

# Drape





















# Eva Stenram

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Eva Stenram is a kind of photographic archaeologist. Sifting through artifacts from past and present, she groups together and digitally manipulates images, which were perhaps banal to begin with in order to disrupt their original function.

Her latest series, *Drape*, reworks domestic pin-up images from the 1960s; shielding the models from the viewer's gaze by "draping" them in digitally extended curtains. As with most of Stenram's work, the resulting images are playful rather than didactic – leaving us open to consider the photographic formalities of the original image, as well as to question our own desire to "sneak a peak" at what lies hidden from view.

**HL:** Holly Lucas

**ES:** Eva Stenram

**HL:** What motivated you to begin making your *Drape* images?

**ES:** Prior to starting the series, I had the idea of using a curtain or drape from the background of a photograph to cover up what was in the foreground of the image. I made some experiments along these lines using non-erotic imagery, then came across some vintage pin-up images in which the models were posed in front of curtains or drapes. This was the start of the series. I decided to search for lots of this type of imagery, mainly from the 1960s, with the model posed in front of a set of curtains or a drape in an interior, preferably domestic, setting.

By exchanging the original background (the drapes or curtains) and foreground (the model's body) of the image, I am causing a rupture within the scene. Once the backdrop falls in front of the model, showing just parts of her body, our voyeuristic desire becomes clearer.

My work is in many ways about being a viewer. As I am usually not the photographer, the work is not about subject/photographer, but about my relationship to the image as a viewer. I explore the act of looking through the making of my work and often seek to unsettle the original functions of our society's familiar photographic genres.

**HL:** You've been exploring this relationship between image and viewer in your work for quite some time now – what is it that first attracted you to this process of digitally reworking found imagery?

**ES:** When I started using Photoshop I realized that I could rearrange and mix up photographs taken in different places or at different times, reinterpreting imagery and creating photographs whose exact temporal and cultural coordinates were dubious. So far I have not been interested in making more documentary photographs.

The first projects that I made with Photoshop used found imagery from my parents' family album. For *Retouching History* I used photographs of our family combined with new staged photographs of myself, displacing and

condensing my family history. I immediately liked working with found imagery — I liked how some control was taken away from me and I had to work with whatever qualities and flaws the original image had. I am fascinated by the many photographs that surround us and am interested in their various functions; working with found images allows me to interact with photographic history and culture in a very direct way.

**HL:** *Retouching History* was made in 1999 — since then, chopping, remixing and re-appropriating readily available digital imagery at the click of a keypad has become common for artists and the general populace alike. However, contemporary copyright debate still doesn't seem to know quite how to deal with this. What are your own thoughts on this culture?

**ES:** Like most people, when I have an idea for making artwork, I don't sit down and think about the legalities. It is the work that I want to make, that needs to be made, and so I make it.

Today, there is such abundance of appropriation and cutting and pasting. It must be something that at this moment in history needs to be worked through. I think we are all, in different ways, trying to make sense of the massive amount of photographic material generated in the past 150 years. In the digital world, the photograph is, more than ever before, in a state of instability and exchange.

I do, of course, sometimes worry about what the original photographers would think about how I use their work to make my own. I hope they would enjoy it, and see my work as a dialogue with their work, rather than as a theft. I use photographic images that attract, intrigue and fascinate me — my work is homage to these images.

**HL:** You've previously expressed an interest in work by Louise Bourgeois and earlier surrealist work from artists such as Man Ray and Hans Bellmer in relation to your *Drape* series — however your own images seem to stem from a much less self-referential process than these artists.

I look at *Drape*, I see a more immediately visible affinity with female collage artists of the 60s and 70s — both in the way they manipulated and made explicit the already inherent politics of their source material, and in the more obvious aesthetic similarities with your kitsch pin-up source images that derive a similar period in time.

Linder Sterling and Martha Rosler come to mind for their playful explorations into representations of domesticity, sexuality and the female form — what do you make of this connection?

**ES:** Rosler's *Bringing the War Home* and other early collages are amazing — I like work which has a simple starting point but then opens up further complexities. The works are uncanny and captivating. Linder's work was not a conscious influence, but is obviously relevant — the combination of the female body with the domestic environment is brilliant.

Like Linder and Rosler, I am interested in the way that women are represented visually in our culture and in the politics of looking — however

I think the big difference between their work in collage and my recent work is that I am not juxtaposing the pin-up image with another type of image — and thus jarring it — but instead only using what is already within the original image. I suppose I am trying to investigate these pin-up images own visual rationale rather than create a discordant aesthetic. My manipulation does not totally change the meaning of the original photograph, it just skews it slightly so that we become more aware of our own gaze and more aware of the conventions of photography.

**HL:** It's interesting that you talk about becoming more aware of the conventions of photography because to me, your *Drape* images seem to highlight some very specific visual tropes in the production of "sexual" imagery — a theme common to your new series *Parts*, but also to your earlier work *pornography/forest\_pics*.

Through the removal of the figures and their individual identities you undermine their original function — I begin to look at the commonalities and repetition within the images, and to consider why the images remain recognisably "pornographic" despite the absence of explicit human sexuality. The images become a form of fetishisation, in which it's not human flesh that invites the viewer, but contrived sexual indicators: PVC boots, a nylon stocking, a velvet curtain or in the case of *pornography/forest\_pics*, the blankets in woodland landscapes that allude to a sexual encounter.

What is it that interests you about these particularly fetishistic images?

**ES:** I think the source images were not particularly fetishistic images to start with — but the removal of the body, or most of the body, refocuses our attention on the details of the images. I am interested in reversing the hierarchy within normal pornographic and erotic images — highlighting the sexual indicators and surrounding scenes.

In *pornography/forest\_pics*, which uses Internet images of hardcore sex scenes in forests as their source material, the background vegetation is copied and pasted over the sexual activity and thus puts an overlooked part of the image, the blankets and other personal items, in the spotlight. The repetition of the setting, the forest, makes this setting more erotically charged as well as more banal. In *Parts* all flesh is removed from the scene, leaving us to enjoy the original images' textures and materials. The pose of the one leg left behind, always clad in a stocking, makes us more aware of the idea of the pose.

According to Freud, the child deals with his anxiety over the woman's lack of penis by retrospectively interrupting his own gaze, and re-focusing it on a detail that stands in close proximity to this absence. This detail becomes the fetish-object.

Similarly, in *Drape*, *Parts* and *pornography/forest\_pics*, there is a pleasure in looking at what surrounds the absence. I was trying to produce quite strange images, images in which the gaze of the viewer is deflected and redirected. The flesh slips away, but what is left behind in the image becomes more mesmerising.