

Review: Eleanor Antin at Diane Rosenstein

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You are what you buy. As a child of the '80s this understanding has been programmed into me since the commercial breaks of Saturday morning cartoons. 20 years before I ever set eyes on an American Girl catalogue, Eleanor Antin was already acutely aware of the abilities of material possessions to tell the story of an individual.

Previously a painter before moving on to assemblage, Antin had already begun her career-long exploration into identity with her first conceptual project, *Blood of a Poet Box* (1965-1968), by gathering blood samples from poet friends and storing them on glass slides. Then in 1968, Antin traded the retail *Wunderkammer* of New York City for a sleepy beach town outside of San Diego. Shortly thereafter, she found her Rosetta Stone in the Sears catalogue. This bible, of sorts, contained a vast array of consumer goods, making it the perfect palette for Antin's method of matching material objects to personhood. "The Sears catalogue was especially crowded with objects from lowly brush shavers to corsets, from ladders to wedding gowns," she explains in the introductory text for the exhibition. The series of portraits, created from various catalogues, became two exhibitions: *California Lives* (1969) and *Portraits of Eight New York Women* (1970). The combined work from both was on view recently as a single exhibition, *What time is it?*, at Diane Rosenstein Gallery.



Eleanor Antin, *Margaret Mead* (1970). Umbrella, chair, binoculars with case, thermos, dimensions variable. Image courtesy the artist and Diane Rosenstein, Los Angeles.

Shopping as portraiture makes a handy form of identity abstraction—most people need a table or a pair of shoes at least—and in the high-consumerist world taking shape post World War II, the possibilities for interpretation were infinitely multiplied. The assemblages from *California Lives* in particular are not flashy, but rather clusters of quotidian materials arranged nonchalantly in the gallery. *Howard* (1969) consists of a pair of dress shoes with a pair of rolled up socks and a watch tucked inside. *The Murfins* (1969), where a partially completed brick wall stands behind a ladder on which rests a forgotten can of Fresca, conjures a scene in which the subjects have stepped away for a quick break and will return any moment to take up where they left off.

This economy of materials does not diminish the power of the personal narratives that Antin depicts. Each detail contains a clue; from the saucy, pink-lip-stick-stained cigarette in *Jeanie* (1969), to the depressingly insufficient fruit tray that accompanies soldier *Tim* (1969) off to war. To aid the viewer in unraveling her subjects, Antin provides brief character texts about each (and the occasional footnote scrawled on the wall in pencil).

These briefs are installed in a single room in the gallery along with the noisiest of her works, *Molly Barnes* (1969). Barnes seems to have neglected to turn off her electric razor following a kerfuffle in which she spills her pills and powder. The vibrating razor rests on a delicately soiled pink bath mat, its insistent buzzing audible to the viewer throughout the show.

After *California Lives* was poorly received upon its debut in New York, Antin doubled down on her methods but altered her subjects, creating *Portraits of Eight New York Women* (1970), each inspired by a prominent female member of New York's avant-garde community. Reflecting the often performative lives of these women, the arrangements become more dramatic in this body of work. There is the show-stopping *Carolee Schneemann* (1970): a dramatic sweep of red velvet is personified and preening in front of a mirror, yet is still grounded by the earthy jar of honey at its feet. The work is haunting and elegant. Meanwhile, a more playful *Yvonne Rainer* (1970) balances a heaping basket of flowers atop her Exercycle, her sweatshirt lingering on the edge of the seat. And what exactly does *Hannah Weiner* (1970) plan to do with that hammer? The tool rests threateningly amongst an otherwise saccharine picnic arrangement complete with gingham-clad, heart-shaped chairs.

Here too, the issues of subjectivity and identity bubble up to the surface. One work, the portrait of *Rochelle Owens* (1970) was deemed inaccurate by its subject; in its place, a wall label reads "Rochelle Owens Removed/ Piece Did Not Live up to Subject" According to the text accompanying the exhibition, only one woman wanted her portrait after the show. But, after a year "she called to say the piece was making her nervous and her therapist suggested that she give it back."

These are portraits that both celebrate and scrutinize their subjects. Antin does good work digging into the complexity of people's (and particularly women's) identities and relaying those specific details with simple goods considerately placed. The sculptures resonate by capturing the imperfections and nuances that people project into the world, encompassing style, poise, and presence, yet also a darker internal turmoil that many of us contain under the surface. Her portraits celebrate and expose the complexities of each of our inner lives, while also unmasking a dependence on capitalist structures to express the self. These objects become stand-ins for the body, infused with the energy of life, and the pathos of mortality.