

## SANTA MONICA

Eleanor Antin: *The Last Days of Pompeii*. Craig Krull Gallery.

Eleanor Antin has worked with installation, performance, and film for more than thirty years, frequently investigating history and persona. "The Last Days of Pompeii" is a series of fourteen photographs (all 2001) chronicling the daily life of the infamous, doomed ancient city. Lost in an orgy of decadence, the Pompeiians are surfeited with food and flesh. Though the settings are bright and the colors gaudy, there's a palpable sense of ennui. As with Fellini's *Satyricon*, the viewer is left with a



Eleanor Antin, *Golden Death*, chromogenic print (59 x 47 in.), 2001. Courtesy Craig Kull Gallery.

craving for substance, for which no amount of opulence can compensate.

The undisguised Southern California landscape providing the backdrop to Antin's tableaux reinforces parallels with filmic fable and high-end living. In settings reminiscent of the Huntington Gardens or the Getty Museum, we are able to transpose contemporary counterparts onto Antin's cast of glamorous hedonists. She makes the spiritual poverty of her protagonists clear with *Golden Death*, in which a clutch of greedy aristocrats asphyxiate under piles of gold coins—one fellow is so literally money-hungry he has stuffed his cheeks with currency and choked to death. Even *The Sacrifice*, which seems to portray a religious rite involving the sacrifice of a virgin, seems wholly lacking in gravitas, as if the Pompeiians have become so wrapped

up in pleasure-seeking that they can only produce camp parodies of their own customs. Such decadence could be axiomatic of the art world, or, for that matter, the entertainment industry.

Antin makes a statement comparing Pompeii to Southern California's ever-present earthquake threat. Given the current political climate, and the late-capitalist malaise Antin evokes in these photographs, their meaning has become all the more poignant, as consumerism threatens to produce its own disasters. Throughout Antin's unfolding drama, one young woman in white watches from the periphery. One suspects that, like the cursed prophetess Cassandra, she is aware of impending doom, but remains powerless because no one believes her story. Her foreknowledge intersects our historically privileged perspective as spectators, and we join in her mute vigil.

—Tessa Laird