



Eleanor Antin, *Who are we? Where are we going?*, 2004, color photograph, 48½ x 61 ½". From the series "Roman Allegories," 2004.

ELEANOR ANTIN

RONALD FELDMAN FINE ARTS

"That summer, in the first year of the reign of Titus, there appeared a small band of players who met with some success until they disappeared without trace, leaving behind one of their number." Such are the words of Pliny the Younger that Eleanor Antin reproduced on the wall at the entrance to her latest show, "Roman Allegories." In twelve large, exquisitely staged, and sumptuously shot tableaux, a motley cast of performers—characters include Columbine, the Lover, the Trickster, an ex-gladiator Strong Man, the Poet, and a little girl—moves through dilapidated tennis courts and nouveau-riche colonnades, poolside bacchanals and sylvan executions on a pilgrimage to the sea. These makeshift Romans bide their time by performing their fate. Antin's idyll is unmistakably allegorical, and this is the source of the work's interest. In her imagining, the troupe teeters on the verge of extinction while a Southern California backdrop becomes a potent evocation of empire past, equally catastrophe's hallucinatory premonition and its exacting if elegiac consequence.

Not entirely unlike Antin, Pliny was a stoic in an age of bread and circuses, writing, seemingly undaunted (or at least unabated), at the foot of Mount Vesuvius. He witnessed and wrote into history a people stilled in ash amid a culture in ruins. (In a letter to Tacitus, he would plaintively admit, "Many besought the aid of the gods, but still more imagined that there were no gods left.") In her 2001 series "The Last Days of Pompeii," Antin conjures the anticipatory debauchery of Pliny's dying world, and in the more recent

series, she presents a prologue to *that* prologue. The slippery temporality at work here confuses before and after, as much as the staged photographs confound both realism and fabulism and comedy and tragedy. These scenarios are likewise shot through with references to mythology and art, so that Poussin's *Triumph of Pan* inspires a work of the same name and composition, the Hellenistic *Nike of Samothrace* idles in Antin's *The Players* (all works 2004), and the tradition of hyperbolic salon painting is everywhere felt.

But even more revealing is what gets left out. Antin's carefully chosen sites are always plausible, often locatable, and sometimes downright telling. The position of *The Lovers* conceals a nearby freeway, while *At the Edge of Night* summons a vision of the Mediterranean rather than neighboring Mexico. Antin also presented a record of the photographs' making in the form of a video, *Shooting Eleanor Antin's Roman Allegories*, in which the artist and company eat apples, drink Coke, sit around in curlers, spray hairspray and paint, pretend to become statuary, smoke, impassively dodge joggers on the beach, move around sets, and rush to shoot a scene before the sun sets behind the hills.

So, for all its seriousness and well-choreographed historicism, Antin's work is funny and movingly, messily human. But her campy absurdity is a kind of gallows humor; its wit cuts deep. Emblems of death and vanity are never far from the savage intemperance of Roman or American epicureanism, but Antin's touch, if not light, is not moralizing either. If history is doomed to repeat itself, as tragedy and then farce, the trick becomes telling the difference.

—Suzanne Hudson