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Crystalline Photos Evoke Ancient Roman Opulence

Eleanor Antin's mural-scale photographs at Craig Krull Gallery are not remarkable because of what they depict—scenes of debauchery and decadence on the cusp of the apocalypse—but because of how they do so: with such a queasy combination of over-the-top artifice and too-good-to-be-true Realism that you can't be sure you're not hallucinating.

Titled "The Last Days of Pompeii," Antin's crystalline images feature toga-clad folks idling away seemingly endless summer afternoons at a fabulously manicured estate in Rancho Santa Fe. For all its rose gardens, sweeping vistas, spacious patios and vaguely classical colonnades, the luxurious residence might as well be a movie set for an old-fashioned costume drama or an 18th century salon painting of Roman opulence and lassitude.

In one, the muscular bodies of two male wrestlers glisten in the sunlight as eight pretty women lounge around in the grass. Some are too bored to be bothered, but others look on intently, their world-weary expressions alive with lasciviousness.

In another color-saturated photograph, two brawny gladiators barely get the attention of their reclining audience, despite battling to the death. In a third, five inhabitants appear to have been buried alive by a shower of gold coins.

In a fourth, six beautiful women wrap themselves around an old tree's serpentine branches. All stare, with mildly curious expressions and general cluelessness, at an unconscious woman lying on the ground. Although she appears to have fallen out of the tree, no one above budges from her perch.

Antin's photographs stick in the mind's eye because of their unbelievable clarity and the sumptuous light that spills from their surfaces. So crisp and vivid are so many of the figures' outlines that you have to go up close to convince yourself that they're not collaged on or added via a computer's digital tricks. Taking a cue from the Pageant of Masters, the San Diego-based artist's pictures tell some big truths by telling many little lies.

Craig Krull Gallery, 2525 Michigan Ave., Bergamot Station, Santa Monica, (310) 828-6410, through Oct. 12. Closed Mondays.



Eleanor Antin's "The Death of Petronius" (2001) combines remarkable realism with over-the-top artifice.

Craig Krull Gallery