

Eleanor Antin's The Last Days of Pompeii

by Patricia Quill

THE OPULENCE AND GAIETY OF AN IMAGINED POMPEII AND ITS glamorous people are detailed perfectly on sunlit patios and poolside settings. Gladiators fight to the death at a sumptuous banquet, a young girl languorously bathes in a garden pool spied on by gray haired senators, the writer Petronious celebrates his suicide with an orgy of friends and lovers, and greedy aristocrats revel in and then are asphyxiated by a flood of golden coins. Throughout the unfolding drama one young woman in white watches from the periphery. One suspects, like the cursed prophetess Cassandra, she is aware of impending doom, but remains powerless because no one believes her story.

For over 30 years, pioneering conceptual artist Eleanor Antin has engaged in a dialogue with history. She has made a career of storytelling in films, photographs, video,

installation and performance. Her feminist-themed work has made her one of the doyennes of the art world.

In her current exhibition at the University of California San Diego's University Art Gallery, *The Last Days of Pompeii*, Antin evokes narratives of a sensually decadent Roman Empire—affluence and excess on the verge of extinction. The images are both luscious in their visceral





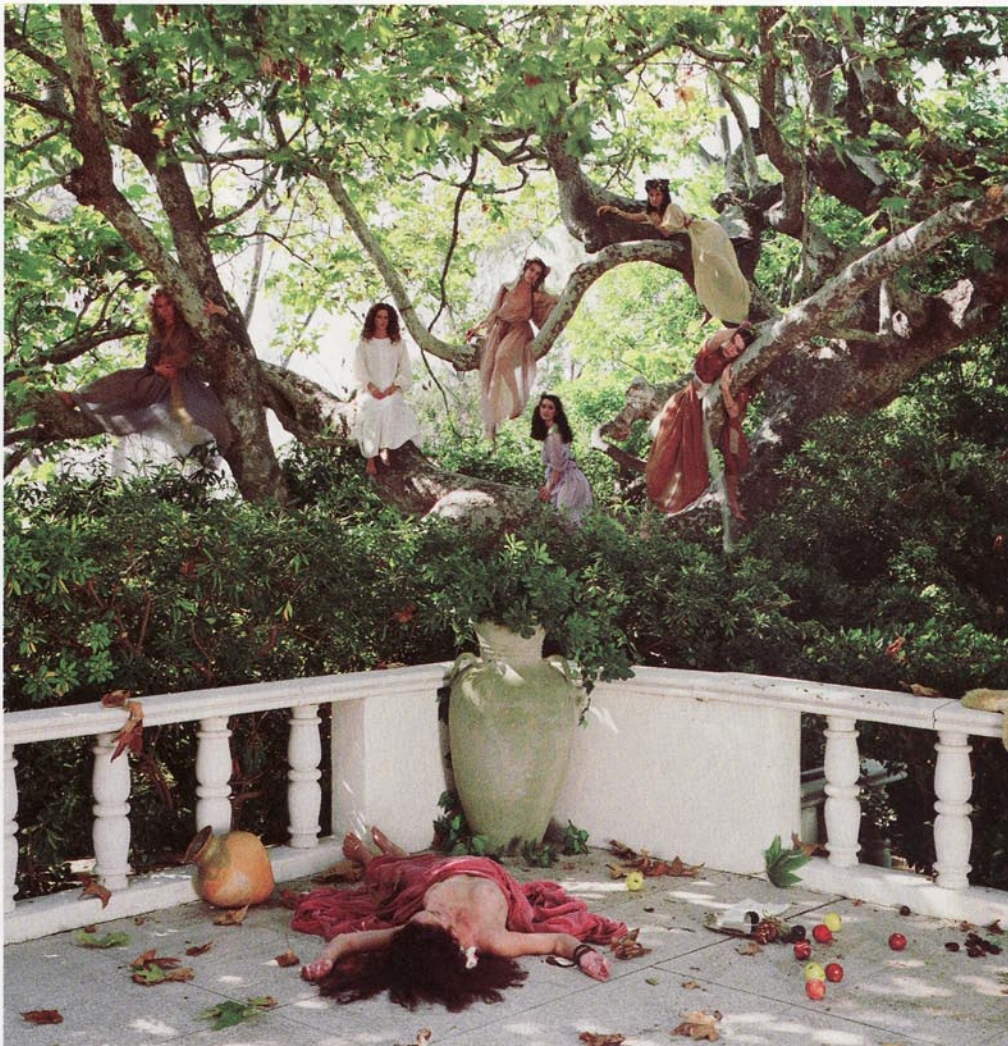
The Death of Petronius, 2001 48 x 96" chromogenic photograph

appeal and beguiling for their multiple levels of interpretation.

Antin does not try to re-create accurate historical images; rather in *The Last Days of Pompeii* Antin poetically links aspects of an historical event, which is presented through the romantic veil of the 19th century Salon d'Art style, with related contemporary circumstances. Giving us a slice of history preserved in time, Antin presents a self-indulgent, self-absorbed society ignoring the warnings and suggesting explicit contemporary parallels to current political and environmental situations.

Described by *Art in America* critic Eleanor Heartney as a "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," Antin's photographs are beautiful and elaborately staged. With the local San Diego area as the backdrop, Antin transformed UCSD's campus, the Salk Institute and the

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The Tree, 2001 48 x 60" chromogenic photograph

The Banquet, 2001 48 x 80 chromogenic photograph

Museum Watch

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Rancho Santa Fe home of fellow faculty member, Marianne McDonald, into Mediterranean landscapes and Roman villas.

“A few years ago while driving down the scenic route, I suddenly realized how similar La Jolla is to the Bay of Naples,” says Antin. “While there are some differences, I was struck by the parallels between Pompeii and San Diego—the weather and a thriving affluent community. Both cities also have a tightly packed population sitting on the edge of disaster, Pompeii with Mt. Vesuvius and San Diego with the numerous fault lines that run through the county and the on-going problem of coastal erosion. There is a lyrical relationship of beautiful glamorous people living the good life on the verge of extinction.”

Antin, who lives in Del Mar, enlisted the participation of fellow UCSD faculty colleagues as actors in her production, including Sheldon Nodelman (Solana Beach), Newton Harrison (Del Mar) and Bennett Berger (La Jolla), among others. Well-known artist's models from the area,

along with students from UCSD's theatre and visual arts departments, also joined the visual spectacle as actors and set builders. This coming summer, Antin will again transform the San Diego landscape into the ancient Roman Empire as she creates *Out-takes of the Roman World*.

In addition to the 12 large photographs in the exhibition, Antin is also screening rough video footage shot during the making of *The Last Days of Pompeii*. Some of this footage was seen in a feature on her work in the PBS series *Art 21: Art in the 21st Century*, which was broadcast nationally last fall.

Antin's work is shown widely in Los Angeles, New York and Europe; however, this exhibition represents the first time her work has been exhibited in her hometown since her 1977 exhibition *Angel of Mercy* at the La Jolla Museum of Art (now known as the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego). In addition to a performance, in *Angel of Mercy* Antin exhibited a series of 19th century-style photos depicting her persona 'Eleanor Nightingale' inventing the nursing profession during the Crimean War.

The focus of a 1999 retrospective at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Antin was the recipient of the International Art Critics Association (AICA) Best Show Award for her LACMA retrospective and *The Last Days of Pompeii* in 2001. In addition, Antin has received a National Foundation for Jewish Culture Media Achievement Award; a Guggenheim fellowship, an NEA Individual Artist Grant and numerous other awards. Her work is in the collections of the Jewish Museum, The Museum of Modern Art, and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York; The Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, among others. Antin is represented by Ronald Feldman Gallery in New York City.

The Last Days of Pompeii is on view at the UCSD's University Art Gallery through June 12. For more information about *The Last Days of Pompeii* or UCSD's University Art Gallery, call (858) 534-2107, email uag@ucsd.edu or visit www.universityart-gallery.ucsd.edu. ■