

# Between dreams and new reality

## About Eva Stenram: Cadastral

By Laura Ifversen

There is at one and the same time something distant, something poetic and something very intimate about the artworks we encounter in *Cadastral*, Fotografisk Center's exhibition of work by the Berlin-based Swedish photo artist Eva Stenram. This is her first major solo exhibition in Denmark and offers deeper insight into her elegant mastery of the art of suggestion and appropriation. It is both a journey through her oeuvre and a re-examination of our culture and our shared visual memory. We are guided through Europe, catapulted to Mars, and brought abruptly down to Earth again; all the way down to the dustballs in nooks and crannies; and up close to bodies, dreams and nocturnal secretions.

### Cadastral

The exhibition is carefully choreographed and develops themes across projects that are often only glimpsed. In her works, Stenram often uses found photographs from analogue and digital sources that have typically been or still are in general public circulation, or takes her point of departure from other, widely recognisable material. Using a variety of reproduction methods and montage techniques, she displaces their original meaning and lets the works open up new interpretations for us, the exhibition visitors – citizens of free democracies.

The title *Cadastral* refers directly to geodata and land surveys, but also to the words *cadere* (Latin: to fall) and *astralis* (Latin: originating from or related to the stars), the latter of which is associated with heavenly bodies and the cosmos or with energy fields and meridians that cannot be seen with the naked eye. Stenram's choice of Latin terms lends her works a discreet scientific objectivity that locates her project somewhere between cool analysis and something intimate, soft, and permeable.

### Seeing and understanding

As hinted by the title, the exhibition is about integrating various modes of vision between the cartographic, the measurable, the observing and something more non-specific, something that draws associative threads out into space and into the mind. We understand it better if we look at *Cadastral* in the light of historical Surrealism. When Stenram forages in our jumbled storeroom of popular culture, world art and world literature, it is the liberating transformational power of Surrealism that particularly inspires her. And by viewing the motifs in certain ways through which the Surrealists thought suppressed, unconscious and unrecognised features could come to light, we can begin to understand *Cadastral*.

One way is through 'the accidental encounter', which describes a spontaneous situation where apparently disparate things seem to belong together. Another is in dreams – and the title's reference to *cadere* can be associated directly with the *fall* in falling asleep. In the context of this exhibition, both 'the accidental encounter' and dreams put us in a state of openness and outline certain transitional zones between different understandings of the work and the world.

Through the exhibition we experience how historical images, political events, physical places and ideas are woven together across time and space. We travel with them and we dream with them. In dialogue with the sequences in the exhibition hanging we follow its motions in time, its motions in space, and its motions in and out of the mind in order to explore some of the themes that Stenram's works raise, while at the same time we can follow the various modes of vision that the exhibition offers.

## Voyages into the mind

### The accidental encounter

'The accidental encounter' is experienced most clearly at the far end of the exhibition, where *F.E.L.I.C.E.* (2021-), *Nocturnal Pieces* (2021-) and *Feral Eyes* (2021) invite us into an intimate, personal sphere. Whereas *Feral Eyes*' myriad eyes confront us with the gaze itself and the act of vision, and the vision in *Nocturnal Pieces* – as we shall later see – is experienced as destabilised and flickering, *F.E.L.I.C.E.* feels much more transparent and straightforward. *F.E.L.I.C.E.* or *Formerly Epigraphically Licensed Intra-Consciousness Exchange* spells 'happy' in Italian and is an interactive mail-art and dream-exchange project created in collaboration with the novelist Tom McCarthy. The visitors to the exhibition are invited to write a recent nocturnal dream on a postcard. The postcards with dreams are sent to the artist's project office after the exhibition where the dreams are matched in twos. Dreams with the best match are sent to the other party in the pair. How they match up becomes an inscrutable algorithm.

The project office is in the same building as Felice Bauer's home in Berlin. Felice Bauer was engaged to Franz Kafka, whom she accidentally met in Prague. For five years they exchanged letters, but the engagement was broken off and Felice was gradually forgotten, while Kafka rose to the starry firmament of world literature.

In that light *F.E.L.I.C.E.* speaks directly to the modern pursuit of love, the vagaries of dating and the market-controlled apps' dream factories and artificial intelligence. The collective notion of machines as objective and infallible, unlike human beings, who are fallible, emotional and irrational, is challenged. And at the same time the travels of the postcards establish an invisible network of connections and a web of dreams that establish 'the dream' as something that also takes place outside ourselves.

### On sleep, dreams and consciousness

Dreams arise in relation to events and surroundings in the world, and Stenram draws parallels between the inner and the outer world in the work series *Nocturnal Pieces*. The series was created

amidst the Corona pandemic with its global restrictions as an unsettling backdrop. It consists of photomontages from the bedroom's most intimate spaces during isolation and stands in contrast to *F.E.L.I.C.E.*'s hope of intimacy. The health crisis created a collective distrust of the body and of getting close to others. The virus invaded our bodies, our minds, and our relationships with our surroundings. The safe and domestic became uncanny. There arose a hypersensitive interest in saliva and surfaces as devious hiding places for viruses, which Stenram translates by examining them from up close. The surfaces of the home are scanned and the secretions of the oral cavity are examined and magnified.

After restless nights with unquiet dreams Stenram manually scans her sheet, night table and door frame with the meticulousness of a detective. Later, she pieced together the scanned data into uneasy representations. It is with the furniture and the door frame in particular that we sense something is 'off', where the hard surfaces of the wood seem amorphous and fluid. Stenram's disjointed compositions mimic the visual act when one blinks to stay awake and fragments of the world float into dreams. She speaks of losing oneself and of the dozy state of consciousness between wakefulness and true sleep. This 'threshold consciousness' can enrich our understanding of the surrounding world, whether, like her, one creates artworks or, like us, we move amongst them.

Here, attention to slumber and drowsiness deals with dream states which have less to do with actual dreams than with the permanence and credibility of the gaze and consciousness. It is the ambivalent vision between waking consciousness and the dream state that possesses a special potential. There is a richness in the permeable and unstable when slumber destabilises consciousness.

We see this again in Stenram's investigation of saliva, which she allowed to drip directly onto the glass of a flatbed scanner. Enlarged, it is like looking through a microscope. The leap in scale directs the thoughts to other things. Gone is the bodily fluid, and contours of bubbles and reflections from surface tensions appear like lava rocks, asteroids or stars and remote galaxies. Soon we are looking out into deep space. In such a universal perspective we are nothing but dust and Mars itself is but a small speck. But we cannot always trust our eyes and soon we return to the body.

## The body as arena – the body as battleground

In *Oblique* (2018) Stenram has clipped photographs of bodies and limbs from sports magazines of the 1960s. The period was characterised by revolutionary ideas of emancipation from oppression, from restrictive traditions, from hierarchies, from police violence and from war. Citizens demanded the right to decide over their own bodies, desires and dreams. The body became a battleground and arena for self-realisation, in ways that are now relevant again. Stenram illustrates this by selecting details primarily from martial arts, but crops the images so tightly that we again mistrusts our gaze: are these closely interwound bodies in the throes of a loving or a brutal embrace? Without the full picture, both are possible.

Like *F.E.L.I.C.E.*, *Oblique* points to the interconnections of individuals in a social reality. In this case it is the act of vision that is revealed as a social act. The gaze of others at us is embedded in us,

and the expectations of others can push us to extremes. Here, grainy close-ups of body parts are cut through by strategically placed lines that control our gaze and transform the motifs into something with multiple meanings. Apparently bound limbs recall bondage or the Surrealist Hans Bellmer's *The Doll* (1930s). An image of a cross-section through an eyeball recalls the iconic scene with a razor blade slicing through an eye in Luis Buñuel's Surrealist masterpiece *Un Chien Andalou* (1929).

Like several of Stenram's series, *Oblique* balances in the space of possibilities between several interpretations. The title *Oblique* is very apt in its ambivalence: *Oblique* can be understood as 'slanting', 'hidden', 'evasive', or as something violent: 'a slash'. Created after Donald J. Trump came into power, the series is more than a comment on the quantitative, goal-oriented and achievement-minded ideas symbolised by sport. It also addresses the glorification of the individual, the misogynous and national-romantic demagoguery of the 45th US president, and the shocks that his careless attitude to established truths sent through the normal world order. Linking the past and the present, Stenram questions power and power structures. And with the increasingly restrictive tendencies of contemporary realpolitik one glimpses spectres from the past that come back to destabilise our world-view. We see past and present fuse.

In the exhibition context, *Oblique* is a transitional work between the individual and sociality, between physicality and the symbolic order. And in this too the gaze is challenged and produces a kind of dual vision that alternates between the surface and the push and pull of forces from within and without. The body is both a membrane between our mind and the surrounding world and delineates the borders of our humanity bound to physical limitations that tie us to time and place. But the imagination can travel to the boundaries of our conceptual abilities, where it meets new realities.

## Voyages in time and space

### With the heavens above us

The exhibition takes us from the body to the cosmos. The work *Per Pulverem Ad Astra* (2007) (Latin: through dust to the stars) transports us from Earth to outer space and the dust deserts of Mars.

Still tuned in to the post-war economic and industrial boom, the pictures from Mars point directly to the space race of the world powers, and the intricate interaction between 'hard' and 'soft' power. The upturn of the 1960s made it possible for ordinary citizens to own a car and travel by air, and everyone sat glued to the TV screen when the first man set foot on the moon in 1969. It was a new Era of freedom and dreams. A science-fiction Utopia had become reality. Expeditions of discovery could now travel to the end of the world – and beyond. The outermost limit had been breached and the new goal was Mars. Interplanetary travel came within reach with the first pictures from the unmanned spacecraft *Viking 1*, which landed on the red planet in 1976. A good 30 years later Eva Stenram happened upon the photographs from Mars at [nasa.gov](http://nasa.gov). She transformed them into 35mm negatives, which she left on her bedroom floor for a while, until eventually in the picture modifications there now floated traces of earthly dust on the surface of

Mars. With this collapse of time and space, Mars and Earth were suddenly 1:1. And in today's context of climate crisis and dreams of Martian colonies the images from the merciless desert may be reminiscent of what is in store.

### With the Earth beneath us

From outer space we touch back down to earth when we turn towards works in the series *New Meridians* (2019-). Here we find a condensate of *Cadastral's* many themes.

Like *Oblique*, *New Meridians* has old magazines as its model. For *New Meridians* Stenram borrows visual material from the German travel magazine *Merian's* monthly publications from the 1950s and 1960s. She transforms picture pages from European destinations and crops some of them to liberate the motif from the typology of the tourist magazine. For *New Meridians* an 'accidental encounter' arose in the meeting between the EU parliamentary election of 2019 and the whole of the European peace and cooperation project that took form in the post-war period; the economic boom permitted mass tourism and created a market for *Merian*, which sold its German readers dreams of cultural history in European countries they could occupy with open curiosity – rather than with artillery. Stenram adds an extra layer to the European images. She draws lines, notes, encircles or censors. Her interventions point to or conceal something and our vision is focused at the very moment when the gaze is blocked. What is insignificant on the face of it takes on meaning and invites special scrutiny. The perspective shifts from the tourist's gaze of desire to the cartographer's or the detective's analytical scrutiny, as if observing or canvassing a crime scene. We have also been transformed. And subtly *New Meridians* seems to challenge us to consider what the hermetic pictures, or 'black -ops' formats, can tell us about Europe and the world today – and about ourselves – in a new reality.

### Towards a new reality

Throughout the exhibition Stenram acts almost as an archaeologist who pieces together fragments of photographs and historical traces from the past or found objects from her surroundings in a way that reinterprets the historical unconscious today and forges new meanings in the present. She draws parallels with political upheavals and ruptures, so that past and present flow together in *Cadastral*.

That Stenram uses historical material and themes to elucidate subjects that are still of current relevance has gained renewed and tragic meaning with the shocking new war in Europe. This makes a question from *Oblique* and *New Meridians* all the more urgent: given the developments and freedoms that have been gained over the last 80 years, to what extent are we willing to compromise on the territories we have won? In the world? In our bodies? And in our minds?