

PST: Eleanor Antin revisits 'Before the Revolution'

The re-imagining of black ballerina Eleanora Antinova, a signature Antin creation, at the Hammer Museum shows an artist still in revolutionary mode.



"California was just so open," says Eleanor Antin of her ability to push the artistic boundaries in the '60s and '70s on the West Coast rather than in the East. (Robert Gauthier, *Los Angeles Times* / January 14, 2012)

By Reed Johnson, *Los Angeles Times*

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Reporting from San Diego —

Artist Eleanor Antin has played lots of memorable alter-egos in her time. A saintly nurse in the Crimean War. The bearded "king" of a California beach town. A black prima ballerina in Sergei Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes*.

She has also embraced a variety of real-life roles: Bronx native, daughter of a Stalinist mother and socialist father, professor emeritus of art at UC San Diego, and postmodernist pioneer who blithely breaks rules and cannily collapses the boundaries between photography, drawing, video, film and performance.

Many of Antin's fictive personae are "sweetly sad" characters, "misled by their own dreams and desires," as curator-critic Howard N. Fox wrote in a catalog essay accompanying LACMA's 1999 Antin retrospective. The artist half-kiddingly attributes that combination of poignancy and absurdity to her Jewish ancestry and radical political roots as a "red-diaper baby."

"Pathos and comedy just [go] together," she said. "My mother was an actress in the Yiddish stage. She was like crying and laughing all over the place."

But on a recent afternoon in a storefront rehearsal space, Antin, who'll turn 77 next month, was visibly enjoying just being herself. She was watching five young actors rehearsing "Before the Revolution," a signature work that Antin first performed in February 1979 at New York's Kitchen Center for Video, Music, and Dance, playing all the parts with the aid of several nearly life-size Masonite cut-outs that she manipulated onstage. Antin also designed, costumed and

choreographed that production, in keeping with the DIY-feminist aesthetic that animates all her work.

Thirty-three years later, the piece, which centers on Eleanora Antinova, a fictitious character — a phrase that always should be bracketed with quotation marks in Antin's work — is being re-staged at 2 and 7 p.m. Sunday at the [Hammer Museum](#). "Before the Revolution" will cap the 11-day Performance and Public Art Festival, part of the multi-venue, Getty-sponsored Pacific Standard Time celebration of Southern California art between 1945 and 1980.

This time, instead of starring in a one-woman show, Antin will be mostly off-stage, co-directing the production's five-member cast with Robert Castro. Castro said the task for him and the performers — Danièle Watts, along with Maria Tomas, Matthew Henerson, Jonathan Le Billon and Jacob Bruce — isn't to re-create the piece "but actually re-imagine it."

The work, Castro said, still seems revolutionary, evoking an earlier generation of politically committed experimental theater by groups such as [El Teatro Campesino](#) and the [San Francisco Mime Troupe](#). "We're totally in the Occupy [movement] landscape, so that idea of people coming together, that kind of spirit is right there," he added.

Antin applauds PST and its celebration of Southern California, which she thinks is still America's most fertile region for making art, especially for a perpetual outsider like herself. "If I had stayed in New York I don't know what I would have done," said the artist, who has lived in Del Mar with her husband, the poet and critic David Antin, since the mid-1970s. "I'd always have, I guess, followed my own thing. But I think my own thing would've been different. California was just so open.

"And also I was going against the grain," Antin continued. "When I started showing in the later '60s these sort of strange works I was doing, filled with narrative and theater — those were dirty words.... And there was also a very warm feminist scene, which was a different feminist scene than in New York, where everyone was a little nastier, fighting with each other all the time."

In what Antin calls "the wild, wild West" of late-'70s California, art didn't get much wilder than "Before the Revolution."

Its protean protagonist, Eleanora Antinova, was the incarnation of a character that had evolved out of previous Antin personas, the Black Movie Star (circa 1974) and the un-named, iconic "Ballerina." The more three-dimensional Eleanor Antinova was outfitted with an elaborate back story involving her brilliant performances in Diaghilev's legendary company, her subsequent migration to the United States, and her descent into a state of wistful nostalgia while she survived by performing in squalid vaudeville halls. Marie Antoinette, composer Igor Stravinsky and the great dancer-choreographer [Vaslav Nijinsky](#), are among the other personages who waltz into Antin's fantasia.

The vagaries of self-representation, and the idea of life as performance, are central themes in Antin's oeuvre. One of her best-known works, "Carving: A Traditional Sculpture," is a photo mockumentary project in which she chronicled a strict dieting regimen's effects on her naked body, creating a serio-comic commentary about idealized feminine beauty.

By conceiving Antinova as a black woman who yearns to play the great prima roles like Giselle — even though Diaghilev sees her as an exotic "black pearl" more suited to portray "primitives" like Cleopatra and [Pocahontas](#) — Antin upends conventional ideas about race, class, gender and fiction-versus-fact.

"The quintessential Eleanor Antin character is a character that fundamentally rewrites history in a way that favors this fantastic drama that just spins up and up and up," said Glenn Phillips, curator at [the Getty](#) Research Institute, who co-organized the performance festival with Lauri Firstenberg, founder-director of [LAX Art](#).

"'Before the Revolution,'" Phillips said, "really is one of the foundational pieces of postmodernism. But it was so drawn out in time that we weren't able to see it as it was going. It took a while to see its full revolutionary potential."

Indeed, Antin said, when it comes to making art she had no choice but to be a radical — who regards much of life as a kind of black comedy. "That," she said, smiling, "is how I see the world."