

ELEANOR ANTIN

"LOVES OF A BALLERINA"

(a filmic installation)

Ronald Feldman Fine Arts Inc.

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Many fictions have been projected on women and on the roles typically assigned to them. Traditionally these fictions are highly selective narratives that, although they portend woman as subject, are really about men and the world men have constructed. Eleanor Antin, however, in her three-part installation *Loves of a Ballerina*, has made men her stated subject while actually focussing on her fictional personage Eleanora Antinova, the once-celebrated black ballerina of the disbanded Ballet Russe.

We saw the ballerina, one of the most public and romanticized images of woman, in three distinct settings: a movie theater; a turn-of-the-century train car, and a dressing room at the theater. Antinova, who was trying to earn a living in debauched vaudeville houses and silent films, was a star of a triple feature collectively titled *Loves of a Ballerina*. In the train car she was a desired but coquettish and aloof lover moving between two men in opposite compartments. And in the dressing room she was an aging performer looking out at us from her dressing room mirror.

In all these situations the audience was on the outside looking in at projections of Antinova's public and private life. At the movie theater the viewer stood under the marquee peering in through the doors past rows of seats peopled with dark silhouettes. In the first segment of the triple feature, "The Ballerina and the Poet," Antinova's intrigue with a moody poet ended in a parody of carnality as she fluttered her feet in orgasm. In "Liebesschatten (Love's Shadow)" a man continually tried to embrace the shadow of the dancing ballerina. Bereft by the futility of his desire he shot the vaporous image. Finally in "Swan Lake" Prince Siegfried's ill-fated desire for the white swan was transformed into a backstage vignette. As Antinova bent over to peek out the stage curtain she dis-

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played the full regalia of the underside of tutu and ruffled panties. The Prince couldn't help but notice, and out of the fly of his pants sprouted the head and neck of a white swan—alert, erect and ready. Each time he looked the neck of the swan got longer.

Antin's portrayal of Antinova was a vivid demonstration of the thin line between lambent caricatures and mythic archetypes. Even though Antin took considerable jabs at the fleeting image of the ballerina, the image always won. However droll Antinova's circumstances became, the idea of the romantic ballerina, underscored by the loss and discontent of unattainable desires, always lurked somewhere close by. In this light Antinova was not so much a comic antihero as she was the embodiment of absence. There was no black ballerina in the Ballet Russe—and there is no room for "blackness" in traditional ballet repertory. This tension, between presence and absence, was echoed and magnified in situating the audience outside each installation. We were forced to be voyeurs. Something we couldn't be a part of was continually presented to us.

The questions the installation raised about women, blackness, corporeality and representation were crystalized in the dressing room. An aging Antinova looked out at the viewer from her dressing room mirror (rear screen projections). It was a particular look, a look that acknowledged being seen. Unwittingly we had become part of Antinova's dance. Our presence in front of the mirror did not speak back to us with a reassuring image of ourselves but rather engaged us in a dialog with an image imprisoned in glass.

Carol Martin

