

In conversation
with
RICHARD PALLARDY

ELIZA HITTMAN

Photographer GUARIONEX RODRIGUEZ, JR.

Fashion Editor
MICHAEL LOUIS UMESIOBI



Earrings ANNA KIKUE,
Suit and Boots GIORGIO ARMANI.

Eliza Hittman is fascinated by the inner lives of young people. Her haunting portraits of alienated American adolescence—*“It Felt Like Love”* and *“Beach Rats”*—suggest a rare and unsentimental sensitivity to the travails of youth. Using a strict first-person perspective, she explores the confusion and claustrophobia of characters on the cusp of adulthood, seeking new experiences and coping with their consequences. In her most recent film, *“Never Rarely Sometimes*



Always,” a teenage girl, Autumn, must journey from her small Pennsylvania hometown to New York City in order to obtain an abortion. Hittman conveys this harrowing experience with moving restraint, eschewing melodrama in favor of unflinching realism.

RICHARD PALLARDY. What first drew you to filmmaking? Was there a watershed moment where you decided that this was really the path for you?

ELIZA HITTMAN. I started out working in theater and felt, for a number of reasons, very limited in terms of where I could go in my career. I had a desire to break out of the black box, so to speak, and be in the world. In theater, I always felt like I was building a sandcastle that existed in this very ephemeral way only for it to disappear. I didn't really come from a family of artists and I didn't grow up around the technology that's involved in filmmaking. It wasn't until my mid-20s that I started meeting filmmakers my own age. I had a moment of sort of watching graduate student films and wondering, *“why didn't I ever consider this? There's this whole industry, people seem to be paid well. It's an extension of what I already like to do.”* I like the idea that you can make something and continue to share and show it, that it could speak to people all over the world.

R.P. You have such a distinctive style. Do you draw on the work of other filmmakers, or do you prefer to ignore what other people have done and do your own thing?

E.H. The creative process can be a vulnerable process and I tend to try and not watch things for that reason. I become anxious that I'm never going to live up to these other films that are already successful in their own ways. When I'm in the creative process, I try and look more towards photography actually. With *“Never Rarely Sometimes Always,”* I looked for photographers in different regions of the United States that were capturing communities of people in the coal mining industry, in areas where they had collapsed. I looked at this regional photographer named Matt Eich, he had done some portraits in West Virginia.

R.P. The characters in your most recent two films come across as very alienated from their surroundings. What draws you to that kind of character?

E.H. I think it's very tied to the issues that they're grappling with. [In] *“Never Rarely Sometimes Always,”* the young female protagonist, Autumn, is dealing with this desire to terminate this pregnancy. Abortion is so stigmatized and taboo. Obviously there's this darkness around what she's going through and why. I felt that she wasn't allowed to talk about it. All of that is incredibly stifling for a person to cope with. So her inability to articulate comes from the taboo nature of talking about abortion. I wanted the audience to feel the sort of the burden and the shame around navigating those issues.

R.P. What leads you to focus so closely on the perspectives of single characters? In both films that I've seen, there are supporting characters, but they're usually only shown from the protagonist's perspective when it's really just the protagonist's story. What draws you to tell a story in that way?

E.H. All my films are character studies that really hone in on the subjective perspective and experience of one individual. For me, it's very much about aligning the audience with their secrets, and their sort of private experiences of carrying around these secrets. I really enjoy making films that are these poetic character studies and immersing the audience in the subjective experience of one person. I enjoy not telling these ensemble-driven narratives where there's multiple points of view of one story. I tend to restrict the point of view. It's very first person.

R.P. Compared to *“Beach Rats,”* [which was very saturated] I thought your color palette in *“Never Rarely Sometimes Always”* was much more muted and bleached out almost. What led you to that kind of stylistic variance?

E.H. They're different seasons. First and foremost, *“Beach Rats”* is a summer film, and *“Never Rarely”* is a winter film. And for me, the sort of bleakness of the environments informs the palette. I wanted kind of a washed-out winter feel for the story. But also we were just looking at the real palette in Pennsylvania and worked from patterns and tones that we saw. I would take photos on the subway in New York and you would just see a big mass of black puffy coats. We knew that in New York, everyone wears black not as a style but almost as a uniform. There's something sort of funereal about it. Then, in Pennsylvania, the fabrics were much more faded, plaid, and muted. So the

palette does shift through the narrative actually. *“Beach Rats”* had a different energy, a different life and it was mostly a different season.

R.P. Can you talk to us a little bit about how your films are scored? It's so interesting to me how the instrumentation works, especially when the characters are silent.

E.H. *“Never Rarely”* is the only film with a score throughout. I hired a really incredible musician to do the score; Julia Holter. At first, while we were shooting you know we talked about instruments and sounds. Her music is very avant-garde and atmospheric. She ended up making so much beautiful music that we almost were at a loss for how to use it all. We had brought in an incredible music supervisor named Suzana Peric. She helped us wade through all of this incredible music, and together developed a logic. The logic was made sort of after the film was edited. We began to figure out what instruments represented the voice of each character. For Sidney's character, Autumn, there's always a clarinet that plays subtly in moments of uncertainty, and there's a piano that links her and Skylar together. Then we began taking those cues and shaping them more throughout so that there was a subtle structure to the way that the music develops.

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R.P. I really love the friendship between the cousins in *“Never Rarely.”* The emotional chemistry was just really impressive. How did you go about casting those two actors?

E.H. I met Sydney a long time ago, casting a nonfiction film. We were looking for subjects for a project, and we met her, adding her on Facebook. That was in 2012. Over the years, she just kept popping up in my newsfeed, my partner and I would always read her posts. I felt like I was watching a coming of age story unfold in my Facebook newsfeed and she would post very personal things about her life, her boyfriends, her breakups, and would post videos of herself playing music. As I was writing, she was a reference point for the character. Then when we started this extensive casting search, I just kept thinking about her and said to my producers, why don't we just have this girl who's been in my head the whole time come audition? And we did. Talia Ryder, who plays Skylar, was somebody who came in through an agent. She coincidentally was from the same place that Sydney was from in western New York. I thought that that was intriguing and that it could be used to form a bond. They had a lot to talk about when they met, and there was just a lot of chemistry organically between them during the callback.

R.P. In both *“Beach Rats”* and *“Never Rarely”* the intent of a couple of side characters is not necessarily clear. For example, Théodore Pellerin's character in *“Never Rarely”* seems like he either could be kind of like a creepy or decent guy. And he ends up being a decent guy. What kind of led you to make that kind of decision? That's something I don't see that often in film.

E.H. I wanted his character to walk a fine line and for him to represent a re-examination of a certain kind of male behavior. We're at this moment of reckoning. His behavior borders on predatory and relentless, as his character doesn't take no for an answer. There's something sort of charming in his approach and yet what's underneath that is more questionable. We know what he wants throughout the narrative. This kind of character is somebody who will appear in the course of a woman's life many, many, many times and I thought it was interesting to explore it. Initially, I had the idea for writing that character when I was just on a bus, taking the journey for inspiration that the characters take. I saw this kid get on in New Jersey. Before getting on, he had an exchange with his father and he took some money from him. I had thought that there was an interesting parallel narrative: a kid who's obviously privileged, going to New York to do something subversive, you know, in parallel with these girls going to New York to do something that's actually taboo. That was sort of where it began.

Shoes MIC URBAN,
Dress JULIA JENTZSCH,
Earrings and Ring PLUTONIA BLUE.

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R.P. As you mentioned, abortion, abortion rights and teen pregnancy are taboo to many people. That's the subject of "*Never Rarely*." Is this something that you're personally very passionate about?

E.H. Yeah, I started working on the film in 2012. I was inspired by a death in Ireland of a woman who was denied a life-saving abortion and just started reading about the journey that women took from Ireland to London. I asked myself, "*Well, what does that journey look like in the United States?*" I wanted to make a film that did reflect my personal politics, and also be a character's journey; an emotional Odyssey. It was very much a reaction to the administration, knowing that for four years in office, Trump was going to aggressively attempt to roll back reproductive rights. I saw it as an opportunity to make something that could potentially be useful and artful.

R.P. Did you talk to any young women who had experiences like the character in the film?

E.H. Because of privacy issues, I never spoke to anyone who took the journey; but I did talk to social workers from Planned Parenthood and abortion providers. I did extensive research and fieldwork on the subject. The journey and the character are invented, which was always my intention, but grounded in credibility.

R.P. Autumn doesn't seem to have many second thoughts about her decision. She seems very adamant. What was your thought process when you decided to frame her decision in that way?

E.H. I think that there's a lot of films about abortion that focus very heavily on the moral dilemma. I don't find that to be so authentic. Most people that I know who have had abortions have known very quickly and clearly what's best for them. I think that the dramatization of the moral dilemma is a bit stale, a conceit for a film. I just think people know what's best for them and what they can afford, what they want. I tried to focus on the other obstacles.

R.P. The film also features several scenes of casual sexual harassment. A man at the grocery store kisses the girls' hands. Autumn has a brief spat in a restaurant with the possible father of the fetus she terminates. These are consequential events, but they are really at the periphery of the narrative. How did you intend these events to relate to the main thrust of the narrative?

E.H. I was trying to use these small moments to create for the audience, giving them an understanding of the ways that the environment around them is hostile while being metaphoric for larger systemic issues that women encounter. Because they're young, these experiences that they have of casual sexism, misogyny, harassment and hostility are more jarring. As you grow up, you become more and more desensitized to them. But they are everywhere, and they are everyday experiences. In lieu of having an antagonistic male figure standing in her way, I wanted to represent the environment as being hostile.

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