

A touch of SoHo

Erna Hecey's gallery has taken off like a shot. **Sarah McFadden** finds out why

Four big works are held up in customs, the lighting technicians, who have only just arrived, are in a hurry to get back to Paris and the phones are ringing off the hook. In the midst of the commotion, artist and gallerist are as cool as cucumbers as they deliberate over the hanging of the exhibition that is to open in a few days' time.

My appointment with Erna Hecey (pronounced Hessayee) coincides with the arrival of the American performance artist and filmmaker Eleanor Antin at the Brussels gallery on Rue des Fabriques. Antin was about to install her show of 10 recent photo tableaux and a selection of photographs and drawings from the 1970s. The latter includes a group of five mildly ribald watercolours not shown until now. "I thought my friends wouldn't think me a good feminist but I was, so I hid them away," Antin explains.

It's almost as hard to imagine Antin hiding something for fear of disapproval as to think that anyone could doubt her feminist credentials. Pint-sized, quick-witted and direct, she is the author of now-legendary works such as *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture*, a 1972 performance that entailed crash-dieting for a month and recording in photographs the gradual reshaping of her body. The result is a series of 144 black and white nude shots for which she struck stiff balletic poses.

Over the years, Antin has invented faux-historical characters with carefully researched biographies, impersonating them in performances, films and photographs. One of them, Eleanora Antinova, was the only Black American member of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. Another is the King of Solana Beach (California), a bearded idealist who tries to save his community from depredation by real estate speculators.



Women at work: Erna Hecey, left, with the American artist Eleanor Antin

Inspired by Hollywood movies and 19th-century Salon paintings, the elaborately set-up colour photographs Antin is showing at Hecey's gallery represent deliciously decadent, clichéd scenes of ancient Rome awash in hedonism. The models, or actors, as she calls them, who pose as banqueters, bathers, warriors and slaves include friends and family members, colleagues, casting agency recruits and willing strangers. Antin herself is not among them. "I've gotten older," she explains. "All I could play now is the Delphic Oracle. Anyway, I'm not like Woody Allen, who has ten directors running around the set. These pictures are like a poor man's movies. Making them is like making a movie, except nobody's talking."

A professor emeritus of the University of California at San Diego, where she taught for 28 years, Antin won a Guggenheim fellowship in 1997, had a major retrospective at the Los Angeles County Museum two years after that. She will be represented at this year's

Documenta by more than 60 photographs and other works. Seventy-two this year, she has the spunk of someone half her age.

As she turns to work with Hecey on lighting the exhibition, her husband of 40 years, the renowned poet and art critic David Antin, tells me, "Eleanor has always had an absolute engagement with antiquity. A guard at the Metropolitan Museum once stopped her from touching the flank of a Praxiteles [sculpture of a male nude], and she fumed for the rest of the day."

I ask him about Hecey because I'm beginning to think she won't have time for me. Having spent 50 years in the art world, Antin has known plenty of dealers but few, apparently, like this one. "When Erna came to San Diego to visit Eleanor's studio," he replied, "it was so interesting to watch her respond to the work. She's so intelligent, so tuned to the art. She's like a friendly Dick Bellamy [the eccentric New York gallerist whose sensitivity to art and artists in the 1960s

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and 70s is legendary] except, of course, that Bellamy's ability to understand the art far exceeded his ability to sell it."

Hecey was born in Budapest, where she studied economics. Her parents, she says, wanted her to have a 'normal' career. She left Hungary in 1971 and eventually settled in Luxembourg, where she raised a family and with a partner became involved in running a gallery. In 1996 she started her own contemporary art gallery in Luxembourg.

She moved to Brussels, she says, for its open culture as well as for practical reasons. She wanted to remain within easy travelling distance of Luxembourg, where she still has an office, and she was captivated by the space which is now the gallery. "I don't think I could have found it in any other European capital. The location reminded me of SoHo in the 1970s."

The gallery occupies the ground floor and basement – 450 square metres total – of a former textile factory. The main exhibition space is open and luminous; the basement level is hospitable to light-sensitive works and video as well as to smaller works. When Hecey moved in, the building was vacant. Now it is home to a communications business on the first floor, an art gallery (Alice Day) on the second, and residential lofts above.

Galerie Erna Hecey is still the neighbourhood's major attraction. It stages five big shows a year and helps to produce its artists' works in other places. Pierre Bismuth's *Most Wanted Men* project, for example, was dispersed in public spaces around Brussels, and Jana Sterbak and Bert Theis have each presented individual works at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in collaboration with Hecey.

"We want to keep the audience excited. To attract the big Belgian collectors we have much to do, but it will happen. It's nice to have one foot in the mainstream, and the other foot out." ■

***The Empire of Signs*, Galerie Erna Hecey, 1c Rue des Fabriques, Brussels, until April 7, Tuesday to Saturday, 14.00 to 19.00, tel 02.502.00.24.**