



Eleanor Antin  
*The Death of Petronius*  
From the series  
*'The Last Days of Pompeii'*  
2001  
C-type print  
118x240 cm

What is art for?  
To make meaning happen!

# Eleanor Antin

What images keep you company in your studio?

My studio is a bridge soaring over a ravine. I look out at what's left of old California – chaparral, sand cliffs, manzanitas. The McMansions are sprouting all over the place but they're far enough away that those I see are mostly hidden by trees. A family of deer comes regularly to eat my roses. The little one looks at me like I'm crazy when I make faces at her. I see the sun move through the sky and set very spectacularly, if somewhat vulgarly, over the sea. What other images do I need?

What's the first piece of art that mattered to you?

I was born and brought up in New York. My first loves were the marble cripples in the Metropolitan Museum's Ancient Greek and Roman rooms. An arm missing here, a leg there, a nose, a knee. It broke my heart to see them; they were so beautiful and abandoned but incredibly sexy. I used to feel up those smooth, cool thighs when the guards weren't looking. Once I was caught and chased out of the museum.

If you could live with one piece of art, what would it be?

Caravaggio's *Narcissus* (c. 1597–9) or the Magritte

image of a bridge over the Seine with an elegant winged Satan in black evening clothes leaning over the parapet, staring longingly at Paris through the fog with a tacky stone lion at his feet.

What film has most influenced you?

Marcel Carné's *Les Enfants du Paradis* (1945).

I must have seen it at least ten times. I saw it again recently, but the magic was gone. It was all a little silly – still beautiful in its way, but kind of cheesy. I think I always knew it was cheesy, but the romantic 19th-century theatricality blew me away, a long time ago.

What is your favourite title of an art work?

That's easy. Nicolas Poussin's *A Dance to the Music of Time* (c. 1640). I'm stealing it for one of the images in my new series 'Helen's Odyssey'.

What do you wish you knew?

When I was a kid, I used to wish I were dead, so I could be an invisible, fabulous spy. I longed to slip into Emily Dickinson's room where she spent her last years and be with her when she died. I would just be a giant eye, not even a spirit. Or sweat at the bar in Monte Carlo with the starving Russian dancers. Or sit in the cart with Marie Antoinette and hold her hand on the way to her execution. I'm convinced she had her period and was afraid of bleeding through her skirt when she had to walk up the steps to the guillotine. I would watch Helen and Paris fucking and wonder whether it was all worth it. Or sail into the blue unknown with Odysseus. It used to enrage me that all those great things had happened and I couldn't possess them. I learnt later that I could, of course. I've spent my life inventing all those pasts that dared to exist without me.

What should change?

George Bush and Dick Cheney and Condoleezza Rice and their whole murderous crew should disappear from the face of the earth. (Though

I believe in revenge, so maybe they should be sent to Guantánamo first and be tortured.) And the war should be over. And no woman should ever have to wear a burka again.

What could you imagine doing if you weren't an artist?

I'd probably be a writer or an archaeologist.

What music are you listening to?

Merle Haggard, Charlie Rich, Nina Simone, Stan Getz, Poulenc, Satie, Mozart, Italian opera, Bob Dylan and Tom Waits.

What are you reading?

Books on ancient Greece and by ancient Greeks.

What do you like the look of?

Venice, Classical ruins, prehistoric bones, rocks – both mammoth formations and striated little ones that I can slip into my pocket – giant California redwoods, Fellini movies, the fog coming up from the sea and transforming the canyons below my studio into Japanese paintings, unexpected discoveries in provincial art museums, second-hand book stores, German Shepherds – Collies too, the full moon fat and pregnant on the horizon, the seriousness of my actors transforming into Greeks and Romans, the mysterious reality of the reflections in the glass walls and doors of my studio at night, my face in the mirror because my eyes aren't good enough to see my wrinkles, my muscles from my daily gym workouts, the old roses climbing over the aloes in my garden, crumbling old graveyards...

*Eleanor Antin, who lives and works in San Diego, California, is a conceptual and multidisciplinary artist who has been creating narrative images in photography, video, film, performance and installation for more than 35 years. Her exhibition at Galerie Erna Hécey in Brussels is on view until April 7, 2007.*