

ELEANOR

ANTIN



ROMAN ALLEGORIES

'That summer, in the first year of the reign of Titus, there appeared a small band of players who met with some success until they disappeared without trace, leaving behind one of their number'

— From a letter attributed to Pliny the Younger



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Roman Allegories forms part of a triumvirate of staged photographs together known and exhibited as *Historical Takes*. The other two series are *The Last Days of Pompeii* and *Helen's Odyssey*. The photographs were produced between 2001 and 2008 at various locations throughout San Diego, USA.

‘Through photography I can invent anything I want, invent different historical periods and the characters that inhabit them. My ballerina Eleanora Antinova, The King, The Nurse and the Hijackers and my Angel of Mercy are some of the different personas that I have created and inhabited.

In my photo series *Last Days of Pompeii*, *Roman Allegories*, and *Helen's Odyssey* I wanted to see if I could reconstruct the ancient world and recall through 19th-century salon painting aspects of the contemporary world.

In *Roman Allegories*, I play games with satire and humor to reveal a melancholy allegory of loss as my ragged band of players wander through a ruined landscape, a declining empire of arrivals and departures, lugging suitcases under umbrellas. I really feel that I am making movies when I compose my photos. Like making films, I have to stage my photographs with casts, costumes, locations, sets, lighting, various cameras and editing.

When I am ready for a photo to be taken, I say “action” like in my films. For photos when I say freeze there is no life in them, but when I say action, even though my actors know not to move, they come alive.’

— Eleanor Antin, 2022





















The Empire of Signs, 2004

















ELEANOR ANTIN DISCUSSES HER RECENT PHOTOGRAPHIC SERIES, 2008

The following text by Eleanor Antin was originally printed in *Artforum*, July 2008 on the occasion her exhibition *Historal Takes* at San Diego Museum of Art. The text was edited by Brian Sholis.

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.

LIST OF WORKS

p. 9 <i>The Tragic Performance</i> , 2004 155.3 × 123.2 cm	pp. 26-27 (p. 29, detail) <i>The Empire of Signs</i> , 2004 123.2 × 155.3 cm
pp. 10–11 (p. 13, detail) <i>The Players</i> , 2004 123.2 × 155.3 cm	pp. 30–31 (p. 4, detail) <i>The Sad Song of Columbine</i> , 2004 123.2 × 155.3 cm
pp. 14–15 <i>The Lovers</i> , 2004 123.2 × 155.3 cm	pp. 32–33 (p. 1, detail) <i>The Comic Performance (after Poussin)</i> , 2004 123.2 × 155.3 cm
pp. 16–17 (pp. 18–19, detail) <i>Going Home</i> , 2004 123.2 × 261 cm	p. 34–35 (pp. 36–37, detail) <i>Who are we? Where are we going?</i> , 2004 123.2 × 155.3 cm
p. 21 <i>Winding the Skein</i> , 2004 155.3 × 123.2 cm	pp. 38–39 <i>The Gamblers</i> , 2004 123.2 × 155.3 cm
pp. 22–23 (pp. 24–25, detail) <i>The Triumph of Pan (after Poussin)</i> , 2004 155.3 × 123.2 cm	pp. 40–41 (p. 42, detail) <i>Alice's Dream</i> , 2004 123.2 × 155.3 cm

During the course of the printing of the edition of *Roman Allegories*, the original process of Chromegenic printing became obsolete. The edition was completed as Pigment prints. All printing was done at Lumiere Editions, Silver City, New Mexico, USA.

BIOGRAPHY

1935 Born in The Bronx, NY, USA; lives and works in San Diego, CA, USA

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2022 *Eleanor Antin*, Richard Saltoun Gallery, Rome, Italy

2019 *Eleanor Antin: Time's Arrow*, LACMA | Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, USA; The Art Institute of Chicago, USA

2017 *Eleanor Antin: Romans & Kings*, Richard Saltoun Gallery, London, UK

2016 *CARVING: A Traditional Sculpture*, Henry Moore Foundation, Leeds, UK
I wish I had a paper doll I could call my own...., Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, USA
What time is it?, Diane Rosenstein Fine Arts, Los Angeles, USA

2014 *Eleanor Antin: The Passengers*, Diane Rosenstein Fine Arts, Los Angeles, USA
Multiple Occupancy: Eleanor Antin's "Selves", The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, USA; The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University, New York, USA

2009 *Classical Frieze*, Galerie Erna Hecey, Brussels, Belgium
Classical Frieze, LACMA | Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, USA

2008 *Eleanor Antin: Historical Takes*, San Diego Art Museum, San Diego, USA
Helen's Odyssey, Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, USA

2007 *The Empire of Signs*, Galerie Erna Hecey, Brussels, Belgium

2006 *100 Boots*, Erna Hecey Gallery, Brussels, Belgium

2005 *Roman Allegories, 2005 & 100 Boots, 1971–73*, Marella Arte Contemporanea, Milan, Italy
Roman Allegories, Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, USA

2004 *The Last Days of Pompeii*, Mandeville Art Gallery, San Diego, USA

2002 *The Last Days of Pompeii*, Marella Arte Contemporanea, Milan, Italy; Craig Krull Gallery, Santa Monica, USA; Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, USA
Eleanor Antin, Galerie Hilger, Vienna, Austria

2001 *Eleanor Antin: Real Time Streaming*, Mead Gallery, Warwick Arts Centre, University of Warwick, UK; Arnolfini, Bristol, UK; Cornerhouse, Manchester, UK

2000 *Eleanor Antin | Harum Farocki*, Fundação das Descobertas, Centro Cultural de Belém, Lisbon, Portugal
Eleanor Antin: A Retrospective, The Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum at Washington University, St. Louis, USA

1999 *Eleanor Antin Retrospective*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, USA

1998 *Maintenance Works, 1969–1979*, Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, USA

1997 *Eleanor Antin: Selections from the Angel of Mercy*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, USA

1996 *Eleanor Antin: Ghosts*, South-eastern Centre for Contemporary Art, Winston-Salem, USA

1995 *100 Boots Revisited*, Craig Krull Gallery, Los Angeles, USA
Minetta Lane – A Ghost Story, Santa Monica Museum of Art, Santa Monica, USA; Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, USA

1991 *The Man Without a World*, San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art, La Jolla, USA

1989 *Retrospective of Photographic Works*, Artemisia, Chicago, USA

1988 *Loves of a Ballerina*, MAG Galleries, Los Angeles, USA; Installation Gallery, San Diego, USA

1986 *Loves of a Ballerina*, Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, USA

1983 *El Desdichado*, Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, USA
Recollections of my Life with Diaghilev, Tortue Gallery, Los Angeles, USA

1982 *Recollections of my Life with Diaghilev*, Minneapolis College of Art and Design, Minneapolis, USA
Battle of the Bluffs, La Mamelle, San Francisco, USA

1981 *Angel of Mercy*, Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, USA; Nova Gallery, Vancouver, Canada
Early Works, Palomar College, San Marcos, USA

1980 *Recollections of my Life with Diaghilev*, Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, USA

1979 *Before the Revolution*, Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, USA
100 BOOTS: Transmission and Reception, Franklin Furnace, New York, USA
The Black Ballerina, Marianne Deson Gallery, Chicago, USA

1978 *The Ballerina*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, USA
The Nurse and the Hijackers, Long Beach Museum of Art, Long Beach, USA

1977 *The Angel of Mercy*, M.L. D'Arc Gallery, New York, USA; La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, La Jolla, USA
The Nurse and the Hijackers, Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, USA
100 BOOTS Once Again (Part 1), *Choreographies* (Part 2), Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, USA

1976 *Eleanor Antin, R.N. (Escape from the Tower, It's Still the Same Old Story)*, The Clocktower, New York, USA

1975 The Kitchen, New York, USA
2 Transformations (The Ballerina Goes to the Big Apple), Stefanotty Gallery, New York, USA

1974 *Several Selves*, Everson Museum, Syracuse, USA
The Ballerina and the King, Galleria Forma, Genoa, Italy, *Black is Beautiful*, University of California Irvine, Irvine, USA

1973 *100 BOOTS*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA
Part of an Autobiography, Portland Centre for the Visual Arts, Portland, USA
More Traditional Art, Northwood Experimental Art Institute, Dallas, USA
I Dreamed I was a Ballerina, Orlando Gallery, Los Angeles, USA

1972 *Traditional Art*, Henri Gallery, Washington D.C, USA; Orlando Gallery, Los Angeles, USA
Library Science, California Institute of the Arts, Valencia, USA; University of California, San Diego; Austin Peay State University, Clarksville, USA

1971 *Library Science*, Brand Library Art Centre, Los Angeles, USA
Portraits of Eight New York Women, Chelsea Hotel, New York, USA

1969 *California Lives*, Gain Ground Gallery, New York, USA

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