

RICHARD SALTOUN

Roman Allegories & Greek Mythologies

Richard Saltoun Gallery Rome
November–December 2022



Richard Saltoun Gallery is delighted to present *Roman Allegories & Greek Mythologies*, a landmark exhibition presenting two seminal series of works: *Roman Allegories*, by the pioneering American feminist artist Eleanor Antin; and *Mythologies*, by the father of the Italian Metaphisica Giorgio de Chirico. Albeit different in form, the two bodies of works reveal the artists' shared fascination with the ancient world and their striking capacity to transform existing narratives into new worlds and stories with different layers of meaning. It is the first time the two series are on view in Rome.

Active since the early 1960s, Eleanor Antin is regarded as one of the most influential feminist and conceptual artists working today. Her works, though marked by a characteristic wit and humour, engage serious, often dark matters, reflecting on contemporary politics, environmental issues and identity.

Roman Allegories is part of Antin's iconic *Historical Takes* trilogy (2001–2008), which weaves together her love for the ancient world and 19th century salon-style painting to deliver a vitriolic critique of contemporary society and power dynamics. Created with a cast of over 100 friends and models, *Roman Allegories* includes 12 staged photographs, richly saturated and up to 3 metres in size, where ragged actors in Roman costumes wander through the supposed ruins of the Roman Empire. Through allegory and satire, the photographs reveal the melancholic sense of loss felt by characters living in a declining empire all the while situating their actions and events in the contemporary world.

The series was entirely shot in the neighbourhood of La Jolla, San Diego, which the artist associated with the ancient town of Pompeii – both wealthy, both under the constant threat of nature. It's an open denunciation of the ever more destructive wildfires, water shortages and environmental emergencies in California. The La Jolla locations in *Roman Allegories* are not merely backdrops – they either highlight the region's seductive yet dangerous nature, or make use of lush gardens, tennis courts and exclusive villas to comment on local culture and excessive wealth. Throughout this, broken columns, classical statues, and empty pots reference the potential ruin on our horizon.

Antin's feminist narratives prevail in this series of work, with female characters depicted openly enjoying their participation in scenes of bacchanalian excitement. The artist continues to recognise, however, the

inevitable trap that awaits these women. In *Alice's Dream*, the girls that hang from the tree, draped in orange robes, are the same girls who were celebrating in *Triumph of Pan (after Poussin)*.

Hugely influential himself, in the years before WWI Giorgio de Chirico founded a new art movement – known as Metafisica – which captivated the French avant-garde of the 1910s and profoundly inspired the Surrealists Breton, Dalí and Magritte. He painted mysterious dreamscapes of classical piazzas and arcades populated with spectral mannequins, which exude a sense of melancholy with their distorted perspective and menacing, long shadows.

De Chirico's imagery draws on philosophy and the mythology of his birthplace, Greece. This is particularly evident in his *Mythologies* (1934), a portfolio of 10 lithographs where Greek statues, centaurs, sea monsters and the artist himself wander through a purely theoretical world. De Chirico's extraordinary lithographs are accompanied by the writings of poet and novelist Jean Cocteau, the lead proponent of the French avant-garde. Cocteau admired De Chirico deeply and defined his work a 'laic mystery', a place where enigma and mystery converge with the clarity of forms. This rarely seen portfolio not only testifies to their friendship and mutual respect, but gives us unprecedented and intimate insight into the creative process of one of the most influential painters of all times.

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Image: Eleanor Antin, *The Players (from Roman Allegories)*, 2004. © Eleanor Antin Courtesy Richard Saltoun Gallery, London and Rome.

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Notes to editors

- **Eleanor Antin** was a central figure of the conceptual art movement that emerged in 1970s New York. Today, she continues to work from her home in San Diego. Her vast and complex body of works explores contemporary issues connected to identity, gender, class and social structures from a feminist perspective, provocatively engaging with real and imagined histories through photographs, performances, films, videos, writings and drawings. For Antin, photography is particularly important as it allows her to create anything she wants; different historical periods, places, and the characters that inhabit them. It allows her to invent "impossible facts", taking the delusory pleasures and terrors of the empire and "running them over a cliff". *Roman Allegories* is part of a triumvirate of staged photographs rooted in the artist's passion for the ancient world that also includes *The Last Days of Pompeii* and *Helen's Odyssey*. Together, these three series are known as *Historical Takes*.
- Founder of the scuola metafisica, **Giorgio de Chirico** (1898–1978) is one of the most singular figures in the history of 20th century art. A forerunner of Surrealism, he profoundly inspired great painters like André Bréton, Salvador Dalí. In his muted-tone paintings, stylised elements of classical architecture merge with the recently developed pictorial language of Cubism. Using a distorted perspective and multiple focal points, De Chirico created dreamscapes that force incompatible spatial systems into a single, coherent scene. His purely theoretical (or metaphysical) world is populated by obscure figures that reference Greek myths and the philosophical writings of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. Guillaume Apollinaire, the experimental poet and defender of Cubism, called De Chirico "the most astonishing painter of his time." De Chirico's work figures prominently in the collections of public museums worldwide including the MoMA and the Met, New York; Tate Modern' London; and the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice.