



Visual Arts

Artist Buck Ellison on his skewed visions of America's super-rich

The Californian's meticulously staged scenes, which subtly dissect the gilded classes, are coming to London's ICA



Buck Ellison photographed for the FT by Aleksey Kondratyev



James Cahill

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Few artists on their deathbed are likely to admit that they wish they had been president of a global bank. The reverse scenario is more plausible, as David Hockney likes to point out. But for the Californian artist Buck Ellison, the two aren't mutually exclusive: the world of high finance has its own complex allure.

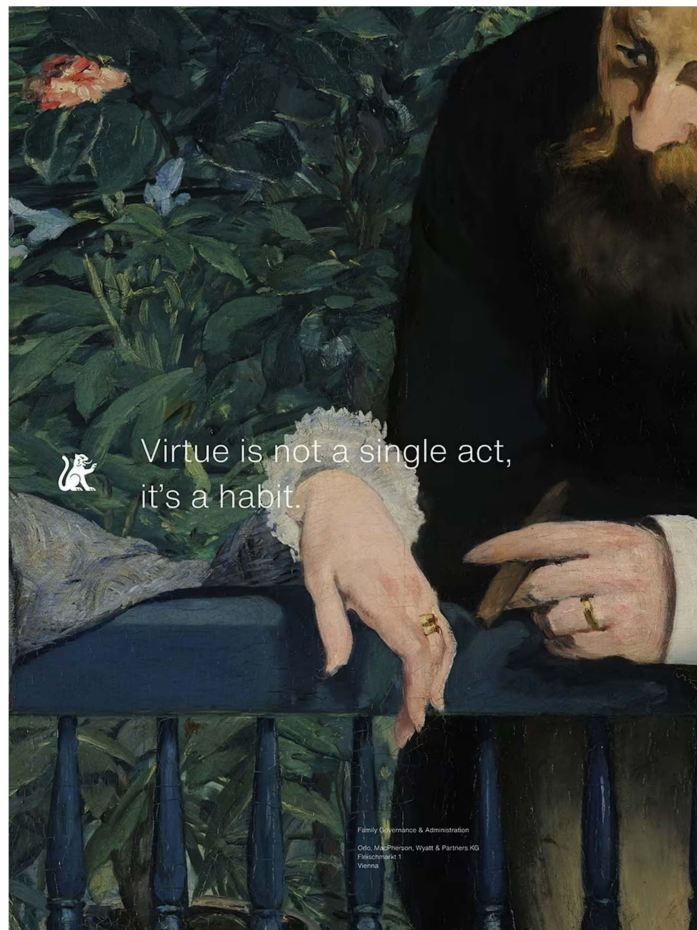
“For a culture that considers itself so open and democratic, we are obsessed with money,” he reflects over coffee at the Four Seasons in Beverly Hills. The setting feels apt. Through photographic tableaux (usually staged), Ellison portrays — and subtly dissects — the ritualised lives of the American super-rich, from lacrosse tournaments to ranch apparel. “We have a lot of cartoons of wealth — the easiest example would be the *Real Housewives* franchise. But I think I’m talking about a level of wealth and secrecy beyond that.”

For a new exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, *Genuine Fake Premium Economy*, Ellison has created a sequence of advertisements for an imagined private bank, Orlo & Co. The logo and typeface on each lightbox evoke corporate branding, but something is awry. The taglines have been adapted from epochs as disparate as the Scottish Enlightenment and classical Greece, while the underlying images are fragments of historical paintings. “In the hands of the few, for the good of the many” melds the ideals of Adam Smith and Andrew Carnegie into marketing speak. The words hover over a cropped view of John Singleton Copley’s “A Boy with a Flying Squirrel” (1765), one of the first American paintings ever to travel to London. A phrase often misattributed to Aristotle — “virtue is not a single act, it is a habit” — accompanies a fragment of a Manet scene, trained on the nearly touching hands of a man and woman.

“The phrases have been shortened and kind of perverted to promote what a bank might be into,” Ellison says. “I like the idea that my work can extract and organise and re-present to the world. The idea that we’re always just adding more things, I find stressful.”



'Hands' (2006), using a detail from John Singleton Copley's 1765 painting 'A Boy with a Flying Squirrel' © Buck Ellison



'Virtue' (2026), featuring a detail from Édouard Manet's 1879 painting 'In the Conservatory' © Buck Ellison



Good-looking and soft-spoken, Ellison might almost be a product of the world he portrays, though his background is middle class. Now 38, he grew up in the suburban heartlands of Marin County, northern California, the youngest of four children. His father owned a group of thrift stores and exported rags; his mother attended art school while he was growing up. He went to a leading, “very liberal” private school. “We learnt to be polite and politically engaged and kind to strangers. There was a myth that you could be a good inhabitant of privilege — occupy your advantages correctly — which I don’t think is possible.”

It was at high school that he began to observe some of the subtle (and not so subtle) behaviours of the moneyed classes. “There was this whole thing about hiding wealth, which has a humour to it.” One peer was the heiress to a multinational corporation: “the most self-righteous hippie”.

Ellison lived in Germany for a year, for his German literature degree at Columbia. “I began seeing these Deutsche Bank brochure ads. They’re really good in Europe. There would be a grandmother giving her granddaughter a silver cutlery service or a father meeting with his naval architect. Almost what a robot would tell you is a good way to depict prudent investment.” At a personal level, too, Berlin was a revelation: “I’d never been in a place where being gay didn’t have to define you.”

In 2011, he returned to Germany to study photography at the Städelschule, Frankfurt, inspired by the photographs of Candida Höfer, Thomas Ruff and other members of the Düsseldorf School — “that really cold, straight-on German stuff”. Increasingly, his pictures acquired a mordant literary sensibility. “Toward the end of grad school, I realised: there aren’t a lot of visual depictions of the behaviours [of the super-rich], but there are writers who really nailed it — like Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf or Edith Wharton. That form of critique.”



‘Dick, Dan, Doug, The Everglades Club, Palm Beach, Florida 1990’ (2019)



An actor poses as Erik Prince in 'Rain in Rifle Season, Distributions from Split-Interest Trusts, Price Includes Uniform, Never Hit Soft, 2003' (2021)

Since the mid-2010s, Ellison has been attracting attention for his meticulously staged scenes of gilded America. One of his best-known shots portrays a group of men on a twilight golf course, one of them turning away and urinating with sublime insouciance (“Dick, Dan, Doug, The Everglades Club, Palm Beach, Florida, 1990”, 2019). “It’s not real piss,” he reveals. “It’s green tea in a catheter bag.” As with many of his compositions, there is an art-historical model: Poussin’s painting of peasants puzzling over an inscription, “Et in Arcadia Ego (1637-38)”. But in Ellison’s portrait, Poussin’s allegory of death’s omnipresence has become a satirical jab: the golfers are fictional versions of the DeVos clan, one of America’s pre-eminent conservative dynasties.

Ellison’s pictures have dramatised the early life of Betsy DeVos, who served as secretary of education under the first Trump administration, and her brother Erik Prince, the reclusive American tycoon who founded the private military firm Blackwater. In a photograph from 2021, an actor poses as the youthful Prince at his Wyoming ranch, sliding one finger into a copy of Carl von Clausewitz’s *On War*. “Something about Prince is that he was really handsome,” Ellison remarks. “I always find desire a useful tool — bringing us closer to things we don’t want to be close to.”



Ellison, who lives in Culver City with his dog, Piglet — an Australian Cattle Dog and Labrador mix— is an observer of foibles. Research forms the bulk of his day-to-day life. If his tableaux possess a novelistic quality, then his photographic “still lifes” have the more disjointed quality of modernist poems. In these, he assembles various small attributes of privilege in mock-casual arrays: tennis balls, basketball shorts emblazoned with the insignia of Princeton’s Cap and Gown club, needlepoint cufflinks bearing the design of the scales of justice.



Orlo & Co mug...



...and Kaweco box, from 'Jack's Office'

The physical trappings of charmed lives have increasingly taken centre-stage. “I noticed how much I loved making props for the photos,” says Ellison. “I started having hats made because I couldn’t get the ones I wanted.”

The ICA show, a three-person presentation with filmmaker Jenna Bliss and painter Jasmine Gregory, will include “Jack’s Office”, a vitrine-enclosed installation that imagines the workplace of a young American man. An earlier iteration, “Jack’s Room”, appeared last year at Jack Siebert Projects, Los Angeles: the full-scale bedroom of an affluent adolescent. “He’s growing up, and he’s going to work at Orlo & Co,” says Ellison with paternal pride. “He has a grip strength trainer, a letterhead that he’s done all these doodles on. We don’t know if he’s gay or straight. We don’t know what he looks like.”

Such a combination of resonant detail and ambiguity has become one of the defining characteristics of Ellison’s art. “The work is more powerful if my personal politics are not on display in it,” he says. “It’s able to slip both ways, which is honestly terrifying for me — the idea that people think I’m pro Betsy DeVos.” While his imagery is routinely discussed in terms of whiteness and patriarchy, he points out that such terms can be reductive, imposing a given reading. “Photographs are mute, they’re very open-ended. If I had really strong, precise views, I would write an essay.” In place of dogmatic argument, he leaves us with a droll wit. “I do think humour is one of the best forms of critique. It may be all we have left.”



CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Buck Ellison's Great White Society

From the driving range to the dude ranch, an artist stages intimate, alluring portraits of U.S. hegemony from within its walls.

By Travis Diehl

June 24, 2022

Their beery, blueblood inhibition hangs in the periwinkle dusk. The photograph shows the two DeVos brothers, scions of the Amway multilevel marketing empire, finishing a game of golf with their dad. Two men crouch over a short putt. One nurses a can of low-cal Michelob Ultra. The third stands behind them, his stance strong, his back turned to the camera and to us, draining his bladder in a stream as straight as a titanium shaft. They seem firm and composed, in the flower of youth. And the fourth figure, the caddy saddled with the golf bag in the Everglades heat — who is he? He's everyone else. He wants to be them, and maybe, if he tugs hard enough on his bootstraps, he will be.

Buck Ellison's preppy tableau, "Dick, Dan, Doug, The Everglades Club, Palm Beach, Florida, 1990," from 2019, seems implausible — not because scenes like this don't play out on the links every day, but because the rich and powerful so rarely reveal themselves to the lens. Which is why the photo, like many of Ellison's portraits, is staged. But his sets and actors end up unfolding the push and pull of his subjects in ways actual portraits never could. Their raw use of other people, their informal approach to the landscape. Their carriage as if the whole world lived like them. Their shirking from scrutiny.



“Dick, Dan, Doug, The Everglades Club, Palm Beach, Florida, 1990,” from 2019. Ellison’s sets and actors unfold the push and pull of his subjects in ways actual portraits never could. Buck Ellison

“It excited me,” Ellison said during an interview in Los Angeles, “this idea that there might actually be a utility to these myths of capturing or exposing” someone’s interior life through photography, “because there is this very powerful group of people that doesn’t allow themselves to be photographed.” Finally, he thought: in a world where a billion photos are made daily, here is something photography is still good for.

“We have all these cartoons of wealthy people in our culture,” he said. Basic class critiques often emphasize splashy but petty outrages, like flying private jets or dining at the French Laundry during a coronavirus surge. But “to say someone inhabits privilege incorrectly implies that you could inhabit it correctly.”

As conversations about race, racism, and inequality surge into the mainstream, Ellison remains one of the only artists describing the myths of white male power from within its walls. His contributions to the 2022 Whitney Biennial, on view through Sept. 5 — three fanciful portraits of Erik Prince, the financier and founder of the private security firm Blackwater — depict a powerful white man at leisure among roomfuls of work focused on abstraction and alterity. (Indeed, they raise the pointed question of what “alterity” would mean in an equitable world.) In 2019, Daniel C. Blight, a lecturer on photography at the University of Brighton, included Ellison in his book “The Image of Whiteness,” and used one of his photos on the cover. “Living Trust,” the artist’s first monograph, won Aperture’s Best First PhotoBook award in 2020. His work was a standout of the Made in L.A. biennial that same year. Ellison will participate in the Lyon biennale this September.



“White people are ghosts,” Blight wrote of Ellison’s work, “invisible to themselves.” And before more accurate, illuminating images of whiteness can circulate, they must be made.

Winningly handsome, athletically built, it’s easy to imagine Ellison as one of his subjects. Our conversation began in a wine bar in Silver Lake. Over a glass of Vinho Verde, he noted that he’s versed enough in social codes to arrange a photo shoot of someone peeing on a country club’s green. (One concession: the “urine” is green tea.) If you must point a finger, says Ellison, point it at him first. “I am a part of this problem and benefiting from these systems,” he says.



Buck Ellison at Technikal, his printer's studio, in South Pasadena, Calif. He remains one of the only artists describing the myths of white male power from within its walls. Michael Tyrone Delaney for The New York Times

Ellison, now 34, grew up among one-percenter Democrats in Marin County, Calif., a milieu where, he says, an oil heiress might protest the U.S. invasion of Iraq without seeing the irony. His mother is an interior designer. "My dad owns thrift stores and rag export



companies,” he says. “This is the family business. My great-grandmother, Stella, apparently coined the word ‘thrift store’ to make the sale of used clothing appeal to Protestant virtues.”

He attended Marin Academy, a private school in San Rafael, then majored in art and German literature at Columbia University. Coming out as gay set him somewhat apart. Studying photography at the Städelschule in Frankfurt gave him a critical distance from his native country. It also sharpened his conviction to focus on the contemporary face of American elitism. That face — Democrat or Republican, East Coast or West, new money or old — is as pale-complexioned as the founding fathers.

“What can a privileged white man like Ellison contribute to the art world’s necessary conversations about racism and representation?” says Jim Ganz, the senior curator of photographs at the Getty Museum. “It is an awkward question, but a fair one.” Whatever his intentions, as Ganz puts it, the artist is “exploiting his own privilege.” It is — and should be — an uncomfortable proposition. But Ellison’s mix of sympathy and penitence distinguishes him from portraitists of the ultrawealthy, like Lauren Greenfield or Tina Barney, whose access depends on good manners. “Beneath their slick surfaces, Ellison’s photographs are infested with emblems of systemic racism,” Ganz continues. His “scenes of the pampered lifestyle of the American ruling class [are] designed to leave a bad taste in the mouth.”

Ellison’s early photographs appraise the insignia of white affluence, like the riding crop in the corner of “Untitled (Whip),” 2011, or the blasé poise of the blond in “Hilda,” 2014. A 2013 series captures fresh seafood at a Berlin restaurant, gorgeously arrayed on chipped ice. As with Dutch memento mori, this too is vanity: After he shot his pictures, the fish were thrown away and doused with bleach to deter scavengers. Gradually, Ellison began searching for the deeper realism of fiction. The kitchens in Ellison’s staged interiors, where two pretty girls pick at bell peppers or toned men hand-roll whole wheat pasta, are airy, cool, composed. These could be stock photos if they weren’t pricked with reality — the housekeeper behind the girls, the cook’s bare cheeks behind his apron strings. “They fail as stock photos,” Ellison says. “They fail as pharmaceutical ads, they fail as family snapshots. What you have left is art.” The lie that tells the truth.



Buck Ellison, "Hummus," 2015. Gradually, the artist began searching for the deeper realism of fiction, the progeny behind the hegemony. Buck Ellison

In 2017, Ellison sent out Christmas cards. The family on the front — comfortable, smiling — wasn't his, but the DeVoses, their photo plucked from the internet. "Merry Christmas," the caption said, "From Our Family To Yours. Dick & Betsy."

Donald Trump wallowed in the spotlight, but Ellison turned to those brokering power behind the scenes. The artist's broad interest in United States hegemony came to rest on the Prince clan. Not only was Betsy DeVos (née Prince) the new Secretary of Education; not only had her father-in-law, Richard DeVos, pioneered the quintessential American practice of multilevel marketing; but her brother, Erik Prince, a former Navy SEAL, had founded the notorious Blackwater security group in 1997. Four Blackwater guards were convicted of murder after a massacre in a Baghdad market, then pardoned by President Trump. Here was real power — evangelical, unaccountable — the kind that didn't need to brag.

Ellison's vision of their family portrait, "The Prince Children, Holland, Michigan, 1975," from 2019, depicts the four Princes in a living room. As in a Flemish painting, no detail goes unconsidered: A pearl earring. An eagle finial. The objects near Erik are especially portentous. Ellison positions three brightly bound books by Abraham Kuyper, the Dutch prime minister and Christian theologian from the turn of the 19th century, over his



shoulder. His wrist drapes on an army drill manual by Baron von Steuben, an 18th-century Prussian officer — one of young Prince's favorite reads. The foreshadowing is Ellison's. As children, the Princes are innocent.



Ellison's "The Prince Children, Holland, Michigan, 1975," from 2019. As if in a Flemish painting, no detail goes unconsidered. Buck Ellison

Treating a specific family lent his work leverage against the lure of sycophancy or lifestyle porn. Made in L.A. 2020 spanned the Hammer Museum, founded by a petroleum company C.E.O., and the Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens, the former Pasadena pile of a railroad baron. Ellison placed a shot of young women playing lacrosse in the Huntington galleries; in a nearby period room, beside John Singleton Copley's 1783 dynastic portrait "The Western Brothers," he hung "Untitled (Cufflinks)," 2020: a still life of fresh tennis balls, rejected applications for a wedding notice in The New York Times, a book opened to a painting of aristocratic youths. Here, says Rita Gonzalez, the head of contemporary art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, he'd drawn a line from past to present wealth. "The projected fantasies of 'belonging,' from the Huntington clan to the subjects of Ellison's photographs, hit me hard."

Lauren Mackler, a curator with Made in L.A. 2020, recalls giving tours of the show. "White upper-class viewers would immediately respond to Buck's images," she said. "They would often laugh at their humor, and spend time unpacking the symbols, titles, and landscapes



that looked familiar. That said, I don't think Buck's work is particularly sympathetic to its subjects." With an endless supply of similar white actors, "he stresses the genericness and replaceability of the characters in the images; their meaninglessness."

The photographs Ellison contributed to the Whitney Biennial diffuse aggression into Kendall eroticism. The portraits imagine Erik, age 34 — Ellison's age when he shot them — on his Wyoming ranch. It's November 2003, and the U.S. government has just awarded Blackwater its first contracts in Afghanistan and Iraq. Played to the hunky hilt by Noah Grant, he indulges in frontier role-play: sighting a rifle; shirtless in a barn flanked by pictures of thoroughbreds; lounging coquettishly on the rug, his finger in a volume of Clausewitz.



Ellison's portrait of Erik Prince, "Rain in Rifle Season, Distributions from Split-Interest Trusts, Price Includes Uniform, Never Hit Soft, 2003," from 2021. Buck Ellison

The problem, then: It's ugly to say, but the wealthy aren't all scapegoats for their wealth. It's hard, but important, to admit the ways they actually reflect our values — the ways we abhor them, but want to be them. For Ellison, portraying a complex person like Erik Prince means embracing the tension between "wanting to look and then feeling bad that you've looked." For us, Ellison's portraits of the progeny of white hegemony hold a similar, awful thrill.

So far, he's received no response from Prince — or any of his subjects — although he has consulted lawyers just in case. "Were I to portray a public figure in a particularly crude or salacious way, that could be grounds for litigation," he says, "but that's not interesting to



me as an artist. Tenderness has always been the strategy here, not to forgive or absolve, but to get me closer to truth.”

A version of this article appears in print on , Section AR, Page 16 of the New York edition with the headline: Buck Ellison Seeks Truth in White Lies



ArtReview

Buck Ellison's American Freaks

Jonathan Griffin Features 9 June 2022 ArtReview



'Rain in Rifle Season, Distributions from Split-Interest Trusts, Price Includes Uniform, Never Hit Soft, 2003', 2021, archival pigment print, 102 x 135 cm. All images courtesy of the artist

Searching for empathy in photographs that capture the codes of the 1% – and how the 99% might see them

The handsome blonde man in the photograph reclines on a wrinkled Persian rug, an arm's length from the camera. His smiling eyes gaze fondly into ours. Maybe he's about to say something. But what?

Other details catch the eye: he has one finger in a book – Carl von Clausewitz's *On War* (1832) – and he wears a wedding ring. His stone-washed denim shirt is embroidered with the corporate logo of SAIC – 'An employee-owned company' – and he sports a rugged-looking digital watch. His forearms are scratched. On the brim of his baseball cap, in permanent marker, is written the word 'prince'.

What else might you want to know about this picture? It is an artwork by the artist Buck Ellison, currently on view in the [Whitney Biennial](#). Ellison is a Los Angeles-based conceptual photographer who works for the most part in what you might call a commercial idiom: well-lit, immaculately composed and often staged still lifes, portraits and narrative tableaux. The title of this photograph is *Rain in Rifle Season, Distributions from Split-Interest Trusts, Price Includes Uniform, Never Hit Soft, 2003* (2021), and it depicts Erik Prince, former Navy seal and founder of military contractor Blackwater, at home on his Wyoming ranch in 2003.

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The man in the photograph is actually a professional actor, cast by Ellison for his close resemblance to the young Prince. The work is part of a series titled *Little Brother* (2021–22), which, through dramatic reconstruction, attempts to flesh out a fuller portrait of a mysterious figure usually vilified by liberals. Prince's older sister is Betsy DeVos, the Christian conservative billionaire Republican donor appointed by Donald Trump in 2017 as his supremely under-qualified education secretary, a position she used to roll back protections for transgender and BIPOC students, as well as survivors of sexual harassment, all while generally undermining America's public education system. Prince himself reluctantly entered the public eye in 2007 when Blackwater mercenaries shot and killed 17 Iraqi civilians in the Nisour Square Massacre in Baghdad, injuring 20 others. He receded from view for a while, but later became a shadow adviser to Trump, who returned the favour by pardoning four convicted Blackwater operatives before he left office.



Untitled (Christmas Card #6), 2017, archival pigment print, 102 × 135 cm



The Prince Children, Holland, Michigan, 1975, 2019, archival pigment print, 153 × 202 cm

There's more, though. In 2003, just as Blackwater was receiving its first major government contracts, Prince's wife, Joan, was dying of cancer. Before she died, Prince began an affair with his children's nanny, Joanna, who attended Joan's funeral pregnant with Prince's child.

In 2003 Prince was thirty-four, the same age as Ellison when he took these photographs, a fact that suggests the possibility of affinity between the artist and his muse – despite Ellison calling him, in the Whitney's exhibition didactic, 'a snake in the grass'. Ellison goes on to wonder whether or not 'a camera allows us to desire, or to be curious, or to feel empathy towards a figure like this'.

Those are three quite distinct impulses, all worth unpacking. Curiosity is the easiest to deal with. As with many members of America's ultra-wealthy, white upper-classes, there are remarkably few photographs in public circulation of the young Erik Prince. Despite wielding inordinate political power, the Princes (as with dynasties such as the Sacklers, the Kochs, the Mellons and the Rockefellers) use their extraordinary wealth to constrict their public profiles, staying mainly out of sight as individuals even while their family names are everywhere. Curiosity is a natural response.



Dick and Betsy, The Ritz-Carlton, Dallas, Texas, 1984, 2019, archival pigment print, 119 × 87 cm

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Empathy is another matter. Ellison has said that he began thinking about empathy as a possible response to his photographs around 2018, when he was making his first depictions of Betsy DeVos. In *Dick and Betsy, The Ritz-Carlton, Dallas, Texas, 1984* (2019), a pregnant DeVos is speaking forcefully into a telephone while her husband listens in. Not exactly a likeable character, perhaps, but then likeability is a problematic expectation of powerful female figures. During DeVos's fraught tenure under Trump, Ellison was struck by the misogyny laced through the vitriol directed at her.

Empathy, it is often said, is sorely lacking in American public discourse. This is by now such a truism that certain provocative thinkers have built careers by arguing against empathy. There's not much of a case there, except to parse the distinction between cognitive empathy, which allows you to understand why someone thinks and feels the way they do, and emotional empathy, which allows you to feel what they're feeling – the latter a poor guide, critics say, to reasoned moral decision-making. Plus, it's exhausting and depressing.

Ellison's pictures are mainly concerned with cognitive empathy, which he facilitates by an admixture of informational signposting and narrative suggestion. (His photograph *Erik with Kitty, Blackwater Training Center, Moyock, North Carolina, 1998*, 2019, showing a flak-jacketed Prince cooing over a ginger kitten, is an arch conceit, and an exception.) The density of data within an image such as *Fog, In His Light We Shall See The Light, Raintree 23 Ltd Ptnr, Excess Distribution Carryover, If Any, 2003* (2021) is akin to one of Ellison's still lifes or collages, in which artefacts and print ephemera combine to make a kind of abstract portrait. (His titles, too, are often forms of notational collage.) On the barn wall behind a grinning, shirtless Prince are snaps of military buddies and Thoroughbred horses, a postcard of women in traditional Dutch costume (the Princes hail from a part of Michigan inordinately proud of its heritage), a baseball cap from Prince's alma mater, Hillsdale College, a private conservative college that has opted out of federal affirmative action policies, and books on the Austrian School of free-market economics.



Sunset, 2015, archival pigment print, 102 × 127 cm

None of which is particularly appealing, aesthetically or otherwise, except for Prince himself, whose muscular torso offers a visual rhyme

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images that speak to a viewer's libido, or avarice, or social aspiration, or reflexive notions of beauty, before disclosing their contextual contaminations – often through the text of their titles. A series of photographs of frothing white surf, *Coastal Access Line, Carbon Beach, Malibu, California* (2015), was taken on what is known as Billionaire's Beach, where oceanside mansions have historically blocked public access to the water. Another series, featuring extravagantly healthy vegetables and flowers, actually shows, the photographs' titles reveal, the gourmet produce of gardens in various California private schools.

Is it satisfying or dismaying to learn that Ellison himself attended one of those schools? His work is not defined by its disdainful identification of some abhorrent 'other', but by its description of something, for the artist and for many of his viewers, embarrassingly close to home. In the predominantly white, predominantly privileged contemporary artworld, the (often textual) codes in Ellison's work speak most clearly to those already proximal to the lives and lifestyles he describes. In his titles, references to investment structures and specialised tax forms might only be fully grasped by the collector class. But that does not mean they are entirely unfamiliar to other viewers. (Ellison commented to me that no one who has visited his studio has ever had to ask what lacrosse is, even though it is played only at a handful of elite boarding schools and colleges.)



Fleece (Spinnaker), 2018, archival pigment print, 64 × 51 cm

While Ellison's work specifically pertains to a slim demographic of the United States, as with so much American culture it is, on some level, recognisable worldwide. The aesthetic appeal of his photographs is so deeply embedded in the popular psyche that it can easily pass unacknowledged, reinforced by centuries of portraiture of European aristocracy and decades of photos of relaxed white families in bank

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Ellison's work fixates on typologies and generalities: the ways in which certain kinds of people look and behave; the ways in which patterns repeat themselves. In *Performance Fleece* (2018), one of his most austere series, he photographs a hearty blond man modelling a range of fleeces from Vineyard Vines (a brand of 'preppy casual clothing' based in Martha's Vineyard). The tropes of consumer advertising are inseparable from the tropes of class identification and aspiration.

Constancy and repetition are, for Ellison, at once formal strategies and thematic concerns. Again and again, his photographs show us the smiling face of America's steadfastly enduring structural inequality, an inequality mirrored even in the putatively self-critical structure of its artworld.

Work by Buck Ellison is on view in the Whitney Biennial 2022, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, through 5 September

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