

Eleanor Antin

RONALD FELDMAN FINE ARTS

That Helen of Troy had a face beautiful enough to launch a thousand ships is a myth so often reiterated that it may as well be true. Interpretations of the rest of her story are more divergent: She was a true innocent, abducted by Paris against her will, for instance, *or* she was an immoral whore who jumped at the chance to leave behind husband and children to indulge in adulterous pleasures with no regard for the havoc she would wreak. It's not unusual, of course, for such opposing intents to be ascribed to women, who so often serve as protagonists for thinly veiled (but overtly gendered) morality tales. Not unlike the Hitchcockian characters around whom Laura Mulvey crafted her famous argument regarding the male gaze, Helen tends to stand as the locus of action—more style than substance.

But Helen as taken up by Eleanor Antin in her series "Helen's Odyssey," 2007, finds unexpected new texture. Antin, who has long brought to bear a shape-shifting, paradoxically comic pathos on her various "characters"—from the ballerina Eleanora Antinova to "The King of Solana Beach"—here presents a different Helen. In nine large photographic tableaux, Helen is pictured as both classical and contemporary, campy and canonical, mythical and mainstream. In fact, she is no longer even singular, instead traipsing around hypertheatrical sets as both a blond and a brunette, her two selves often together, sometimes even arm in arm.

Take *The Tourists* (all works 2007), which anachronistically poses two grinning, sunglasses-wearing Helens, presumably spending a nice day in Sparta hunting for fashionable accoutrements. No matter that the scene is set on a rugged hill, dotted with warriors, most in over-the-top "Greek" poses. A thickly muscled man balances on one knee, his loins covered just so by a judiciously placed sheet. Reaching toward the giggling Helens, he also holds tight to a dying comrade. Surrounded by presumably defeated soldiers (the city having been sacked), the Helens mug for the camera like rock stars. In two otherwise identical works, both titled *Judgment of Paris (after Rubens)*, the Helens split up, with "Dark Helen" sitting looking annoyed in one photograph and "Light Helen" in the same pose in the second. In both images, the same hammy Baroque-type backdrop gives play to a hard-to-figure scene: A mixed-race Cupid, a red-haired Aphrodite, a gun-toting Athena, a '50s-styled Hera, and a feathered-cap-wearing Hermes all strike poses. Just how and exactly what this anachronistic crew represents as a whole is impossible to determine, though the associations they cue individually are crystal clear.

Likewise in all of Antin's reprisals of Helen, in which well-worn tales and tropes rub up against incongruous details.

For every pregnant moment Antin offers us, there is another stumping of clear-cut denouement. Antin's images curtly cut across the kind of '90s "girl" photography that *looked* to be empowering but merely reinscribed modes of voyeurism and passive representation. There isn't "another planet" in Antin's Iliad—she places Helen squarely in the present by playing with clichéd notions of the past. If Antin is enjoying herself (as she so clearly is) in rescripting a text that would seem to be written in stone, she is also intelligently insisting that such invocations can be put to new ends. Though Helen of Troy could seem the least relevant figure for our times, one need only remember the perpetual power of a pretty face.

—Johanna Burton

Eleanor Antin, *The Tourists*, 2007, color photograph, 61 x 77 1/8". From the series "Helen's Odyssey," 2007.

