

ARTFORUM



View of “Henrike Naumann: Re-Education” 2022–23. Background: *Rustic Traditions*, 2022. Foreground: *Horseshoe Theory* (detail), 2022.

Henrike Naumann

SCULPTURECENTER

Berlin-based artist Henrike Naumann builds national interiors. The furniture she assembles for her scenographic sculptures and installations is invariably sourced from the regions she exhibits them in, and her selections—more affective than referential—do not adhere so much to their status as design objects as to their demographic popularity. Naumann’s work opens thresholds between private and public scenes of assimilation, placing viewers into tableaux where political culture is articulated as a myth of the past, present, and future: a thing that furnishes all of our lives. “Re-Education” is Naumann’s first show in the United States; its title references the pedagogical rehabilitation program America created for postwar West Germany in order to advance denazification and promote Western-style democracy. The two large-scale pieces that dominate SculptureCenter’s main space, *Horseshoe Theory* and *Rustic Traditions* (all works cited, 2022), configure a landscape of Americana staged by an artist who grew up in East Germany.

The latter work resembles an altar, or even a trash heap, comprising a triangular stack of cabinets, cupboards, desks, chairs, pitchforks (one of which ominously crowns the piece), rakes, chain, a shovel, and a hammer. All of these elements are bookended by slabs of marble that once functioned as steps to the US Capitol building in Washington, DC. Exceeding the height of the wall (painted in a hue branded Capitol White) that the assemblage is mounted to, the varnished, colonialist, federal-style furniture calls to mind the January 6, 2021, storming of this historic edifice, as well as the fascist pagan aesthetic of those who attacked it,

including the bare-chested, war-painted, buffalo-horned Jacob Chansley, aka the QAnon Shaman.

Horseshoe Theory, which features a lineup of fourteen chairs, stools, and benches crafted in different styles and arranged into the shape of the namesake form, references the idea that extremists on the right and left actually closely mirror, rather than utterly contradict, one another. (Demonstrating how images of the left end up as mere travesties of the right within concepts of totalitarianism has been central to much of Naumann's practice.) The work also plays upon the widely circulated Horseshoe Theory of Chair Design and Function meme from 2021, which illustrates the so-called political spectrum of furniture aesthetics, from "regressive modernity" to "oppressive traditionalism."

Facing *Horseshoe Theory* is *Radical Centrist*, a wall-mounted work made up of large-scale relief letters that spell out the titular phrase. The piece is painted bone white and framed by a pair of highly mannered satin curtains and frills in that particular color. With its twee suburban aesthetic, the piece satirizes the scare tactics of American political discourse, showing that the most terrifying (or "radical") social group in the US is actually populated by those who enthusiastically and unequivocally occupy the middle, a space of dangerous apathy and toxically weak resolve.

In the back gallery—a cave-like, stage-set space modeled after the popular 1960s animated sitcom *The Flintstones*—Naumann mounted a retrospective of her videos from the past decade: pieces that play on historicist actualities and futurities of German nationalism. Take "Triangular Stories," 2012, a series of fictional home videos set in 1992 made by a trio of right-wing youths. The works are actually based on the real-life National Socialist Underground (NSU), a three-member German terrorist organization that between 2000 and 2007 was responsible for fifteen bank robberies, forty-three racist bomb attacks, and nine murders. (It was only when police found a video from NSU member Beate Zschäpe confessing to the group's crimes that German authorities dropped the theory that the homicides—bigotedly labeled the Kebab Murders—had been carried out by people who were of the same ethnicity as their victims.) The artist implicates the viewer in her characters' transgressions by portraying these people as unexceptional men and women in everyday domestic settings who, nonetheless, were capable of the most heinous and barbaric acts.

Overall, Naumann's meditations on fascism show us how normalized and omnipresent it is in the West, and that any form of worthwhile political reeducation must start with those who place themselves not at opposite ends of the political spectrum, but firmly within its center.

— Kerstin Stakemeier