

Do As the Romans: Greco-Roman Iconography in Eleanor Antin's *Last Days of Pompeii*

Author: Catherine Parkinson

Faculty Mentor: Jennifer Way, Department of Art Education and Art History, College of Visual Art and Design

Department and College Affiliations: Department of Studio Art, College of Visual Art and Design

Bio:

Catherine Parkinson is a studio art major concentrating in drawing and painting, with a minor in Japanese language. Her artwork and research primarily focus on gender and sexual identity, particularly in women, exploring how traditional gender roles in fine art, media, and the domestic sphere shape women's identities. She is currently working on a series of figurative oil paintings based on personal photographs and live modeling sessions investigating these themes. She moonlights as a writer and photographer for a fashion blog, and is spending her summer contributing as a web designer to a youth magazine that seeks to give visibility to teens of color, non-traditional gender identities, and disabilities.

Abstract:

Throughout history, artists have appropriated scenes from ancient Greco-Roman culture to convey truths about the present. In the photography series, *The Last Days of Pompeii*, 2001, Eleanor Antin continues this legacy by recreating Pompeii in La Jolla, California. However, Antin's work possesses a self-consciousness about its position in the lineage of Greco-Roman appropriation. Rather than recount Roman mythology, *The Last Days of Pompeii* mimics Renaissance and Rococo interpretations of classical antiquity. By juxtaposing techniques of Renaissance and Rococo art with hyper-realism, *Pompeii* critiques not only contemporary American values, but the romanticizing of history in art. While Antin draws many parallels between Pompeii and La Jolla, my primary focus is her commentary on artists' use of history. By comparing palettes and iconography in *Pompeii* to those of iconic Renaissance and Rococo art, and by consulting Nietzsche's identification of Western Europe's inheritance of the Greco-Roman "master" morality, I will demonstrate how Antin's series parodies artistic reinventions of the past.

Eleanor Antin's *Last Days of Pompeii*

In the photography series, *The Last Days of Pompeii* (2001), multimedia artist Eleanor Antin stages fictional scenes of Pompeii emphasizing the moments just before the eruption of Mount Vesuvius. However, she places the scenes in the contemporary setting of the rich resort community of La Jolla, California. Antin's engagement with classical history reminds us that for centuries, artists have appropriated scenes from ancient Greco-Roman culture to convey truths about the present. For example, Antin constructs elaborate sets that allude to historical art practices depicting ancient Rome. Yet, in her series, Antin not only draws parallels between past and present; I contend that she also comments on Western practices of remembering the past. Drawing inspiration from the color palettes and iconography of painters that preceded her, and juxtaposing these techniques of Renaissance and Neoclassical art with photography and humor, *The Last Days of Pompeii* critiques not only contemporary American values, but also the process of reinventing history through art.

Heritage, as defined by Laurajane Smith, is "the use of the past to construct ideas of individual and group identities" (18). It engages history beyond objective facts for the purpose of "[ensuring] or [expressing] social cohesion and identity" (Smith 18). In the *Pompeii* series, Antin recreates ancient Rome based on iconography established by Renaissance and Neoclassical tradition, despite the historical inaccuracy of these representations; therefore, heritage, rather than history, becomes the primary concern of *The Last Days of Pompeii*. By alluding to the work of her artistic predecessors, Antin self-consciously positions her work in a long lineage of Greco-Roman appropriation in the visual arts. Color is one of the main avenues by which she links her photographs with historic works of art from the Renaissance and Neoclassical periods. For example, the broad color palette of *Pompeii*, particularly in the photographs, *The Golden Death*

(Figure 1) and *A Hot Afternoon* (Figure 2), resembles Raphael's "aesthetic of variety and copiousness [of color]," particularly in his portrayal of Ancient Greece in *School of Athens* in Figure 3 (Bell 91). Conversely, the more limited color palette of *The Last Day* (Figure 4) draws inspiration from the "muted colors" of a Neoclassical color palette ("The Oath of Horatii"). The dark grays, rusty reds, muted greens, and sparse whites call to mind Jacques-Louis David's iconic *Oath of the Horatii* (Figure 5), which similarly depicts a tragic scene appropriated from Roman history (Louvre). By using these color palettes, Antin pays homage to Renaissance and Neoclassical artists whose own color choices were inspired as much by their own respective eras as by their ideas about the Classical past. These portrayals of Rome are not merely illustrative of historical events, but works of heritage reinterpreted within varying contexts. By continuing artistic traditions of Rome, Antin also engages with the process of remembering a collective past.

According to Jan Assman, cultural memory is "a collective concept for all knowledge that directs behavior and experience in the interactive framework of a society...through generations in repeated societal practice and initiation" (126). Collective memory is distinguished from sciences (such as history), which lack "characteristics of memory as it relates to a collective self-image" (126). The process of building a collective Western identity is a "transcendent" process "characterized by its distance from the every day," not expressed through mundane facts, but through "figures of memory" from the remote past which are constructed over generations of cultural practices, including art. "Figures of memory" refers to cultural rites, poems, and imagery that define a collective past (128-129). Antin's *Pompeii* series, far from an objective representation of Rome, deals primarily with "figures" of Antiquity. Drawing from cultural iconographic tools used to depict Rome rather than historical fact, Antin's *Pompeii*

series proves not to be a study of Roman history, but of Western culture, memory, and iconography.

Antin takes iconographic cues from Renaissance artists such as Raphael, particularly the white marble statues and friezes in the background of *School of Athens* (Figure 6). The pure white sculptures hearken back to stereotypes visually representing Greece and Rome that were established during the Renaissance. Historical accuracy dictates that these friezes and busts appear gaudily painted in flat glazes and busy patterns (Gurewitsch). However, Renaissance and Neoclassical artists operated under both archaeological limitations and imperialist “vandalism” of ancient statues, which demanded that they appear pure white. According to Gurewitsch:

Knowing no better, artists in the 16th century took the bare stone at face value.

Michelangelo and others emulated what they believed to be the ancient aesthetic, leaving the stone of most of their statues its natural color. Thus they helped pave the way for neo-Classicism, the lily-white style that to this day remains our paradigm for Greek art. (2)

Whether or not his successors were aware of the mistake, they participated in building an iconographic language that visually and conceptually defined Antiquity. For instance, 19th-century salon artist, Thomas Couture, also featured white sculptures in his 1847 painting, *The Romans of the Decadence* (Pioch). Incidentally, Antin would reference this painting in a later photographic series on Rome (Heartney 128-129); however, the iconic white statues appear in her *Pompeii* series too. In *The Artist's Studio* (Figure 7), an artist carves a bust of a woman in marble, with several white friezes and fragmented busts in the background. Although in ancient Rome these busts would have been painted, or at the very least, fully intact, Antin plays off of modern sensibilities about ancient Roman culture by portraying the sculptures as white and aged.

Rather than turning to recent scientific and archaeological findings on Pompeii, Antin consults Renaissance and Neoclassical artists through whom the memory of Rome filtered and evolved.

In an attempt to further dilute the historical accuracy of *The Last Days of Pompeii*, Antin injects a Pre-Raphaelite woman into several photographs, including *A Hot Afternoon* (Figure 8). Although the woman is difficult to distinguish in digital representations of the photographs, undoubtedly she would stand out in the mural-sized gallery installations in which the photographs were exhibited. Seated in a 19th-century wheelchair, her interactions with the Romans are ambiguous and detached; Antin describes this woman as “a visitor from the future” (Antin “Oral History”). Placed chronologically between the Romans depicted in the photograph and the contemporary viewers, perhaps she acts as a liaison between past and present. Or, she may represent the gaze of colonial tourists who began visiting the site of Pompeii in the late 18th-century, only half a century before her time (“Archaeological Areas”). Since its excavation, Pompeii persists as one of the most visited World Heritage Sites (“Archaeological Areas”) confirming its importance as a site at which “we construct and maintain identity” (Williams 186). More importantly, as a site of tourism, Pompeii is “strongly mediated by cultural filters,” that is, “reinvented...to suit our purposes” (Williams 187). Thus, the woman in the wheelchair perhaps represents the role of the tourist who shapes the constructed cultural importance of Pompeii through consumerism and the “tourist gaze” (187). Although her specific purpose remains unclear, she seems to nonetheless represent a tradition of speculating on the past.

Although the scenes of *The Last Days of Pompeii* reenact the remote past, Antin remarks in a 2003 PBS interview that the series “deals with our present situation” in America (Antin, “Humor”). The overwhelming affluence depicted in *The Golden Death* and the decadent table scene in *The Banquet* resonate heavily with Americans in the rich resort community of La Jolla,

California, whom Antin describes as “beautiful, affluent people living the good life” (Antin, “Humor”). Although the photographs were taken prior to September 11th, Antin notes that the post-production work, done after the attack on the Twin Towers, was executed with an acute awareness of America’s precarious position as it teetered on the brink of war with the Middle East. She draws a parallel between the United States and Pompeii, just before the eruption of Vesuvius (Antin, “Oral History”). In Antin’s *Pompeii* narrative, the characters display hubris of comfort in their affluent lifestyle as destruction looms in a way eerily reminiscent of the pre-September 11th American attitude. In her book, *On Photography*, Susan Sontag characterizes this hindsight perspective on photographs as “posthumous irony,” or “the state of innocence, the vulnerability of [the people in the photograph] heading toward their own destruction” (qtd. in Hirsch 19).

Playing off this irony, Antin employs crisp details and color to engage viewers in a mode of historical voyeurism achievable only through the photographic medium. According to Sontag, “Photographs furnish evidence. Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we’re shown a photograph of it” (qtd. in Hirsch 5). Despite the historical inaccuracy in *The Last Days of Pompeii*, the verisimilitude of its photographic execution legitimizes the events it depicts. Her use of the modern medium of photography to reenact ancient historical scenes allows the contemporary viewer to inject themselves into the life-size installations. Antin’s juxtaposition of traditional iconography and color with the modern medium of photography lends strength and credence to the connection she makes between antiquity and modern America.

Antin’s *Pompeii* series not only draws upon visual traditions in the arts, but a philosophical tradition as well. In his book, *The Genealogy of Morals*, philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche traces the establishment of Western morality to Greek and Roman philosophers.

Dubbing this morality as the “master” morality, he says, “the noble, powerful, high-stationed and high-minded [of Greece and Rome]... first seized the right to create values and to coin names for values,” citing etymological and philosophical examples from ancient Greek language and texts (26). He characterizes the master morality as “knightly-aristocratic value judgments [presupposing] a powerful physicality, a flourishing, overabundant health” (33). In *The Last Days of Pompeii*, these Classical virtues manifest themselves in the vigorous and beautiful people that almost exclusively populate Antin's narrative, especially brawny and tanned wrestlers in *A Hot Afternoon* (Figure 2).

When considered with reference to Classicism in art, Nietzsche's treatise elucidates the enduring prominence of Roman and Greek culture in Western art. Values of pride and bravado, instilled in the West since Antiquity, compel us to reclaim Greco-Roman heritage in order to flatter our present reality. The privilege to “possess truth,” or define a society's values, belongs to an elite class that shapes the conversation of heritage, or what legacy we choose to remember (Nietzsche 29). Laurajane Smith calls this “authorized heritage discourse,” or the “hegemonic discourse [of heritage]” that “promotes a certain set of Western elite cultural values” (11).

Through numerous artistic movements, artists have romanticized Rome in response to a need for the promotion of master morality values, especially for the purpose of establishing a cohesive national identity. For instance, Neoclassicism sought to instill values of stoicism, democracy, and heroism for the purpose of advancing the French Revolution (“The Oath of the Horatii). Even Antin addresses the Roman ideational values of indulgence, valor, and beauty in the heroism of *A Hot Afternoon* (Figure 2) and the melodrama of *The Last Day* (Figure 4). Like her artistic ancestors, Antin borrows from Antiquity in order to convey truths about present-day La Jolla;

however, rather than championing traditional master morality virtues, Antin's recreation mocks the Roman penchant for "bold recklessness in the face of danger" (Nietzsche 29).

Despite the dire comparison between America and the destroyed city of Pompeii, Antin liberally infuses humor and absurdity into *The Last Days of Pompeii*, parodying the serious, unapproachable characters in Renaissance and Neoclassical art. For example, in *The Death of Petronius* (Figure 9), a person performs acrobatics inappropriately in the background; in *The Tree*, a woman lies inexplicably on the ground, breasts bared; the repeated presence of the aforementioned 19th-century woman remains perplexing. The ridiculous poses and behaviors punctuate otherwise idealized images, interrupting the customary stoicism and elitism of the Classical subject. While historical works of art such as *School of Athens* and *The Oath of the Horatii* convey a sense of dignity, "greater seriousness, and moral commitment" (Neoclassicism and the Enlightenment"), *The Last Days of Pompeii* celebrates debauchery and absurdity. Whereas artists like Jacques-Louis David used Roman scenes to advance serious political causes such as the French Revolution, Antin appropriates them to satirize the artistic tradition of self-glorification.

Antin's use of humor, ambiguity, and photography prove the perfect mode of adaptation of ancient Greco-Roman tradition into the postmodern era. In postmodernism, the artist takes an "ironic or bric-a-brac collage approach to construction that combines several traditional styles into one structure" (Morley). Through a synthetic pastiche of iconography, art, and morality from centuries of former art movements, *The Last Days of Pompeii* critically revisits Classicism in art and morality. *The Last Days of Pompeii* connects with contemporary viewers by appealing to a cultural nostalgia while also catering to a postmodern skepticism of tradition through "sarcastic playful parody" (Morley). Antin's irreverent reworking of artistic tradition into the postmodern

era proves relevant to the present, in which spectators of art must acknowledge their heritage while remaining critical of it.

Although Eleanor Antin's *Pompeii* series continues a long, prolific tradition of appropriating ancient Greece and Rome in art, her art uniquely grapples with tradition itself by introducing photography and absurdity into otherwise elite subjects. By using historically inaccurate Roman iconography from Renaissance and Neoclassical artists, Antin reinvents an ancient Rome that is reflective of contemporary values, especially our practices of constructing social memory. *The Last Days of Pompeii* closely explores the relationship between present and past, capturing the transformation of ancient Rome iconography from historical facts to a "figure of memory." Eleanor Antin's work reminds us that history is often manipulated to suit the needs of the context in which it is remembered, and often, inaccurate ideas about the past form the most enduring memories. The Rome we see in Raphael, David, and, indeed, Antin, is not the entire story of the past, but rather a small vignette, tailored to flatter the privileged.

Works Cited

- Antin, Eleanor. Interview by PBS. "Humor" Art21. PBS, 2003. Web. 16 Feb. 2012
- Antin, Eleanor. "Oral History Interview with Eleanor Antin, 2009 May 8-9." Interview by Judith O. Richards. Archives of American Art. Smithsonian Institution, 9 May 2009. Web. 29 Mar. 2012.
- Antin, Eleanor. *The Last Days of Pompeii*. 2001. Photograph. Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, NY. Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, Inc. 2010. Web. 29 Mar. 2012.
- "Archaeological Areas of Pompei, Herculaneum and Torre Annunziata." UNESCO World Heritage Centre. United Nations, 1997. Web. 29 Mar. 2012.
- Assman, Jan, and John Czaplicka. "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity." *New German Critique* 65 (1995): 125-33. Print.
- Bell, Janis. "Color and Chiaroscuro." *Raphael's "School of Athens"*. Ed. Marcia B. Hall. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997. 85-109. Print.
- Gurewitsch, Matthew. "True Colors." *Smithsonian Magazine*. Smithsonian.com, July 2008. Web. 29 Mar. 2012.
- Heartney, Eleanor. "Eleanor Antin at Ronald Feldman." *Art in America* 6 (2002): 128-29. Print.
- Hirsch, Marianne. "Mourning and Postmemory." *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*. Cambridge, Mass. [u.a.: Harvard Univ., 2002. Print.
- Morley, James. "Defining Postmodernism." *Defining Postmodernism*. Ed. Christopher Keep. University of Virginia, 2000. Web. 07 May 2012.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. "First Essay: Good and Evil, Good and Bad." *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Ed. Walter Arnold. Kaufmann. New York: Vintage, 1989. 24-56. Print.
- "Neoclassicism and the Enlightenment Overview." Education at the Getty. The Getty. Web. 29 Mar. 2012.
- Pioch, Nicolas. "Thomas Couture." WebMuseum. BMW Foundation, 14 July 2002. Web. 29 Mar. 2012.
- Smith, Laurajane. "The Discourse of Heritage." *Uses of Heritage*. London: Routledge, 2006. 11-43. Print.
- "The Oath of the Horatii." Louvre Museum. Louvre Museum, Paris, 2010. Web. 29 Mar. 2012.

Williams, Stephen. "Cultural Constructions and Tourism Geographies." *Tourism Geography*. London: Routledge, 1998. 183-91. Print.



Figure 1: *The Golden Death* (2001)

Eleanor Antin

The Golden Death from "The Last Days of Pompeii," 2001

chromogenic print

58 3/4 x 46 5/8 x 1 3/4 inches

Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York / www.feldmangallery.com



Figure 2: *A Hot Afternoon* (2001)

Eleanor Antin

A Hot Afternoon from "The Last Days of Pompeii", 2001

chromogenic print

46 7/8 x 58 5/8 x 1 3/4 inches

Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York / www.feldmangallery.com



Figure 3: Raphael's *School of Athens*

Bell, Janis. "Color and Chiaroscuro." Raphael's "School of Athens" Ed. Marcia B. Hall. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997. 85-109. Print.



Figure 4: *The Last Day* (2001)

Eleanor Antin

The Last Day from "The Last Days of Pompeii," 2001

chromogenic print

46 3/4 x 58 5/8 x 1 3/4 inches

Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York / www.feldmangallery.com



Figure 5: *Oath of the Horatii* (1784)

Jacques-Louis David

Louvre Museum, Paris

<http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/oath-horatii>



Figure 6: Detail from Raphael's *School of Athens*
Bell, Janis. "Color and Chiaroscuro." Raphael's "School of Athens" Ed. Marcia B. Hall.
Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997. 85-109. Print.



Figure 7: *The Artist's Studio* (2001)

Eleanor Antin

The Artist's Studio from "The Last Days of Pompeii," 2001

chromogenic print

46 5/8 x 58 5/8 inches

Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York / www.feldmangallery.com



Figure 8: Detail from *A Hot Afternoon*

Eleanor Antin

A Hot Afternoon from "The Last Days of Pompeii," 2001

chromogenic print

46 7/8 x 58 5/8 x 1 3/4 inches

Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York / www.feldmangallery.com



Figure 9: *The Death of Petronius* (2001)

Eleanor Antin

The Death of Petronius from "The Last Days of Pompeii," 2001

chromogenic print

46 9/16 x 94 1/2 x 1 3/4 inches

Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York / www.feldmangallery.com