



THE POLITICS OF EVERYDAY LIFE

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This page: Buck Ellison, *Hammus*, 2015, ink jet print, 40 x 50".
Opposite page: Buck Ellison, *Hiker*, 2015, ink jet print, 62 x 47".

OPENINGS

BUCK ELLISON

DREW SAWYER



THERE IS SOMETHING TROUBLING about Buck Ellison's recent photographs. Since 2014, when he graduated from Frankfurt's Städelschule and returned to his native California, the Los Angeles-based artist has been creating pictures that reproduce the customs and habits of a certain segment of the coastal upper-middle class. In *Hammus*, 2015, for example, two teenage girls perch atop a pristine kitchen counter as they munch on a plate of sliced vegetables and a container of the eponymous dip. Their pale skin and dirty-blond hair go with the bland white interior. Behind them, a dark-haired woman appears to be tidying as she reaches a hand into an open drawer. Ellison's choice to focus his lens on the background seems pointed, and combined with the girls' apparent obliviousness to the woman's presence, it suggests that the woman is a domestic worker. Like so many of Ellison's photographs, the picture captures a seemingly banal moment or detail that slowly discloses a gnawing sense of malaise.

The verisimilitude of the scene is heightened by the fact that all three figures appear arrested midaction, conveying the impression that this is a documentary photo akin to Tina Barney's large-scale, snapshot-like pictures of her wasp family and friends. In fact, the photograph was staged. In the last couple of years, Ellison has been taking advantage of his proximity to Hollywood—hiring actors, scouting locations, sourcing clothes and props—in order to re-create mundane scenes drawn from his own memories and observations: young women munching on healthy snacks, a strapping stoner bro in plain air (*Hiker*, 2015), a teen making

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Left: Buck Ellison, *Pasta Night*, 2016, ink jet print, 47 1/2 x 37 1/2". Above: Buck Ellison, *Pro*, 2016, ink jet print, 45 1/2 x 57 1/2". Opposite page: Buck Ellison, *Slippers Gold, Oysters Cold*, 2012, ink jet print, 17 1/2 x 20 1/2".

Ellison investigates the language of privilege.

protest posters in a chic bedroom with a forest view (*Pro*, 2016). In exhibitions, Ellison often displays these staged images alongside careful selections of other photographs, from quarter-length portraits to landscapes to details of textiles, building up his narratives by way of almost essayistic juxtapositions. We are compelled to recognize an ostensibly enlightened, progressive bourgeois culture that is restlessly in search of authenticity—a quest lent a decidedly ironic resonance via Ellison's elaborate artifice.

Ellison has been exploring this subject since his student days, but he was initially less interested in scenes of everyday life than in a genre that, for centuries, has foregrounded the social language of luxury goods. In 2012, while in school, Ellison began an ongoing series of studio still lifes that feature various assortments of objects arranged on brightly colored surfaces. Shot from above, the carefully composed groupings of

orange peels and fennel bulbs, business cards, fine china, pages from lifestyle magazines and corporate brochures, graded college midterm exams, and the like subtly articulate specific tastes and fine shadings of class and identity. Often including text, the pictures invite close reading. In *Slippers Gold, Oysters Cold*, 2012, for example, a quote in an open magazine is highlighted: "THE WAY YOU LIVE EVOLVES ACCORDING TO WHAT YOU BUY—AND HOW MANY CHILDREN YOU HAVE," FRÉDÉRIC MALLE SAYS.

In both bodies of work, the culture of virtuously sourced ingredients, "clean eating," and wellness is a recurring motif, and the self-effacing consumerism inherent in the bourgeois-bohemian lifestyle is made explicit: You are what you buy. In *Pasta Night*, 2016—another kitchen scene and apparently a cheeky riff on John Currin's *Homemade Pasta*, 1999—a pair of fortysomething white men stand close together as they

guide whole-grain pasta dough through a stainless-steel pasta maker. Ellison has appointed the equally white kitchen with bowls of fresh kale and lemons that suggest the men have their own garden or at the very least have purchased their produce at a farmer's market. Mexican pottery provides additional information about their lives and sensibilities. The domestic setting, and the fact that one of the men is wearing an apron but no pants, intimates that they are a couple—in fact, they're enjoying what looks like wedded bliss. Since the Supreme Court has overturned Proposition 8, it seems, they are free to pursue the comforts of fine and socially responsible living unfettered by discrimination. The title itself suggests that this is a glimpse of a regimented weekly schedule of activities that require other culinary products. Like the upscale ads they often resemble, Ellison's photographs illustrate the contemporary blurring of distinctions between the self and lifestyle brand.



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Opposite page: Buck Ellison, *Cheeseboard*, 2016, ink jet print, 40 x 50".
Right: Buck Ellison, *Sunset*, 2015, ink jet print, 28 x 38".



Columbia University in 2010. The image hints at a simple narrative (wedding-registry shopping), but its nuances are complex. Fashionable athletic wear, a turquoise water bottle, and a reusable Bagga tote indicate that these are healthy and environmentally conscious individuals. The cheese board, a giant \$170 number, conspicuously occupies center stage. Any viewers who are able to decipher the cultural signifiers cannot help but become aware of their own embroilment in this world, their own "insider" understanding of it—and one suspects that Ellison is fully aware of this dynamic.

If the artist trades in the coded syntax of commodities, he also increasingly investigates the language of privilege in text-based works. For his 2015–16 exhibition "Country Day" at Bentheim Castle in Bad Bentheim, Germany, for instance, he created a poster

with sets of adjectives and nouns: BUSY WEEK, FARM EGG, NEW ALLERGIST, PREP SINK, and, of course, COUNTRY DAY. Connoting conscious consumer choices as well as good taste, the phrases could have easily been taken from some of those magazines and documents originally found in Ellison's still lifes, or from self-help books and websites like Goop. More recently, the photographer has used press releases and other publications as occasions to write chapters of *Gold-Pressed*, a serialized novel in progress that scrutinizes the lives of a middle-age gay couple, Todd and Cameron, and their daughter, Regan.

Ellison's rigorous commitment to the art of description—through not only his texts but also his meticulously staged images and his use of a large-format camera—gives his project an unexpected affinity to nineteenth-century realist fiction, in particular the

novel of manners. Writing in the wake of World War II, the literary critic Lionel Trilling argued for the continued importance of manners as the very basis of what he called "moral realism," indicated by "small actions" and details like "the way children play . . . the gesture the waiter makes when he puts down the plate . . . the nature of the very food we prefer." Trilling's seminal essay "Manners, Morals, and the Novel" was published in his 1950 book *The Liberal Imagination*, which aimed to put "under some degree of pressure" the assumptions of the world as imagined by liberals. Ellison's photographs show us that all these decades later, the haute-bourgeois left still needs a little self-reflection. □

DREW SAWYER IS HEAD OF EXHIBITIONS AND WILLIAM L. AND SARAH ROSS SOTER ASSOCIATE CURATOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY AT OHIO'S COLUMBUS MUSEUM OF ART.

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