

Eleanor Antin: Passengers at Diane Rosenstein Fine Art, by Lenae Day (April 24, 2014)

Passengers

where are you going?
from here to there?
do you ever get there?
i don't know
why not?
i'm only a passenger—just like you
(from an Egyptian tomb)



Eleanor Antin, *Going Home*, from *Roman Allegories*, 2004
© Eleanor Antin, courtesy of Ronald Feldman

As you round the corner of the entryway at Diane Rosenstein where this phrase is visible, the first works on view in Eleanor Antin's *Passengers* are two massive photographs from her 2004 series *Roman Allegories*. *Going Home* is

almost 9 feet wide and 4 feet tall. It depicts a very blonde girl seated on a suitcase

plastered with travel stickers, looking off to the right of the camera, smiling in a forced, staged manner. She sits as though posing for a children's clothing catalogue, but is dressed in Hellenic Roman garb and is surrounded by vague Roman detritus (pieces of columns, an urn, vague statues), a crow, and five adult figures all dressed similarly with their backs to the camera, facing the ocean. All of the characters hold umbrellas as if waiting for a deluge while already knowing their fate.

This piece works as a kind of beginning and ending, encapsulating the feeling inherent in *Passengers*—an existential question about life, death, culture. And the point of it all—with a humorous spin *Passengers* is a retrospective of Antin's work, but not in a way that I expected at all. Anyone familiar with Antin's oeuvre knows that she was a pioneer of early conceptual and

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Eleanor Antin, *100 Boots on the Porch*, 1971/2005,
© Eleanor Antin, courtesy of Ronald Feldman

performance art. She created and developed characters—Nurse Eleanor, the black ballerina Eleanora Antinova, and the King of Solano Beach—but very few references to her work with the self exist in this show. In a separate small room toward the entrance of the gallery, all

fifty-one photographs from her *100 Boots* series are on display. This is the

piece that made her famous in her 1973 MOMA show and it is one of the earliest examples of narrative conceptual art. Antin photographed 100 boots in various locations and mailed them to 1,000 people and institutions over two years. She conceived of this project as a sort of “pictorial novel” in which you can see the boots on a long journey. They begin at the sea (*100 Boots Facing the Sea*), do some mundane chores (*100 Boots at the Bank*; *100 Boots in the Market*), commit their first crime (*100 Boots Trespass*), go to work (*100 Boots on the Job*), head east to New York, and eventually end up at the museum. In my favorite, *100 Boots on the Porch*, Antin’s playful humor is evident: Some are lazing, some are daredevils perched on a ledge, while others are casually standing, facing each other—one can almost hear them talking to each other about the day’s events. This is a classic piece, one that is great to see in person and within the conceptual framework of this show.

In the main gallery are some rarely seen (and some previously unshown) drawings. The playful series *Dance of Death* (1974–75) consists of pastel sketches featuring a jolly skeletal figure of death, dancing with maidens or smoking with soldiers. There are also beautiful costume and stage-set drawings from her 1979 play *Before the*



Eleanor Antin, *Costume Drawings from Before the Revolution (Double Marie)*, 1975-76 © Eleanor Antin, courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Art

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Revolution—one reads “Simplicity is an infinite cost,” perhaps referring to the lavish Baroque world in which the play exists, but which I read as a philosophical declaration on the part of the artist to remain grounded in complicated visual and human narratives.



Eleanor Antin, *Classical Frieze*, 2008
© Eleanor Antin, courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Art

My favorite piece is at the very end of the show. *Classical Frieze* (2008) is a twenty-one-minute film directed and produced by Antin that explores the process behind her classical pieces. In it, she says, “with photography you can invent any time period you want.” And she does just that in her beautiful monumental *Historical*

Takes series (from 2001 to 2007) that photographically re-create classical

Greek and Roman scenes in the style of 19th-century salon-style painting. Five of these pieces are on view in the exhibit, but watching Antin’s own telling of their creation is the most fascinating and hilarious. The video shows her subjects getting ready for the shoots: It shows them putting makeup on, taking selfies in costume, gorging themselves in a suburban kitchen, naked men’s butts getting hair applied to them so they can be satyrs, young girls sheepishly viewing the goods on men in tight bikinis, awkward conversations, and the miscommunications that occur with a cast of twenty people. It shows the collaboration inherent in works as grand as this, as well as the joy and warmth she exudes as she makes her work. At the very end, it shows Antin, a tiny 70-year-old Jewish woman, lugging urns to their places on the beach—the same detritus in that entry photograph *Going Home*. The young girl is in curlers sitting on suitcases while some men are planting the columns along the beach as a resident fishes in the background. When the shot is finally set up and all actors are in their places, Antin yells “action” before a jogger runs from right to left—through the frozen Classical scene. Eleanor Antin has a way of bringing the past to the present in a way that allows for warmth, insight, and humor: the three pillars of great art.