



Lena Henke: *NATURE WILL S IT*

April 29 - June 14, 2023

The Ranch is pleased to announce "Nature wills it," a solo exhibition of Lena Henke presenting a new body of work made in response to The Ranch's equestrian and architectural histories.

A haunting assembly of sculptures of horses occupies the West Barn of The Ranch directly across from the active horse stables. What might be termed "estranged representations," these are not likenesses. Rather than put forward a coherent and unified body, Henke's work proposes alternate ways of figuring the horse. These sculptures evince an agonistic making: grappling for different means of picturing the animal's visual features. Endeavoring toward the haptic and latent, the horse is segmented into components (head, body, hoof), each given its own handling and media.

Trodden, handmade leather masks serve as each horse's visage, while transparent plastic rods lend a concise shorthand for the body. A startling reduction of form, Henke trims the sinuous limbs and protruding haunch with readymade plastic, instructing her viewers to imagine the body as a vehicle for calling forth repressed memories or forgotten encounters. The truncation of the body voids the sex of the animal—genderless, Henke denies that male appendage which Sigmund Freud argued drove young girls to become so attached to their horses. At the foot of these vertical assemblages are hefty plaster cast hooves, replacing the conventional pedestal of the sculptural monument. Resisting sculptural stolidity, the hoof meets the ground, ready for ambulation, while the pole quietly begs to be ridden like a child's hobby horse.

Henke redirects our attention to the unseemly underbelly of human-equestrian relationships: the logics of mastery, intimacy, and grooming. The leather heads of each horse are modeled after fetish masks—playing with the fetish as a possible escape route. The artist's tumble into leatherwork and underground ritual is approached with rigor—extensive research and experimentation undergirds the techniques applied to the masks. First hand-stitched, these masks are then boiled—transforming the supple material into hardened structures, and then shaped by packing them with miscellaneous items from the artist's studio. In effect, these horses appear ridden, recuperating from battle, or at the very least worn out after a long day.

Yet, Henke's sculptures strum an unexpected note of sensitivity and tenderness. Stretched and stuffed, these misshapen horse masks appear both distressed and doted upon. Tendrils of leather horsehair sprout from the top of the masks at variable lengths and stylings, sometimes lovingly braided. The activity of caretaking emphasizes the quasi-romantic, even dormant sexualization, of the bond between horse and owner.

Henke makes this more overtly understood in a suite of wall-bound reliefs, *Combustions*, presented in the exterior galleries. Creating “portraits” of the horse mask sculptures, these suspend the horse heads within a coterie of intervening hands that caress and grope. Though mounted to the wall, Henke clarifies that these too are sculptural in scope—emphasizing their objecthood by wrapping the support in leather, which is later scored, burned, and dyed.

Throughout Henke’s practice, the horse emerges as a device through which the artist probes matters personal, psychosexual, and sensorial. Sharing the title *Memory of young sculpture*, the work presented in the “gallery barn” engages a self-reflexive mode, figuratively exhausting the motif of the horse. The equine grazes against subterranean subcultures of sexual play and domination, while intersecting with Henke’s longstanding interrogation of urban spaces and the psychogeography of cities: the Meatpacking District, a reserve of inspiration for this new body of work, housed butchers and fetish clubs alike in the 1980s. Henke makes visible these seemingly oppositional concurrences through a logic of material interplay, allowing the irrational to demonstrate its own capacity for coherence—a conceptualization born in part from her interest in the quasi-totalitarian vision of the city as functional machine voiced by the architect and urban planner Robert Moses. The physical collision of these diachronic worlds attests to the slippery nature of the materials that Henke utilizes to altering ends. Her unlikely and sensuous understanding of the sculptural surface is intensified in a pair of outdoor sculptures that close the exhibition. From a series first exhibited at Kunsthalle Zurich in 2018 and then *Frieze Sculpture* at Rockefeller Center in 2020, these monumental renditions of the hoof are looping forms covered in the boldly colored granulated rubber used for flooring on athletic fields or playgrounds. At *The Ranch*, Henke teases at replacing the traditional exhibition with the staging of a “horse-show,” activating a feedback loop in which her preexisting formal inquiries teeter towards an almost tedious self-analysis.

— Megan Kincaid