

ELEANOR ANTIN

SAN DIEGO MUSEUM OF ART

“Historical Takes” is the title of Eleanor Antin’s current exhibition at the San Diego Museum of Art, featuring near mural-size photographic tableaux vivant derived from classical history and mythology. Since 2001, Antin—a performance and multimedia artist, filmmaker, and pioneer feminist—has created three such series, developing issues dating far back in her career, while departing significantly in format, address, and emotional tone. Over four decades Antin has authored a stream of productions—photo and text ensembles, staged performances, films—sharing a preoccupation with the fashioning of selfhood and its ambiguities, and incorporating a variety of theatricalized personae, some freely invented, others impersonating historical figures, in

world it evokes is that of 19th-century academic neoclassicism, in which antiquity itself is an ideologically driven mirage. The large scale and elongated proportions of these digital photographic prints, as well as their smooth, shiny surfaces, uniformly sharp focus, and brightly contrasted colors, unmistakably recall the posturing “salon” paintings of mid- to later 19th-century France—officially sanctioned monuments of establishment taste. One such is imitated directly: the vast *Romans of the Decadence* (1847) by Thomas Couture, Manet’s teacher, now at the Musée d’Orsay. Other works recall, though less literally, paintings by the likes of Ingres, Gerome, and Alma-Tadema, while still others are pure Antin; among these, *The Suicide of Petronius* (2001) is a particular tour de force, with its friezelike compositions set against a Pacific sunset (as seen from the courtyard of Louis Kahn’s great Salk Center in La Jolla). Compared with Antin’s earlier historically situated

fantasies, with their intimate scale, gentle pathos and disarming whimsy, these are the Technicolor and CinemaScope versions. Behind the open invocation of 19th-century official painting, there is an echo of the sword-and-sandal epics proliferated by the Italian film industry during the ‘50s and ‘60s, with their voluptuous starlets and sweaty musclemen.

Despite the virtuosity of Antin’s maneuvers in staging live reenactments, we are left in no doubt as to the utter artificiality of the entire project—and not solely because of the intermittent anachronisms (Athena totes an assault rifle; Hera wields a vacuum cleaner) slyly inserted here and there to give the game away. Artifice is pervasive and boldly foregrounded. Insiders familiar with Antin and her works will share a complicitous pleasure in spotting friends and colleagues incongruously costumed and made up as if for a masquerade party. (This writer must confess that he appears in two of these works.) But even those without specialized knowledge cannot evade the realization that they are witnessing a charade, however seductive, amusing, or sometimes touching.

More is at stake in the transparent legibility of Antin’s impostures than her signature blend of critical irony and romantic nostalgia, topped off this time with a dollop of campy humor. Their playful artificiality is a commentary on the serious artificiality of the genre to which they allude,

and to the double-edged role, which the classical past, in its various re-evocations, has played in the continuing conflict of values within Western culture. Central to this issue is the concept of composition, the governing principle of academic art. Composition, with its idealizing rhetoric of rationality, coherence, and hierarchical order, strives to master the brute contingency of reality and to distill the flux of time into the concentrated presentness of a perfected moment. The tableau vivant, created during the birth-process of the modern world, derives its frisson from the exposed fragility of composition revealed as temporally contingent enactment. Antin reanimates this moribund genre as a reminder of composition’s repressed Other, its origin in and dependence on performativity. In reasserting the human turbulence in which this elusive image of ideal order can sometimes be intuited, “Historical Takes” can be read as a deconstruction of the mythology of composition and of the ideology of an ossified classicism—and perhaps also as a hopeful intimation that the primal energies of which the classic itself was forged are not yet extinguished. —SHELDON NODELMAN



Eleanor Antin, *The Artist's Studio*, 2004. Chromogenic print, 46% x 58% in.

piquantly evoked dramatic settings, mostly of the 19th or early 20th centuries. A sampling of earlier works, appended to the present exhibition, illustrates both the continuities and the disjunctions. Antin, whose inimitable presence formerly occupied center stage, here limits herself to the role of off-camera designer and director.

The tableau vivant, or live representation of a well-known painting, came into vogue in the later 18th century. In the 19th century, it became a favored subject for the new medium of photography, with faithful mimicry increasingly replaced by freely invented compositions. Antin’s revisiting of this tradition differs from her treatment of period models in such works as her *Angel of Mercy* (1977) a photo piece dealing with Florence Nightingale in the Crimean War, or her faux silent film of shtetl life, *The Man Without a World* (1991); in these, period subject matter and period media characteristics and style were carefully aligned. If the ostensible subject matter is now the classical antiquity of Greece and Rome, the presentation has little (except in some of its eclectic decor) to do with Greek or Roman art. Instead, the