

Eleanor Antin

CRAIG KRULL

Santa Monica

"I'm excavating a Pompeii of my own invention where beautiful, affluent people live the good life innocent of the disasters waiting just around the corner," Eleanor Antin writes of her recent series of large color photographs. "The Last Days of Pompeii" (2001) is only the latest episode in the illustrious career of an influential conceptual artist, but it's a winner. Drawing from English and French salon painting and her own observations of self-indulgent rich folks in southern California, where she lives, Antin has staged and photographed a narrative epic with a timeless message.

Set on a grand estate in a verdant landscape, the story takes place on a perfect summer day. But tension abounds, and a sense of foreboding permeates the pictures. A skull, for instance, sits ominously on a shelf in *The Artist's Studio*, where a sculptor chisels a life-size female nude in marble. A man falls slain in a duel next to a group of oblivious revelers in *The Banquet*. Several people with glazed expressions are buried in gold coins that cascade down a broad stairway in *The Golden Death*, but they seem to have no idea what has hit them.

In other images, Antin depicts a slave sale, a human sacrifice, and a wrestling match that seems destined to end in death. As for the conclusion of this tale of debauchery and disregard for human life, *The Last Day* brings foolish participants to their knees in a dark image of despair and desolation.

Reduced to words, this body of work may sound like an overly dramatic visual sermon, but Antin's sense of humor and capacity for staging ludicrous spectacles in rich detail allow viewers to get the point while enjoying the absurdity.

—Suzanne Muchnic

