

### Eleanor Antin at Ronald Feldman

"The Last Days of Pompeii" (2001), Eleanor Antin's seductive series of 14 photo tableaux of debauchery and apocalypse, pays playful homage both to the extravagances of 19th-century Salon paintings (like Thomas Couture's *Romans of the Decadence*) and to the Hollywood costume dramas inspired by the story of Rome in decline. In one work, aging senators and inebriated matrons recline among the remains of a sumptuous meal, while a virile gladiator—very much on the model of Russell Crowe—prepares to finish off his wounded opponent. Another photo shows a bored and similarly satiated gathering paying little attention to the near-naked slave girl being auctioned off in their midst.

For all the mindless pleasure-seeking, there are augurs of impending doom. In one vignette, the double-edged power of Midas is invoked as a group of aristocrats lie, apparently asphyxiated, under a pile of gold coins. Elsewhere, late afternoon sun seems to signal the coming end, as it washes over a group of revelers on a parapet celebrating the suicide of the poet Petronius. The final scene chronicles the expected denouement: the once-insouciant Romans lie dead or dying amid a welter of broken columns and scattered bricks. Only one figure is left standing, a young woman in white, a peripheral character in other scenes, who observes the spectacle with quiet detachment.

Antin has made a career of storytelling in films, photographs and performances that present engaging narratives of quests, masquerades and waking dreams. Here again she shows an eye for telling details. The swaddled skull on a shelf in the studio of a male sculptor who is translating a voluptuous nude female into stone becomes a vanitas symbol; a plate of half-eaten pomegranates signals the desire of a man being tantalized by a snake-wielding priestess. Costumes are appropriately theatrical, with characters swathed in togas slung with cloaks in vivid hues of red, purple and gold. The gleaming



Eleanor Antin: *The Golden Death*, from "The Last Days of Pompeii" series, 2001, C-print, 58% by 46% inches; at Ronald Feldman.

white Neo-Classical garden set is, presumably, in California, where Antin makes her home. Its parapets, grand staircases and sheltered side gardens are used to great effect.

It is hard not to read an undercurrent of social commentary in the picture Antin presents of a self-indulgent, self-absorbed society ignoring warnings of imminent catastrophe. But she leaves explicit contemporary parallels to the viewer's imagination. She remains content to convey the more general insight that no golden age can last forever.

—Eleanor Heartney