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Konrad, Laura. " Buck Ellison." *COEVAL* June 2017. Web.

COEVAL

Buck Ellison

photography



Sunset, 2015, archival inkjet print, 102 x 127 cm

Standing in front of some of Buck Ellison's photographs definitely exceeds a normative two-dimensional affair. Somewhere in-between the process of experiencing, we become active participators within the carefully curated settings portrayed in his images. We're right there: at the marble kitchen counter, eating hummus and bell peppers with pre-teen girls; putting stickers on the trunk of a BMW 3, the labels referencing an active lifestyle occurring somewhere in the likes of Western U.S. suburbia.

Yet, while still subsisting within this quotidian landscape of normative society where there's a continuous informality within its very intimacy, we're simultaneously detached from the staged moments. Lives that aren't necessarily about flashy yachts and luxury brands, but a plastic serenity exploited via pullovers neatly tied around shoulders and fruit whose position and color easily exceeds the display of any extravagant supermarket. The result of rupture is either instituted by the work itself or basic human moral that doesn't want to abide within these disturbingly clinical catalogue lives. Ellison likes to litigate his audience's consciousness, as well as his own, by capturing a well-formulated beauty that's innately seductive in its syntheticity while also announcing the inevitable ugliness of it all. The moral dilemma takes place at all times: how we all seem to yearn for socially-defined normalcy yet can't as it licenses a state of anesthesia, an impartial distance to everything in reality that we've come to love and hate.

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Untitled (Cars), 2008, archival inkjet print, 99 x 121 x 4 cm



Hummus, 2015, archival inkjet print, 127 x 95.4 cm

Buck, what's been your mind these days?

Lacrosse. I've been researching for my next project. I was reading that the Native Americans used it to prepare for combat. Now it's played all over the country, but for a long time it was mostly played at blue-blooded New England prep schools: Andover, Exeter, St. Paul's, etc. It's a beautiful sport to watch, but also has this ghostly quality to it, you can't help but see the shadow of an indigenous population vanished through extermination. It's one of the few Native American rituals that has a presence in contemporary American life, and, more specifically (and perversely), wealthy, white American life.

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Pasta Night, 2016, archival inkjet print, 120 x 95 cm



Pro, 2016, archival inkjet print, 116 x 146 x 4 cm

In the press release the recent exhibition 'Louisa' at Balice Hertling in Paris, you said, "There was something in the casual way they related to luxury that fascinated me - and still does. It was the first time I felt

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that strange mix of attraction and repulsion that motivates so much of my work." I mainly paused at the word 'casual,' as it perfectly iterates the destination of real luxury. Can you unfold this attraction/repulsion?

It's about wanting to look but feeling guilty once you have. Wealth makes a lot of beauty possible, undeniably so. But I find many of the systems that preserve or create affluence pretty objectionable. Of course, this guilt only heightens the pleasure of viewing. It's an uncomfortable feeling, to find so much beauty in what you hate. I think you see this in most of my images, a deep desire for and a deep discomfort with the same subject.



Thyroid Problem, 2015, archival inkjet print, 73 x 59 cm

This notion of discomfort stands out, as the kind of anxiety in your work is different from one we'd usually expect to experience in the medium of photography. I guess I'm especially referring to war-related scenarios. While of course there's no real comparison between the two—for one it being fiction versus nonfiction—both exhibit a reaction of aversion and, as just mentioned, discomfort.

In psychology, they talk about ambivalence. It's not indifference, but rather a simultaneous attraction and repulsion towards the same subject. This creates a lot of psychic distress for the patient. This is as close as I've ever come to a description of what motives my work.

So when you take a picture, there's typically judgment involved?

For me it's more about meditation. I'm attracted to photography because it allows me to slow things down and really look at them. And hopefully pass this potential for reflection onto the viewer.

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Untitled (Boy), 2016, archival inkjet print, 98 x 127 cm

There's definitely a brand-consciousness within your work. What's your process of choosing them? Are the choices of brands somehow related to personal memory?

I use specific clothing and objects to help the viewer orient themselves in the image. Even a simple t-shirt can evoke an entire narrative outside the frame, a place of work or vacation destination, for example. I want to give my viewer a sense of total access to the "world" of the image. Right I'm working on a new work. I spent a week hunting down an Ivy Club t-shirt, because we can all go online and buy a Princeton shirt, but this t-shirt I had to bribe a former member for. This is the sort of interiority I want my pictures to have.



Mama, 2016, archival inkjet print, 95.5 x 67 x 4 cm

What underlying affiliations with this particular piece of clothing were so important to you?

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Ivy is a student fraternity or “eating club” at Princeton. Described by former member F. Scott Fitzgerald as “breathlessly aristocratic,” it has a long and storied history, but one also complicated by sexism, anti-Semitism, and racism. In recent decades, Princeton students have questioned whether clubs like Ivy still belong in a university now so officially committed to diversity and inclusion. So all these debates get wrapped up in an unremarkable grey t-shirt with green text on it. Like a wink or a whisper, it’s a language illegible to almost all of us, but it’s still a language. This, I would argue, is one of the ways systems that preserve privilege manage to carry on today, they make their codes so subtle that they are almost invisible.



Upper School Greenhouse, Marin Country Day School, Tiburon, California, 2016, archival inkjet print, 79 x 64.5 x 4 cm

Your work would drastically change if instead of producing a fixed image, you’d move over into film. The exaggeration and calculated plasticity would necessarily get lost, perhaps especially because a photograph inevitably freezes an atmosphere and the viewer is somehow stuck with it. What made you choose photography as a mode of expression, and not film? Maybe it’s just my Protestant modesty, but I never wanted to make a film because I never wanted to ask too much of my viewer. Of course, I want to make pictures that challenge their audience. But what drew me to photographs is that the viewer can decide her level of engagement with the work; she can sit with it for an three hours or a second, and if it’s a good work, it will be rewarding for any length of viewing. When predetermined duration comes into play, however, it feels like such an imposition.



Ethical Culture, 2013, archival inkjet print, 62 x 79 cm



Strenuous Life, 2013, archival inkjet print, 62 x 79 cm

How do you feel about Protestantism now? I imagine some of it has continued to find its way back into your practice.

My great grandmother Stella worked for the Salvation Army. Tasked with finding an appealing way to sell used rags to fundraise for the charity, she coined the term "thrift store," evoking the Christian virtues of thriftiness and charity. This was brilliant marketing, it triggered the customer's piety. The business did so well that she left and started her own venture, which is now the business of my entire extended family. I didn't grow up in a religious household, but we knew that our meals came from the Christian virtue of others. So even as a kid I understood that this religion had told us all how to feel about work, goodness, modesty, and even if you didn't believe it yourself, it gave you a map through the minds of others, and that map could be very useful.

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Untitled (Dock), Entire Edition, 5 + 2 APs, 2011, archival inkjet print, 32 x 25 cm

Images courtesy of **Buck Ellison**

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interview **LARA KONRAD**

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