

Buck Ellison

Useful Life

November 14 – December 14, 2019

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1973), sociologist Erving Goffman describes games shared by specific social groups, “sets of performers who cooperate in presenting a single performance.” This “social front”, he maintains, “becomes institutionalized, [...] to take on a meaning and a stability apart from the specific tasks which happen at the time to be performed in its name.” The front becomes a “collective representation” and “objective fact.”

In the work of Buck Ellison, this “collective representation” is made up of women dressed in soft beige suits, of a couple making homemade pasta, of people making the difficult choice of which cheese platter to purchase. They were introduced in Ellison’s first exhibition at Balice Hertling, *Louisa*, in 2017.

Born in San Francisco, Ellison spent his childhood immersed in the regimes of appearance and social codes of conduct he now investigates. His images imprison a carefully staged moment, the result of a period of considered research. He gathers props, sources locations, casts amateur models.

The result, as crystalline as the smile of his protagonists, owes its strangeness to this slow accumulation of time. Spontaneity seems to reign, the actions have an invigorating simplicity, yet something troubles this illusion. You sense the mechanical, the artificial, the choreographed. Ellison never mocks his subjects; he never makes caricatures of them. This discrepancy you sense, this distancing effect that slides between you and them like a veil, doesn’t come from the codes represented, but rather those that are not. In Ellison’s work we witness spending on non-visible, highly expensive goods and services (education, health care, child care) that shape life chances.

The title of Ellison’s second show at Balice Hertling, *Useful Life*, refers to the amount of time an asset continues to generate revenue. This cold, financial language underscores the rigorous structure of his first film, *Henry, Henry, Henry*. The three films are identical in plot, shot with a commercial cinematographer, and edited to the standard one-minute length of an advertisement. In each, a man wakes up, reads the newspaper, puts his son on the shoulders - rehearsing a litany of idealized male tropes from luxury advertising. Men with cheeks found in shaving cream ads, and, apparently, economic leaders. Each film presents a different husband, distinguished only through the varying baseball teams they support, Ivy League colleges they attended, or sections of the newspaper they read. Perhaps the camera has divorced and remarried a similar man three times, having deemed Henry to no longer have a “useful life”? Ellison tugs at normalized vision of courtship put through in luxury advertisements, how we emplot our own romantic lives to aspire to these fictions, and the gap between the seduction of such images and the relationships we’re able to cobble together in reality.

Ingrid Luquet-Gad (translated from French)

Buck Ellison has recently presented his work in solo exhibitions at The Sunday Painter in London (2019), The Meeting/Bill Cournoyer in New York (2017), Balice Hertling in Paris (2016), LAPAIX in Paris (2016), Weiss Berlin in Berlin (2016), Bad Bentheim Castle in Germany (2015), and Ratio 3 in San Francisco (2014).