this submission.

The warm glow of the fire on the bare feet of the soldiers casts flickering shadows onto the relationships of those present. In this late Romantic, masculine pastiche that still operates in terms of inside and outside, private and public, upstairs and downstairs—and in doing so dreams above all of the simple reversal of the arrangement as itself homoerotic—the protagonists of this equestrian culture can hope for invisibility, stealth, and discretion; they can hope for a secret. Meanwhile, actual industrial capitalism in the cold beyond has long since decreed the death of horse and rider. A wet pond swallows up the Swan Knight.

The complex entanglements of lust and cruelty in the constellation of “Babysteps into Masochism” make it seem as if one were looking through the keyhole of a glass door. Productive misunderstandings. Lena Henke's exhibition is not about coming to terms with nostalgic or ornamental splinters of repressed sexual urges in some secret side of life. What dominates at LAYR is maximum visibility.

The imagery in the works on view formulates a shift away from clandestine, masculine, heteronormative deviance to an overt, society-level engine in which fetishization not only brings about objectification but also creates opportunities for greater freedom and equality. The exhibition also, however, critically interrogates the (sexual) drives that are capable of inflaming the neoliberal capacity for individual suffering as a desire for self-inflicted pain that

can, moreover, be monetized.

But masochism is here not only understood as the end point of exploitation; it is also proposed as a model that simply makes possible a controlled, libidinous surrender to a complex game of dependence and submission, in which, at least temporarily, an inner leash takes the place of an external one. It thus also offers the opportunity to forcefully restructure one's own situation, the circumstances of one's own position and the pain and suffering resulting from it, and thus to gain control of otherwise uncontrollable and often violent forces. An entire arsenal of different practices and desires is presented here, too.

#### *Crushing, Foot Fetish, Incest*

A series of fired and shimmeringly glazed water lilies are inscribed with terms such as Devotion, Discipline, Abduction, Bond, Zoo, and Terror—concepts related to violence and control, although they are also assigned colors, quantities, and numerical proportions. The model of subdividing wholes, the almost forensic allotment of shares, determines not only the form, slices signifying proportions just as in a pie chart, but invites one to fantasize a world with a finite number of immaterial social and sexual concepts that add up to a zero-sum illusion. In their recourse to statistical and also typically economic frameworks, they also seem an almost ironic paraphrase of Freud's "The Economic Problem of Masochism" (1924).

#### *Giantess, Horse-Play, Zoophilia*

Henke's "totem animal", the horse, serves as a starting point in this exhibition, too, even if it is not the main character in the story, one in which various sexual practices, games, and preferences are thematically and reciprocally interlinked. Two arches, like enlarged stirrups, end up as abstracted riders' legs (*i'm safe*, 2020; *you're safe*, 2020), whose "feet" have become horse-play accessories (literally horse-shoes). The two ends over which each arch rises are isolated and defined only by their fetishized part. The figures are headless. (The only head in the exhibition is also isolated, severed: a plastic cast of a bull's skull, set on a chair like an O'Keefe prop. It seems, without eyes, to "watch".)

These works not only mark out the threshold that awakens the rider's desire or giddy fear to be ridden, to be the horse itself, in this arrangement. Their covering of horse(!) leather makes clear, moreover, that the transition from subject to object also harbors latent aspects of death and cruelty, especially given how the horse's hide, in the form of a tanned pelt, resonates in a macabre and ironic way in the titles alluding to safe-words. The works also bring to mind two oversized croquet hoops that inevitably miniaturize the viewer, free to imagine being a ball of flesh knocked through the hoops by an imaginary, and equally huge, mallet.

But despite all the abstraction and fragmentation, the exhibition's frame of reference remains biographical. The representation of the artist's self, however, has shifted away from the inordinately large rendering of herself as a prosthetic toddler (as in her last exhibition *Ice to Gas* at the gallery Pedro Cera in Lisbon this past September). Here, she occupies

the position of the voyeur, going further in the reversal of subject and object. Horse-hoof and architecture, which were then still entangled with self-representation, are now externalized. Henke's most recent work, the photographic series "Organic Architecture", reconceptualizes representation via the fetishistic objectification of huge men's feet that have been pushed into condoms, their movement constrained. The feet are enormous: Henke has scaled them up to the size of her own body, and thus reverses the poles of the fetish of exaggeratedly oversize women's bodies (mostly with well-established dimensions and proportions) in male fantasies that ultimately oscillate somewhere between *vore* and *unbirthing*. This is accomplished through an inversion of the gaze, imagining her own supersized body, ideally paired, beneath these feet, ready to be *crushed*. In spite of the strong sense of being able to feel all the folds, the sweat, and the smell of this oversized "architecture", the feet are stuck in the latex, suffocating slowly under a wet, strangely clinical gloss.

The interconnections between the body, sexuality, and architecture that allow Henke's works to become prosthesis fetishes are, alongside the millennia-old practice of analogy, also what pulls the space of signification and representation into a brutal reality. Physical pain, normativity, and the proverbial desire for humiliation, diminution, while present in other works, too, here develop their effects in a way that is deeply unsettling. "Organic Architecture" is set against the fragile architecture of the body: from Vitruvius to Leviathan to King Kong.

The gallery—itself the shape of an even bigger footprint, once pushed into the mortar of the building by some greater power—tilts on its longitudinal axis through the action of an as yet unknown force. It seems as if the images of feet bound in latex are stepping on the visitors, crushing them, in an act of pleasure, between themselves and the water lilies on the floor that was once a wall.

Robert Müller