

Elements of Style

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Buck Ellison

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For Buck Ellison, a California-based photographer who stages deadpan, meticulously stylized pictures of people in elite, banal-seeming scenarios, privilege is defined in minute details and practically unseen movements. Elise Silver, a model cast in *Oh* (2015), a study of innocuous teenage expression, will be recognizable to those who have seen her as a glamorous figure in luxury car advertisements. In *Untitled (Cars)* (2008), when Ellison ventures into the world of automobiles, two Land Rovers are parked at ridiculously steep angles. It captures a dealership's demonstration of the vehicles' rugged capabilities—cartoonishly tough, masculine, expensive. At closer glance, one of the cars bears a vanity license plate reading MARIN, the name of the Northern California county where Ellison was raised, one of the most affluent in the country.

Growing up, Ellison says, "I felt guilty that I was attracted to symbols of wealth, because they are often facilitated by things I find reprehensible." When he was fifteen, Ellison saw an

editorial campaign for the brand Kate Spade that he later learned had been photographed by Larry Sultan. It depicts, in staged scenes, an upper-middle-class family's tourist trip to New York to visit their daughter, with their accompanying forays into consumerism. A photographer himself since 2008, Ellison sets about re-creating deliberately artificial depictions of the kind of life he was born into, crafted with the precision of commercial shoots.

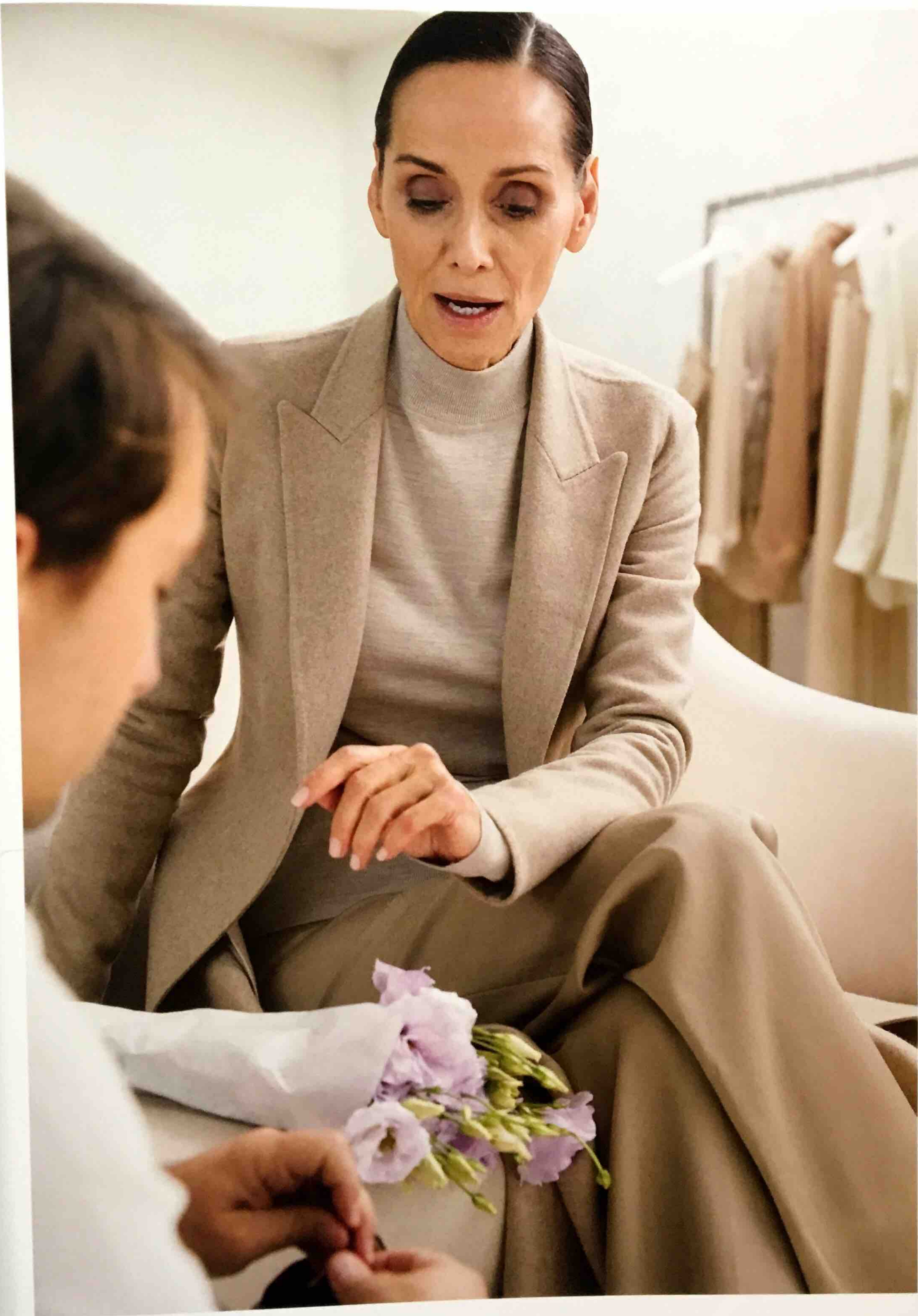
For a commission by *Arena Homme +*, Ellison cast agency models to portray members of his own family, approximating the idea of a traditional, seated portrait. ("It was always my dream to do a portrait of my family," he says, "but they didn't share my enthusiasm.") Working with the stylist Charlotte Collet, Ellison shot nearly four thousand frames, purposefully exhausting his subjects until they stopped acting. Embedded are subtle codes and imperfections: the stiffened smiles, the wrinkles and rumples in the carefully dressed-down clothing, the silver tray of cocktail tumblers, the child with his face in a phone.

Ellison's stage-managed casualness brings to mind Tina Barney's complex, intimate photographs of her family; they share Barney's rarefied milieu and immersive feeling without being documentary. "It's not about capturing a moment before it disappears, but finding something that's almost invisible or illegible to the rest of us," he says. His pictures are an investigation of small gestures—a frank, off-kilter conversation between advertised and unspoken wealth, somewhere between aspiration, imagination, and projected reality.

The similarity between the minimalism of *Hilda* (2014) and the cool detachment of Thomas Ruff and the photographers of the Düsseldorf School—in particular the painterly, late 1980s and early '90s family portraits of Thomas Struth—isn't a coincidence. Ellison studied German literature at college in New York before relocating to Germany for graduate school, a move that added another dimension of distance from which to view the visual projections of privilege in the United States. At the Städelschule Frankfurt, Ellison collected advertisements for Deutsche Bank and luxury watches—"images of prudent investment," he says a little wryly. He looked at early U.S. colonial portraits, particularly those by less technically skilled painters: "There was so much insecurity about who we were as a country." In his studio, he pinned Bruce Weber's photographs from Ralph Lauren campaigns to his wall: contemporary, idealized renderings of the American West as envisioned by the Bronx-born fashion designer who changed his name from the Belarusian Ralph Lifshitz to create a global brand.

In their own way, Ellison's photographs lift the taboo that still protects the upper echelons of American life. "It's like, 'don't talk about money,'" Ellison says from Los Angeles, where he lives and works now. Instead, he borrows that attitude of reserve to provoke dialogue, allowing complicated social dynamics to play out beneath the exterior of clean, formal arrangements. Using the inner vocabulary of privilege, Ellison shows the fissures that seep through its idealized surfaces.

Rebecca Bengal is a writer and editor based in New York.



Previous page:
Mama, 2016

This spread:
Untitled (Family Portrait),
2017











Hilda, 2014



Untitled (Cars), 2008
All photographs courtesy
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