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Review: A compelling Eleanor Antin show invites closer study, by Sharon Mizota (April 21, 2014)



Eleanor Antin, *The Sad Song of Columbine from Roman Allegories*, 2004

© Eleanor Antin, courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Art

Eleanor Antin's exhibition at Diane Rosenstein Fine Art is something of a tease. Not quite a retrospective, it's a selection of pieces associated with various projects clustered in the 1970s and 2000s.

Intended to highlight "existential themes" that run through her work, the show is certainly preoccupied with sex and death and power (in a playful way, as much of Antin's work is), yet presupposes a familiarity with her career that renders it maddeningly oblique in places.

Still, this sampling is an invitation to dig deeper — a credit to the sustained engagement and relevance of Antin's varied and mercurial work.

Fascinated by history, since the 1970s Antin has constructed much of her art around invented characters or alter egos such as black ballerina Eleanora Antinova who danced with the Ballets Russes in the 1920s, or the King, a 17th century monarch who anachronistically strolled the shorelines of Solana Beach.

These projects are among her best known, but are represented here only by a few photos of the King — Antin wearing a floppy hat and effusive facial hair — and some (quite lovely) watercolor designs and paper dolls from "Before the Revolution," a French Revolution ballet in which Antinova appeared. The latter are especially difficult to place, as there is no indication that they are actually designs for a play within a play.

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For those in the know, there are also some revealing watercolors of the King. Generally a benevolent ruler, he is here caught in some naughty moments, such as taking a switch to a subject's bare bottom. These images are presented next to equally ribald, never-before-seen pastels from Antin's "Dance of Death" series from

the mid-1970s, depicting skeletons alternately abusing and consorting with maidens and soldiers. Executed in a loose, cartoonish style (with a nod and a wink to Goya's "Caprichos"), they are both light-hearted and chilling.

This tension between humor and horror also runs through a series of photographic works from the last 10 years in which Antin staged scenes from Classical antiquity, filtered through the historical lens of Romantic painting.

Contemporary actors pose in togas and/or various stages of undress to form complex, fleshy tableaux. Shot under harsh, flat light like advertisements, these scenes are palpably artificial, almost like drag. The clash of familiar Classical settings and clothing and undeniably 21st century bodies is absurd and does much to clear away the romantic mists in which antiquity has been idealized. Yet their heightened reality also makes them creepy and unsettling.

Antin became interested in ancient Rome in particular when she saw a connection between the fall of the Roman Empire and the impending (some would say in-progress) fall of the American one. Her neo-neo-Classical tableaux are therefore indictments of our own culture of excess, exploitation and waste. Despite their inherent humor, they are portraits of a doomed society, not so different from the dance of the skeletons.