

ARTNEWS

THE STUFF OF YOU: REVISITING ELEANOR ANTIN'S GROUNDBREAKING CONCEPTUAL PORTRAITS AT DIANE ROSENSTEIN, LOS ANGELES

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Eleanor Antin had just moved to San Diego, discovered the Sears catalogue, and begun work on her “California Lives” installation. “In New York, you take the subway, go to Macy’s, and buy something,” Antin explained in a 2009 interview: Californians mail-ordered lifestyles, and she wanted to see if she could do it, too.

Antin had her second-ever solo show lined up at New York’s Gain Ground, an alternative space on West 80th Street. For the installation, she mail-ordered objects, which she used piece by piece to assemble portraits of Californians whom she knew—none of them particularly famous. The portrait of “Jeanie,” for example, consisted of pink and yellow hair curlers, matches, and a coffee cup set on a side table. The portrait of “Merrit,” a man who got himself shot while walking along the freeway toward a gas station, featured an army-green hat hanging over a gas can.

In 1969, when these works first went on view, they shone with newness. “Fresh,” critic and poet David Antin called them in a 1971 essay that suggested his wife had made the relationship between self-worth and consumerist dependencies painfully apparent. Eleanor Antin would call these and later works “consumer-goods sculptures.”



Eleanor Antin, *Jeanie*, 1969.
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND DIANE ROSENSTEIN

Now, as installed at Diane Rosenstein in Hollywood, the objects come off as dated, pleasantly vintage. They're not fresh at all, no longer readable as comments on consumerism, but as reflections on other things: obscurity, intimacy, and legacy making.

Antin's portrait of Molly Barnes, a then-recent California transplant, now a dealer and author writing a book about her one-time lover Willem de Kooning, consists of a faded pink bathroom rug, sprinkled with baby powder, and an old electric razor, plugged in and buzzing during gallery hours. Together, the objects conjure a portrait of a single lady, self-sufficient yet distracted. Each little assemblage has an air of insiderness—sometimes of the gossipy variety, with a few of the framed texts that accompany the installation alluding to affairs.

When Antin originally exhibited this work, artist John Baldessari offered a criticism, she recalled during a June 4 talk at Diane Rosenstein. Her “subjects” were too obscure, Baldessari said. With her 1970 show, “Portraits of Eight New York Women,” she tried to portray women who were—or should have been—famous within art-world circles. Then, if her critics didn't know who her subjects were, she could say to them, “Well, you should.” Antin installed all eight portraits (again, assemblages of new consumer goods) in a room at the Chelsea Hotel. There, Yvonne Rainer's exercise bike was angled toward a milk bottle on a welcome mat, meant to represent museum publicist Lynn Traiger, and Margaret Mead's green chair, flanked by a thermos and covered by a black sun umbrella, defiantly faced a corner.

At Diane Rosenstein, the Mead chair faces a wall, and a corner is occupied by a portrait of Carolee Schneemann in the form of a blood-red velvet cloak draped over an easel with a mirror behind it. A simple cot with a lantern hanging over it stands against the opposite wall, an especially ascetic portrait of art critic Amy Goldin. Goldin, Schneemann, Mead, and Rainer are among the more recognizable names in this room. Others, like Traiger and experimental gallerist Naomi Dash, have fallen into obscurity—Google them, and the first hits reference Antin's work.

These days, Antin tends to discuss her work in a very anecdotal way. She treats her tangents and incidentals as equal to her main threads. Similarly, this exhibition is like a story made up of tangents that all coalesced at a certain moment in an artist's life. As reinstalled now, acting as something of a time capsule, the show feels decidedly, gratifyingly anti-canonical. The little nuances, accessories, and sensations trump any narratives of achievement.

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