

Lena Henke

Inverted Roofs

September 8 — October 31, 2025
Lisbon

*Everything we choose in life for its lightness soon reveals its unbearable weight*¹, Richard Serra observed when reflecting on the paradoxes of materiality. Describing gravity as both a formative and fracturing force, Serra's words articulate an artistic inquiry committed to a tangible reality composed of "constitutive physical elements"², a framework that has grounded his work since the late 1960s. In 1968, Serra worked almost exclusively with lead, a medium that demonstrated the ability of abating its own weight and transposing its dense materiality into an insubstantial register. In the seminal work *Hand Catching Lead* (1968) the artist repeatedly attempts (and mostly fails) to seize falling pieces of lead, demonstrating how gravity constitutes sculpture not merely as a constraint, but as an active "structuring device".

In dialogue with the lineage of Serra's early sculptural films³, *Lena Henke's Inverted Roofs*--her second solo exhibition at Galeria Pedro Cera in Lisbon--conjures a world of forms in which gravity not only shapes the behavior of matter, but also destabilizes the very conditions of its orientation. Staging a precarious balance between suspension and pressure, Henke's works seem perpetually at the mercy of weight, or at the risk of overturning and collapsing; a condition ontologically inscribed in the material vocabulary at play. Aluminum asserts a framing solidity, ceramics fracture under their own mass, and watercolors absorb gravity's pull in the vertical descent of pigment. Yet such somatic quality is not limited to matter alone. The new chromatic palette distances Henke from her previous reliance on darker tones, guiding her works toward a more pastel lexicon that recalls the legacies of impressionist and post-impressionist painting, and their modulation of light across surface (particularly that of Cézanne's, whose work the artist encountered during her recent residency in the South of France)⁴. In each instance, pigment, material and gravity become constitutive elements of inversion, determining how form emerges and destabilizes itself.

Decades later, Serra conceived the site-specific public artwork *Gravity* (1993). Installed at Washington D.C.'s Hall of Witness⁵, a twelve-foot steel slab split the space in two, opening alternate passages while making explicit how spatial experience was constructed through weight and direction. If Serra's gravity asserts an axis of movement through spatiality, Henke's exhibition simultaneously amplifies and subverts it, not only by exposing its pressure but, at the same time, by staging an upside-down world that appears to evade it – a home that welcomes us beneath its inverted roof.

Henke's ongoing commitment with architectural elements and the domestic (socially encoded sites, shelters to the body and self) is not incidental. From early on, such forms have functioned in her practice as motifs of a conceptual investigation into socio-political narratives and art

1 Richard Serra, *Writings, Interviews*, The University of Chicago Press, 1994: p.185.

2 Miwon Kwon, "One Place after Another: Notes on Site Specificity", in *October*, vol. 80, 1997: p.85.

3 A term coined by art historian Benjamin Buchloh in his 2000 essay "Process Sculpture and Film in the work of Richard Serra", published as a chapter of the book *Richard Serra*, edited by Hal Foster. Buchloh employed the term to describe Serra's 16mm films as explorations of sculpture as a process and series of actions, rather than a finished object.

4 *Cézanne au Jas de Bouffan* at Musée Granet.

5 Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Pedro Cera

Lisboa
Rua do Patrocínio 67 E
1350-229 Lisboa, Portugal

Madrid
Calle de Barceló 13
28004 Madrid, Spain

info@pedrocera.com
www.pedrocera.com

history, evidencing her interest in the psychology of urban structures through the intervention in public space. In *Inverted Roofs*, the exterior is re-inscribed into the interior, from the roof tiles mounted upside down, to the large sculptural body that stretches from ceiling to floor, compelling visitors to choose a side. It is therefore significant to see St. Barbara, patron saint of architects, recur in Henke's recent work. Her face cast into the large aluminum *Unforced Error*, her body configured into an amorphous, twisted torso ending with a hoof. Human and horse--elements that have accompanied the artist since her formative years in Germany--are merged into the same *informe*⁶ configurations that extend into Henke's new half-foot, half-hoof sculptures, where inversion also becomes anatomical. Like a butcher's chart of cuts, her works treat form as fragmentable, subject to disassembly and reassembly.

Henke's sustained engagement with oppositional structures--of space, matter and categorical distinctions--produces a dialectic condition in which orientation itself is destabilized. One may find resonance with Georg Baselitz's systematic inversions, where the reversal of pictorial orientation emptied figuration of its narrative legibility, and redirected attention to the work's construction through line and fracture. In Henke's new watercolors, reversal operates not only as a formal device, but as an act of subversion that reconfigures perceptual possibility. One thinks of Mondrian's *New York City I* (1942), which for decades was hung upside down, now at risk of structural damage were it to be corrected; or Cézanne's *Portrait of Marie Cézanne / Portrait of Madame Cézanne* (1866-67), a rare double-sided canvas that consigns one portrait to an inverted position.

In this upturned world, the gravitational logics that pull ceramics to the floor, suspend St. Barbara, or let lead continually escape Serra's grasp, are the same forces that pressure galleries and render them vulnerable to economic conditions that precipitate closure. In financial terms, the "inverted roof" recalls a stock market chart pattern, coined by Thomas N. Bulkowski in 2005, resembling the bottom half of a diamond and interpreted as a signal of impending recession. Yet in Henke's universe, this inverted triangle simultaneously transfers into an erotic dialectic, recalling parts of the female body. The latent codes of fetish subcultures are inscribed by the taut pull of ropes that seem to deform *Unforced Error*, the recurrent trope of the horse as a figure of dominance and submission.

Still, one hopes to resist a purely catastrophic reading. Just as heads remain afloat above tiles, one must sometimes resist gravity's tight embrace and overturn its logic. As Elizabeth Grosz notes, *to be outside is to afford oneself the possibility of a perspective to look (...) inside*⁷. As such, Henke's inverted narrative demonstrates that only through the suspension of conventional stability, can new orientations of sculptural and figurative presence be articulated.

—

Lena Henke (b.1982, Warburg, Germany) is a New York-based artist who has developed a diverse body of sculptural works, often arranged in comprehensive spatial installations. Her interest in spaces 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

6 *L'informe* is a concept first introduced by French philosopher Georges Bataille in his "Critical Dictionary", published in the journal *Documents* in 1929. Rather than offering a fixed definition, the term suggests what Rosalind Krauss described as "a process of deviance," capturing the spirit of Bataille's artistic *milieu*, in which Surrealism sought to break away from logic and enter the realm of unconscious possibility.

7 Elizabeth Grosz, *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space*, The MIT Press, 2001: p. xiv.

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 with herself and her family environment.

Lena Henke has exhibited at the Museum für Gegenwartskunst Siegen, Germany (2019); Whitney Museum of Art, New York, (2018); Bard Hessel Museum, New York, (2018); Kunstmuseum Luzern, Switzerland, (2018); Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt am Main, Germany, (2017); Sprengel Museum, Hannover, Germany (2017); Museum of Contemporary Art, Detroit, USA, (2017); Timisoara Contemporary Art Biennale, Romania, (2017); S.A.L.T.S., Basel, Switzerland, (2016), Kunstverein Braunschweig, Braunschweig, Germany, (2016); Manifesta 11, Zurich, (2016); The 9th; Berlin Biennale, Berlin, Germany (2016); Le Biennale de MONTREAL, Montreal, Canada, (2016); Kunstverein Braunschweig, Braunschweig, Germany (2016); Triennale of Small Scale Sculpture, Fellbach, Germany (2016); The New Museums Triennial, New Museum, New York, (2015); Socrates Sculpture Park, New York, (2015); New Museum, New York (2015); Kunsthalle Bern, Bern, Switzerland (2014); White Flag Projects, St. Louis, USA, (2014); Sculpture Museum Glaskasten, Marl, Germany, (2014); Kuenstlerhaus Graz, Graz, Austria (2014); Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami, USA, (2013); Kunstverein Aachen, Germany (2012), among other.

In 2019 Henke received the RUBENSFÖRDERPREIS der Stadt SIEGEN and the Museum für Gegenwartskunst Siegen held a survey exhibition of Lena Henke’s work, summarizing the past ten years of her practice. In the same year, Henke was awarded the Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant.