
GALLERY VIEW

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Eleanor Antin's Historical Daydream

One of the brightest people around the American art world is a young woman named Eleanor Antin. What she does is difficult to categorize. It has within it elements of writing, painting, filmmaking, photography, theatricals (both amateur and professional), autobiography and a daydream inspired by history. These elements may appear either singly or in combination, and the end-result may be either a little sheet of paper that we have to get up close to or an elaborate spectacle involving live actors, a spoken text, painted mannequins on rollers, a sufficiency of scenery and Mrs. Antin herself.

The Antin show which is on view through Feb. 5 at the M. L. D'Arc Gallery, 15 East 57th Street, is called "The Angel of Mercy." It consists of sixty-five impersonations of Victorian photography on the walls, together with a large group of lifesized, two-dimensional figures in masonite. The figures are strongly characterized and painted in a vigorous brushy style with plenty of bold color and a keen eye for period detail. In almost every case the figures also appear in the photographs, so that the visitor has the sensation of living in two worlds at once.

The historical daydream in question is drawn from the life and times of Florence Nightingale, the pioneer feminist who said to Victorian England that a woman's place was, if not on the battlefield, then in a field hospital not far behind the lines. The Nightingale career is abundantly documented and there are moments at which the dauntless little persona conjured up by Miss Antin merges completely with the historical Nightingale. That solitary little woman in a world of men at war could be no one else.

Seasoned Antin-watchers will remember that something of the kind came out in her earlier historical pieces. "The Great Ballerina," who shone like the evening star in the twilight of Imperial Russia, had her counterpart in real life, for instance. "The Seventeenth-Century French King," likewise. With fancy dress on the one hand and an eye for extravagant incident on the other Mrs. Antin was able to keep us continuously interested, amused, and touched. These were annotated picture-narratives in which true feeling wrestled with parody and came out on top. It helped

if you had read Tamara Karsavina's autobiography, "Theater Street." It also helped if you had read "The Three Musketeers." But it wasn't essential: a universal longing came through of its own accord.

"The Angel of Mercy" is a memorable and an idiosyncratic achievement. It begins with twenty-five soft-grained photographs which mimic both the idiom and the technical limitations of the Victorian photographer. Image after image, each with its handwritten title, shows us the home-life of Antin/Nightingale in the England of the 1850's. The scene is decorous, even if suppressed passions are never far away. Hearts are broken in an atmosphere of croquet-playing, sketching from nature, admiring the new baby, fishing from a bridge in the garden, singing to the sound of an upright piano, and reading the news from the front in the morning papers.

Mrs. Antin has at her disposal a seemingly unlimited stock of Victorian costumes and a cast of hundreds, all of whom play their part with no more than an occasional intrusive grin. She herself assumes for the occasion a George Eliot-like cast of countenance. We see before us the archetypal honest worrier who persuaded Victorian England that women were not secondary human beings. (A particularly telling photograph is the one in which Mrs. Antin declaims "The quality of mercy" in an open-air performance of "The Merchant of Venice." It is worth going to the D'Arc Gallery for that image alone).

The England of these scenes carries conviction, even if the presentation sometimes owes more to Winslow Homer than to his English contemporaries. When the action moves to the Crimean War and the time comes for Antin/Nightingale to prove herself on the plain that lay wide open to the Russian artillery, quite another idiom supervenes. Roger Fenton, the great war-photographer, now stands behind the lens; and to the initial cast there is added a motley crew of generals, doctors, wounded cavalrymen, Russian prisoners, wandering violinists and demon barbers, together with a fearless investigative reporter duly designated as "Mr. Russell of The Times" (no relation).

When Mrs. Antin adumbrated her Nurse series at The Clocktower last year she worked with foot-high paper dolls and in an esthetic that owed much to soap opera. In "The Angel of Mercy" she gets clear away from the soaps and handles a cast of characters that is almost Tolstoyan in its variety and immediacy. They go through laconic adventures of every kind. We see men united in prayer, darning their socks ("The Soldier's Work Is Never Done"), being soothed by a song from home, executed for desertion, left for dead in the trenches or cut up on the operating table. Everywhere and at all times the beady little nurse is on hand.

Much of this is shown in long-shot. But when individual figures from these photographs step out of the frame, reappear as mannequins and stand around in the middle of the room the effect is disconcerting. We know them, and yet we don't. They are vividly alive, and yet they aren't. They never existed, and yet they follow us around. Doubtless all this was still more extraordinary on January 14 and 15, when Mrs. Antin marshalled the whole troupe, together with two live actors, for an hour-long performance which added yet another dimension to the dream; but even when they are silent the effect is hallucinatory.

What makes it so is a quality of belief. Any talented person could throw together a show of this kind as a joke, just as any nostalgic old booby can go ape over the great dancers of the 19th century. The point about Eleanor Antin is that she believes in her fantasies the way Joseph Cornell believed in his fantasies about Fanny Elssler. She really takes off, on this subject, and in a way not quite to be fathomed she takes us with her.