

Yowzer! Yowzer!

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The Human Effect: Eleanor Antin

Spending time with Eleanor Antin's body of work, a triangle begins to appear in the mind. One angle represents the positive effect people can have, another angle represents the negative effect people can have, and the third represents our inability to have any effect at all. Whether we're talking about affecting world history, local politics, art, personal relationships, or even our own physical bodies, the fact remains that the fruit of our efforts is often irreconcilable with what we originally had imagined.

Born in New York, in 1935, to Jewish parents who had recently emigrated from Poland, Antin played with paper dolls as a child, read voraciously, one of her favorite books being a history of Ancient Greece, and grew into womanhood as the United States was wrapt up in heated debates over the merits and dangers of Marxism. After being somewhat disillusioned with the ways of the world, especially after learning of the atrocities committed by Joseph Stalin in the communist USSR, of the atrocities committed by the States during the Vietnam War, and of the lack of equal rights for women, Antin turned to photography as a way of taking matters into her own hands. Through her new visions, which she has been sharing since 1971, Antin expresses her frustrations with social and political realities through images soaked with enduring humor and hope.



Portrait of the King (1972)

Despite the fact that more images are posted here than in any of our previous articles, it should be noted that the photos represent only a small selection of Antin's work, and that they don't even touch on her work in other media like her writing and directing of ballets, her movie-making, her books, and her pastel drawings.

1971-1973



100 Boots on the March (mailed February 20, 1973)



100 Boots on the Road (mailed September 7, 1971)



100 Boots on the way to Church (mailed April 5, 1971)



100 Boots Facing the Sea (1971)



100 Boots Out of a Job
(mailed September 18, 1972)

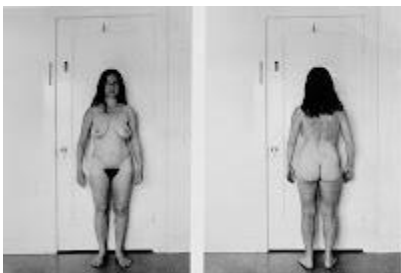


100 Boots at the Bank (February 9, 1971)

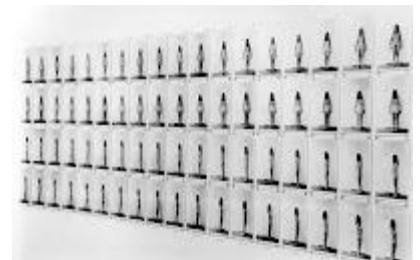
This is how Antin has described the conception of her *100 Boots* series: "Somehow it came to me in a dream. There! Black boots! Big black boots. I got them at the Army-Navy Surplus then I printed them up on postcards. Over the course of it — finally two and a half years — fifty-one cards were mailed out to about a thousand people around the world. Now it is a piece that I see as a kind of pictorial novel that was sent through the mail, came unannounced, unasked for. It came in the middle of people's lives....It spilled out of their mailboxes along with bills, letters, newspapers, Christmas cards, divorce papers. They could tape it to the fridge, tuck it away in a drawer, throw it in the trash."

Through the simultaneously haunting and humorous photos, Antin had found her first group to direct. She had also portrayed a clear character: an everyman with the might of fifty people, and as powerless as none. We follow 100 boots in its pursuit of survival, justice, and an expansion of consciousness. And by following 100 boots, we each become an extra pair. In essence, by simply having people look at the series, Antin has helped foster a unity among us. You could say that those boots represent us, all who have viewed them, as scattered as we are by place, time, and ideology. Is this a bit authoritarian? Sure, but isn't all art authoritarian at some level? And that's when the fact that these are military boots comes back around.

Of additional interest in this series is that, in it, we see the beginning of Antin's interest in blurring the lines between motion and still photography, as the boots when lined up, facing in the same direction, one in front of the other, suggest a marching motion.



Carving: A Traditional Sculpture (detail, 1972)



Carving: A Traditional Sculpture, (1972)

Over thirty-seven consecutive summer days in 1972, Antin documented the effects of a strict dieting regimen on her body by taking 4 nude photographs of herself each day: front, back, left profile, and right profile. Titled *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture*, the result is 148 nude photographs that show a woman spinning through time, and in a struggle between her determined will and her tempted flesh. While following the timeline and reading the changes of her body, questions begin to arise over Antin's reasons for dieting. Is this for health? Is this for vanity? Are we witnessing an assault on a woman by the additional pressure that society puts on the female sex? Can this really be an example of the sexual imbalance in America if Antin is aware of it? Is this all simply for art's sake? Whatever our answers to these questions are, this is likely Antin's most challenging project to experience, bordering on unbearable. But Antin's presentation of herself as art-piece, as sacrifice, certainly achieves its primary goal: to get the viewer to realize how personal and sacred each person's own figure is.

1974-1979



Photo from *The King of Solana Beach* series (1974)



Photo from *The King of Solana Beach* (1974)



Photo from *The King of Solana Beach* (1974)



Photo from *The King of Solana Beach* (1974)

Conceived of by Antin in 1972, the good-hearted King of Solana Beach was also played by Antin. Her stage for this project was the open air and the city streets, as well as the bank, and the market. Antin's invented character is a delight, and demonstrates a ruler that finally is wholly of and for the people. There doesn't seem to be any air of overly-inflated importance to him. Sure, he dresses differently, but he seems genuine in his wish for a happy community. Whether his royalty is genuine, defunct, or a symptom of sheer madness, the king ends up becoming a source of pride for the community, like a mascot, even though he's fallen on hard times, and by the end of the series seems to have been driven out of the community after losing a real estate battle.

"We were very much alike," Antin has said about the King. "He was a stubborn hopeless romantic like me. He was a political loser like me."

One possible reading of the project is to highlight the error in a system that consistently gives the boot to such a person as the King.

Of additional interest is the fact that this project began two years before Cindy Sherman began photographing herself in character.



The Angel of Mercy (Florence Nightingale),
Myself-1854 (1977)



In the Trenches before Sebastopol (1977,
from The Angel of Mercy series)

By the end of the decade, Antin was working with other characters including her invented ballerina Eleanora Antinova, around whom she created a whole story that interwove through history. Antin produced and acted in interactive plays that were set up as autobiographical meet-and-greets with Antinova, which played with notions of reality. She also found inspiration in the character of Florence Nightingale (pictured in the two photos above), the historical woman who, in a time of almost impregnable patriarchy, helped transform the job of a nurse into meaningful work that women could do outside of home-making. The photo on the above right, of Antin as Nightingale, comments on the violence of war, as well as Nightingale's strong sense of compassion. It's brilliant the way Antin uses detailed staging to communicate multiple layers of meaning, and it's interesting to see that this same style would develop into the Greco-Roman photos she would shoot 24 years later.

2001-2007



The Death of Petronius
(*The Last Days of Pompeii*, 2001)



The Artist's Studio
(*The Last Days of Pompeii*, 2001)



The Golden Death
(*The Last Days of Pompeii*, 2001)

"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."
-Antin in a previous interview with Brian Sholis.



Constructing Helen (*Helen's Odyssey*, 2007)



Casting Call (*Helen's Odyssey*, 2007)



The Tourists (*Helen's Odyssey*, 2007)



Plaisir d'Amour (after Couture)
(*Helen's Odyssey*, 2007)



Helen's Vengeance
(*Helen's Odyssey*, 2007)



Judgment of Paris
(after Rubens)
Dark Helen (top)
Light Helen (bottom)
(*Helen's Odyssey*, 2007)



Persephone Welcome Helen to Hades
(*Helen's Odyssey*, 2007)

First off, it should be noted that Antin's photos since 2001 average more than 60 square inches, so you can imagine the amount of detail that is lost reproducing them on your mobile phone. All we can hope for is that a retrospective show will start up soon, and when it does, YowzerYowzer will be very pleased to announce it.

Now, about the matter and the style of Antin's latest projects. They are three distinct series: *The Last Days of Pompeii* (2001), *Roman Allegories* (2004), and *Helen's Odyssey* (2007). What they have in common is their lavish colors, cinematic staging, and content ranging from serious to the morbid, with an overlay of sensuality and humor. Antin catches the dynamic edge by yelling "Action!" just before snapping the shot.

Helen's Odyssey, in particular, seems to have the most developed web of interconnected themes going on. By alternating between a blonde-haired Helen and a brown-haired Helen, Antin gives us the opportunity to reflect on the differences in our own reactions to hair color. We also encounter, through the series, the many aspects of Helen's character, from the blank slate in *Constructing Helen*, to the flirty in *Casting Call*, the disconnected in *Plaisir d'Amour* and *Judgement of Paris*, and later to the independent but insensitive Helen in *The Tourists*, the empowered but sadistic Helen in *Helen's Vengeance*. Antin takes the legend of the woman who was so desirable as to cause the Trojan War, and rebuilds her humanity. In a way, that might be what art has done for Eleanor Antin herself, and in a way, that is what Eleanor Antin has done for us.

In a 2008 interview with Joe Fusaro, Antin commented on some reactions to her work: "I'm confused when people consider my work *controversial*. Or the word most often used is *brave*. I don't know what they mean. This isn't Soviet Russia or Hitler's Germany—yet. Those countries may have been intellectually monstrous and physically murderous but they seemed to think artists were important enough to persecute. Here, relatively few people care what artists do. This allows us freedom even if it assures us of irrelevance. So to call me brave is silly."

Spoken like the King of Solana Beach, or true art-royalty, if there were such a thing. Thank you, Eleanor.