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NATIONALMUSEUM @
Denise Grünstein: En face

Nationalmuseum@Konstakademien, Stockholm
19 February – 3 May 2015

Magnus Olausson
Director of Collections and Research

The Nationalmuseum is no stranger to contemporary art. Our collections and our exhibition activities both bear witness to the Museum’s focus on art from our own era. The experience of closely monitoring the birth of a new art project – “1866” – was new to us, however. The project was incorporated with the exhibition Denise Grünstein: En face (Fig. 1). The project is based in the Nationalmuseum – the site where it was staged – and performed by an artist whose portraits were already in our collection.

Denise Grünstein (b. 1950) has worked for many years as a commercial photographer, specialising in fashion and portraits. She is known for her celebrity portraits in the magazines Månadsjournalen and Elle in the 1980s and onwards, which is partly how she earned the moniker “the Annie Leibovitz of the Swedish welfare state”. In the late 1990s, however, she lost interest in these portrait commissions, finding faces too easy and predictable. She was also losing patience with the pretensions of her models. Instead, Denise Grünstein decided to develop her artistic practice by engaging in her own art projects. This has made her one of the leading figures of staged photography. Grünstein succeeds in forever re-
achieving a retrospective character through the use of the old museum building as a stage or sounding board. Grünstein chose to include allusions to her previous works, such as the archive, or the ghost-like festive architecture in Zone V (1998) (Fig. 2). Still, she had never before worked as systematically with interiors, but mainly used outdoor settings. The vast, secretive, virtually empty museum halls intrude on us. It would have been counterproductive if she had opted to fill the space with old worn office chairs, ladders or packing crates. Instead, Grünstein arranged her own accessories in the rooms and cabinets – miniature trees, fruits, curtains, and, of course, figures – possible and impossible bodies. The totality forms a tribute to art, but it is also a stage in Grünstein's own artistic journey.

Size is a fundamental element that Denise Grünstein experiments with in “1866”. As in the building models of architects, she has used miniature versions of trees. Juxtaposed with these are her images of monumental halls in the old museum building. The format is not merely crucial to under-
standing the proportions in the pictorial space, but also has bearings on the artistic dramaturgy. It is, at one and the same time, a reproduction and a construction. A large format, thus, supplies the tools for understanding the work of art, but also gives rise to an ambiguity, where the sheer size ultimately erases the boundary between the depicted space and the space from which it is viewed.

Denise Grünstein has worked with colour photography for many years. Throughout the post-war era, this had been synonymous with commercial photography, whereas black and white was reserved for artistic ambitions. But this distinction has long since ceased to exist. In the “1866” project, Grünstein opted for a combination of polychromatic and monochrome photography (Fig. 4).

Light is closely related to colour. It is incredibly important in Denise Grünstein’s practice. She is a master in this field and prefers to work with natural light. She has also skilfully used the reflections from the surface of the water, which the original architect Friedrich August Stüler had calculated would throw light all through the central staircase of the building. With a distinct reference to her romantic portrayal of Queen Silvia (Fig. 3) the photographer has in one of the images in “1866” (Fig. 5) conjured up a ghostly apparition with a bright aura descending the main staircase. In other pictures, she shows a woman in a dress resembling a crinoline pass through the building, which was constructed in the 1860s. The impression that this is a landscape from the past is enhanced by the red veils or grey films that Grünstein has used in her project. Her images from the old museum premises seem to depict her own dreams, which dwell in all dimensions of time – historic, present and future.

A total of 55 works were shown in the exhibition, including two videos. One of the latter was part of the “1866” project, along with 18 new photos. The retrospective part of the exhibition was presented in the two galleries on either side, and featu-
red a number of items selected from previous photographic series, including *Figure in Landscape* (2001), *Malplacé* (2005), *Figure Out* (2009), *Acute Still Life* (2011), *Winter* (2013) and *Wunder* (2013).

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**Fig. 5** Denise Grünstein (b. 1950), *Descending*, 2014. Gelatin silver print, 80 x 102 cm. Artist’s collection.

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**Lighting design:** Gert-Ove Wågstam  
**Exhibition technology and installation:** The Technical Department of Nationalmuseum under the supervision of Thomas Lundgren  
**Chief conservator:** Karin Wretstrand  
**Exhibition coordinator:** Matilda Sandelin  
**Education officer:** Helena Sjödin Landon  

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