

## BORTOLAMI

**Lena Henke**

***Germanic Artifacts***

**11 January - 16 February 2019**

**Opening Friday, January 11 from 6:00 – 8:00 pm**

Bortolami is pleased to present *Germanic Artifacts*, Lena Henke's first solo exhibition with the gallery.

In the belly of the gallery there is an over-sized Germanic boar with stout legs. The animal has been meticulously sculpted by Henke and dyed purple. The *UR Mutter* (mother of origin), whose udders hang low, cocks an ample rear towards her snout to form an arc with her body. Among the first animals to be domesticated by *Die Germanen*, the boar is an unexpected but fierce, intelligent protector. Henke has cast a second boar in chainmail, using *UR Mutter* as the mother mold to get the shape. The resting *Wildschwein* lays in death, like a ghost or hollowed out link to the past.

*Germanic Artifacts* calls on the spirit of the ancient Teutoburg Forest, a historic woodland neighboring the artist's childhood home. Henke's installation reflects the early architectural structures of the Germanic tribes that lived among the forest's marshes and thickets in 300 BC. These long, narrow structures were built to enclose fires, bringing heat indoors and forming a domestic womb. Henke embraces fire—which bakes clay, forges metal, and melts sand into glass—as a symbol of life and transformation.

Among the new sculptures featured in *Germanic Artifacts* are chunks of pigmented, inverted bark that resemble tray-sized vulvic rose petals. Many were cast from the trees outside Henke's New Jersey studio including a "double-tree" with two trunks growing from the same root. The pieces lay open like a pair of lungs or wings. In various shades of green, they hang side-by-side, horizontally along the wall like a fallen tree. Another series of floor-based sculptures, each cast from an identical mold, summarily capture Henke's interest in the relationship between architecture and the natural world by featuring horse shoes, bricks, and burl tree trunks. The cartoon stumps have been rendered in bronze, aluminum, resin, cement, fiberglass, terra cotta, and porcelain. While her use of materials is extensive, Henke relies on familiar forms (pigs, horse hooves, trees) as subject matter rejecting the notion of a "pure" Germanic history. The pre-Christian myths of the Germanic tribes have been explored and appropriated many times over, most conspicuously by pan-German nationalists who use folklore and spiritualism to argue for the supremacy of the Aryan race. The most oft-cited account of Germania is a volume written by Tacitus in 98 A.D., but the Roman historian did not actually visit the Germanic lands. His anthropological tropes are based on second-hand information, at best, and yet they persist today.

Using neon lights as material for the first time in her practice, Henke has installed a neon sign in the gallery's street-facing window. The sculpture spells out the artist's name in Elder Futhark, the oldest form of runic characters, connecting folkloric iconography with the sculptural works presented inside. It is a gesture that subverts long-standing chains of nationalistic and racialized associations.

Henke spotlights individual sculptures and filters the winter sun through a row of metal studs. Outfitted with two solid "doorways," the cage-wall creates a transitory space that recalls the multifunctional abodes *Die Germanen* built. The structure tilts at an angle echoing the architecture of the skylight, casting subtle shadows on the gallery's columns and Henke's sculptures, as if sunlight were moving through a forest canopy. Visitors can pass between the studs to enter the demarcated space, inverting the outside/inside relationship—an apt metaphor for Henke's ongoing exploration of transformative states, material processes, and history.

- Alhena Katsof

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**Lena Henke** (b. 1982 in Warburg, Germany) lives and works in New York. Henke has been the subject of solo exhibitions at Kunsthalle Zurich, Schirn Kunsthalle, Kunstverein Braunschweig, and White Flag projects. Her work has also been shown at the Whitney Museum of American Art, Kunstmuseum Luzern, Hessel Museum of Art, the Sprengel Museum in Hannover, and MoCA Detroit. Most recently, Henke received the RUBENSFÖRDERPREIS DER STADT SIEGEN and will have a solo exhibition at the Museum fuer Gegenwartskunst Siegen, including a new publication in October this year.