

## Eleanor Antin

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Eleanor Antin, *Judgment of Paris (after Rubens)—Light Helen, 2007*, color photograph, 62 x 118". From the series "Helen's Odyssey."

For nearly four decades, San Diego-based artist [Eleanor Antin](#) has provocatively engaged histories real and imagined through photographs, performances, films, videos, writings, and drawings. Since 2001, she has completed three series of allegorical photographs based on Roman life: "The Last Days of Pompeii," "Roman Allegories," and "Helen's Odyssey." A survey that focuses on these works, titled "Historical Takes," is on view through November 2 at the [San Diego Museum of Art](#).

**ALL MY LIFE** I have had a passion for ancient Greece, since reading *Bulfinch's Mythology* as a kid. At the time I first read it, I wished that I could live in ancient Greece. But then, later, when I found out how badly they treated women, I kind of cheated and just shifted my allegiance to ancient Rome, where women had some rights and might even have lived interesting lives. One day after my retrospective exhibition at LACMA in 1999, I was driving the scenic route down to La Jolla, and looking down at the town glittering in the sun, I suddenly had a vision that La Jolla was Pompeii. Pompeii was a very wealthy town, too; it was the place where rich people went in the summer to escape mosquito-plagued Rome. It was the place to which older senators retired if they survived Roman politics. People living there enjoyed the affluent life while on the verge of annihilation. You don't even need to consider our current political situation to see a connection: The cliffs are eroding, we're on a major fault line, the wildfires get worse and worse, there are water shortages. California is overbuilt and disintegrating. So

we don't have a volcano, but it could be just as bad. There is always something autobiographical in my work, and when I made the connection between where I live now and my first love, I jumped on it.

"The Last Days of Pompeii" provokes an immediate response, since the story has entered the poetic imagination of Western culture. I wanted to see if it was possible to use contemporary people in my own Southern California and pass them off as more or less believable Romans. Stylistically, I used the image structures of nineteenth-century French and English salon painting, which had flattered colonial Europe by depicting it as the new Rome. "Roman Allegories," which I did next, is, I think, less accessible—perhaps because allegory, despite its rich history in premodern art, is not part of contemporary culture. Only recently have artists become interested again in telling stories. (Allegory is, of course, related to representation, and for some time, representation was anathema to an art world that glorified abstraction.) Whereas my Pompeii depicted everyday Roman life, in this series, I highlighted theatricality and explored a number of commedia dell'arte archetypes and their shifting relationships to one another. I believe this series was more complex. I was going through a bad time in my life, so there's a darkness that pervades the images that I think adds to their mystery. (In fact, a skeleton that I've kept in my studio for decades makes a few cocky appearances in some of the photographs.) These photographs work like a hall of mirrors. I like to think of them as defective narratives that can be made whole by looking deeper into them for layers of meaning, for more stories. "Helen's Odyssey," which I just completed last year, is a kind of amusing riff on the male epic. Helen is always vilified as a seductress and both admired for her beauty and feared for her power—yet however she's interpreted, her place in our historical fantasy has always been legitimized, written, or painted by men. I wanted to humanize this woman, to find her beneath the covering of stories that obscures her to us.

Looking at all three series together, as I'm now able to do, I find even more connections between them—psychological, political, philosophical—than I had previously suspected. When I was working, I moved both intuitively and intellectually. But perhaps I couldn't realize how deeply each series flowed into the next. Looking at the images now, I think, *Wow! I didn't waste the last eight years*. This exhibition reveals that my three series constitute a complex single invention that was worth the effort after all.

The works themselves blend pathos and comedy, or comedy and tragedy. This may be due in part to the influence of my mother, who worked in Europe on the Yiddish stage—and we all know the Yiddish theatrical and literary tradition: "I'm laughing so hard I'm crying." Comedy and tragedy go together; I could never separate them. We're on the edge of the abyss at every moment, and it doesn't make sense for an art world to be entirely too committed to one mode of expression or the other. We live both all the time.

— *As told to Brian Sholis*