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ELEANOR ANTIN

Classical Frieze

22 November 2009 – 15 November 2009

Opening Saturday 21 November 2009 5-8 pm

Reading by Eleonor Antin from "*Conversations with Stalin*"

Performance Saturday 21 November 2009 4:30 pm

Erna Hecey is pleased to present "Classical Frieze", a solo exhibition by Eleanor Antin.

"Classical Frieze" reflects Antin's continued attraction to allegory, Classical mythology and the embodiment of purloined identities through writing, performance, photography, video and film. Born and raised in New York, Antin moved to Southern California in the late 1960s, where she began impersonating prototypical West Coast figures such as The King of Solana Beach, a monarch who looks after "his" subjects and protects "his kingdom"'s integrity against the greed of real-estate developers.

Thus from the first Antin humorously stages the timeless struggle between the patriarchal benevolence of a supreme leader (whether The King of Solana Beach, the Gods or Stalin) and the short-term calculations of individuals driven by lust and greed. That these desires forever thwart any attempt at imposing autocratic rule is inevitable, since they give rise to mythical stories whose very repetition, and subsequent variations, ensure that they will never become fixed nor subject to demagoguery.

In the seven photographic tableaux included in "Classical Frieze", Antin pursues her trans-historical mapping of cultural typography, overlaying the Mediterranean basin with sunny California, Antiquity with contemporary culture and politics. The pictures focus on the story of Helen, which, depending on the narrator, usually recounts either the vicissitudes of a woman whose beauty triggered wars or the accomplishments of a strong-willed heroin conscious of her powers. Antin chooses to show both sides of Helen's ambiguous personality, revealing the complexity of a figure that, "after three thousand years of notoriety," "remains strangely silent as the most beautiful and disastrous objectification of male anxiety and desire."

By further combining classical mythology with explicit references to painting (Rubens, Géricault, Couture) and less explicit references to certain genres of photography (Wilhelm von Gloeden) and cinema (from Cecil B. DeMille to Ridley Scott), "Classical Frieze" tells the tale of a common cultural heritage, sometimes referred to as "Judeo-Christian" or "of the book", while suggesting a symmetry between the rise and falls of empires and the cyclical upheavals of our political and financial systems.

Allegory, for Antin, is "the method best suited to tell the tale of our desperate existential situation in the world". It is also what allows her photographs to act as cultural x-rays, bringing each narrative layer simultaneously to the fore with the attention to detail found in academic paintings, pictorial photography and epic cinema. Rather than a homogenizing process of historical translation, however, what emerges from these allegorical pictures is an excess of meaning, a multiplication rather than a reduction of interpretative possibilities – what the art historian Max Kozloff has referred to as Antin's practice of willful "mistranslation".

In *Constructing Helen* (2007), Antin catches myth-making in the act, so to speak: men are busy at work on a sculpture of a supine naked woman, her larger-than-life size reducing them to Lilliputian dimensions. If a model is to be selected, one woman must be able to stand out from her rivals. Hence in *Casting Call* and *Judgment of Paris*, both from 2007, Antin derides the age-old trope of a male jury deciding the fate of female candidates

(a trope that endures in so-called “reality” TV shows like *The Apprentice*). Whereas painters have often achieved spectacular visual effect by representing the decapitation of men – that is, by capitalising on the viewer’s assumed castration anxiety – in *Helen’s Vengeance* (2007) three inebriated Fates, a little girl and Helen herself revel in the spectacle of the poet’s bloodied head, while in the background the painter vainly attempts to free himself from a bird cage. *Proserpine Welcomes Helen* (2007) captures another “imaginary” moment in the life of Helen. Proserpine, or Persephone in the Greek tradition, offers Helen a warm welcome to the underworld where she dwells as Hades’ consort – an encounter none of the great poets describe, but which Antin faithfully restages for the camera. *Plaisir d’Amour* (2007), based on Thomas Couture’s 1847 painting *Decadence of the Romans*, now in the Musée d’Orsay, depicts yet another censored scene from Helen’s official biography, when her relationship with Paris has lost its initial spark: here she is seen reluctantly taking part in an apathetic orgy, while the Greek army takes decades to carry out its siege of Troy. *The Tourists* (2007) pushes the allegorical blend of references further still, mixing the pathos of Géricault’s *The Raft of the Medusa* with two Helens on their way to the mall, dressed like stars in a classical prequel of *The Devil Wears Prada*.

As ambiguous as Helen’s personality, Antin’s carefully choreographed images draw upon two apparently mutually exclusive registers: the impression of temporal and narrative seamlessness induced by the film’s movement at 24 frames per second, and the truth-effect produced by the photograph’s split-second shutter speed. Between the former’s story-telling and the latter’s assumed role as objective witness, Antin creates medium hermaphrodites, at once fictional and truthful, immediate and slow. As evidence of Antin’s long-standing interest in this temporal convergence, “Classical Frieze” includes a short film by Antin, also entitled “Classical Frieze”, that reveals the similarity between the artist’s technique for shooting still photographs and the shooting of Hollywood movies.

For the opening of “Classical Frieze” at Erna Hecey, Antin will read from her “memoir” entitled *Conversations with Stalin*, a text that switches between “absurdist comic confession and ironical pathos.” As yet another incarnation of Antin’s complex life and thought, *Conversations with Stalin* plays with heterogeneous narrative registers and biographies – specifically, in this case, upon the artist’s own experience of growing up in 1950s America in a Jewish, Communist, Eastern European immigrant household.

A cabinet presentation of drawings related to *Conversations with Stalin* will complete the exhibition.

Antin’s 2002 photographic exhibition at the Ronald Feldman Gallery, “The Last Days of Pompeii,” received the AICA (International Association of Art Critics) First Place award for Best Show by a Mid-Career Artist. Those works traveled to Vienna, Milan, Los Angeles, San Diego, and elsewhere. She has had numerous solo exhibitions, including at the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum, the Wadsworth Atheneum, and a major retrospective at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1999 which traveled to the Washington University Museum in Saint Louis before touring the UK. In 2009, Antin returned to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art with a solo exhibition titled “Classical Frieze”. Other recent solo presentations include “Eleanor Antin: Historical Takes” at the San Diego Art Museum and “Helen’s Odyssey” at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, both in 2008. Antin has participated in innumerable group exhibitions including documenta 12 in Kassel, *WHACK: Art and the Feminist Revolution* in Los Angeles, New York and Vancouver, and *elles@centrepompidou* in Paris. Antin is represented in major public collections including those of the Art Institute of Chicago, the Whitney Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Jewish Museum, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Tate Modern, and the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris.

Erna Hecey Gallery

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