

THE QUEEN OF VERSAILLES

AN AMERICAN ALLEGORY



For my dad, Sheldon Greenfield (1938–2025),
whose pride in me inspired all my projects,
especially the political ones.
And for Victoria (1996–2015).



Jackie Siegel, 46, strikes a pose in pink-dyed fox at Versailles, her future home, Windermere, Florida, 2012. The application of the Italian white marble façade is in progress. In 2026, Versailles remained unfinished.



LAUREN GREENFIELD

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Lannoo



Jackie Siegel (middle) and friends dangle their golden Versace handbags at a party for the opening of the Versace boutique, where champagne and caviar flow, Beverly Hills, California, 2007. This photograph was republished in *Time* magazine's 2007 "Pictures of the Year" as emblematic of the multiplying superrich and "a new Gilded Age."

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All photographs by Lauren Greenfield were taken between 2007 and 2012 in Florida, Nevada, or New York, unless otherwise noted. All quotations are excerpted from interviews conducted during the making of Greenfield's 2012 documentary film *The Queen of Versailles*. "Film strip" images are frame grabs from the documentary, and accompanying dialogue is from the documentary screenplay. Additional images, other than those in the essays, are from archival and background material collected during research for the film.



Jackie Siegel, 41, and friends attend a private reception at the Versace store, Beverly Hills, 2007. Lauren Greenfield first met and photographed Jackie at this event while shooting Donatella Versace for *Elle* magazine. Jackie described herself then as one of Versace's best customers.

WHAT DOES GOOD TASTE REALLY MEAN?

Ginia Bellafante

On the second weekend of September in 2008, as the collapse of Lehman Brothers “opened the portals of hell,” as one reporter put it, I found myself at a wedding in Norfolk, Connecticut, a town then in its 250th year, at a country club roughly into its 90th—a setting that would have easily attracted the eye of Lauren Greenfield, who has documented varied expressions of American privilege with a skill unmatched by any other living visual artist.

The main building—with a porch, white shingles, and a sloping roof line, suggesting the idyll of summers unburdened by obligation—looked out at a golf course designed by A.W. Tillinghast, the architect behind the celebrated courses at Winged Foot and Baltusrol, clubs where admission still rests with the labored judgments of earnest committees rather than the cashiers.

The man and woman getting married that Saturday afternoon were just a few years out of Yale, a marker of both his patrimony and hers. The bride’s roots in Norfolk were set down by her maternal grandfather, who, during his own time at Yale in the 1930s, had been a member of the secret society Skull and Bones; he went on to become a well-known writer for the *New Yorker*. The groom’s pedigree was no less distinctive—a childhood spent in London (St. John’s Wood), where his father had run a successful commodities brokerage, having absorbed something of the business as the son of a wealthy Midwestern grain merchant (Yale again) who married the ex-wife of an FDR-era senator. And so it went—an uncle who had run a multi-billion-dollar insurance firm (Princeton, Yale Law) and his wife who had been in the CIA, a television executive (Harvard), a banker who was refurbishing a castle in West Cork, on the southern coast of Ireland, that had been in his family for centuries.

By September of 2008, the iPhone had been with us for only 15 months, and Instagram, better suited to recording arrival than accomplishment, was still two years into the future. While guests discreetly checked their devices for news out of Wall Street, no one seemed panicked or, to my recollection, even especially anxious. It did not require clairvoyance to foresee a certain insulation from the coming chaos. The tenderness of the occasion, the loveliness of a couple so well matched, the delight of champagne enjoyed amid the warmth of a late summer afternoon combined to reduce whatever collective tension might have permeated. So, too, presumably, did the fact that several people in the room had shorted the housing market.

If, at that moment, anyone had asked who made up the American ruling class, I would have named the dozen or so leading financial executives who had been summoned by officials at the Federal Reserve that weekend to triage in New York—and pointed to the roughly 120 people who had gathered to toast the next generation in this quiet corner of northwestern Connecticut.

Gifted with the prescience that can turn good artists into great ones, Greenfield could see that the plates were beginning to shift, that the old signifiers were losing their torque—that Jackie and David Siegel were the mold in which so many members of the contemporary billionaire class would be cast. Greenfield already had a long history of identifying where American culture was headed, beginning with her 1997 book *Fast Forward: Growing Up in the Shadow of Hollywood*, which documented the emerging phenomenon of teenagers whose ambitions no longer seemed to crystallize around traditional ways of making a living—surgeon, fireman, lawyer, police officer, nurse—but rather around



Jackie with her seven biological children, her adopted niece Jonquil Peed, a second niece (far right), and her mother, outside the 90,000-square-foot dream home inspired by the Palace of Versailles. She and her husband began building their Versailles in 2004 in the Orlando suburb of Windermere, the location of many of central Florida's most extravagant trophy homes.





The grand ballroom of the Siegels' Versailles under construction. The sprawling, single-family home was designed to include an indoor roller-skating rink, six swimming pools, two movie theaters, a bowling alley, a wine cellar with fireplace, a 10,000-square-foot spa, a discotheque, and a bomb shelter.



BIGGEST HOUSE IN AMERICA — VERSAILLES MANSION

JACKIE

We never sought out to build the biggest house in America. It just kind of happened.

This is our grand ballroom. We have the grand staircase on each end.

I said, “Well, I’d like to have a bowling alley,” and then he said, “I want a health spa,” and then I said, “We need maids’ quarters.” I forgot how many kitchens. Ten kitchens. We have a sushi bar.

DAVID

Two tennis courts. One will be a stadium court. A full-sized baseball field, which will double as the parking lot when we have parties.

The children have their own wing. They have their playroom with a stage, where they can perform and do whatever they do.

JACKIE

This is the staircase I would come up if I was going to visit the children.

DAVID

We wanted to put everything we could dream of in this home.

JACKIE

So by the time we both got what we wanted, now it’s 90,000 square feet.



TIMESHARE CUSTOMERS — WESTGATE SALES OFFICE & MODEL UNIT

DAVID

You know, the typical timeshare family will stay in a motel with two queen-size beds, small TV on the dresser, and one bathroom. When they walk into the room, the kids want to turn on their cartoons, the wife wants to watch her soap operas, and the husband wants to watch his football game or sporting event.

They get up in the morning, they go in the bathroom, the wife goes in, steams up the mirror so the husband can't shave. They go out, and we have a booth. And we say, "Well, if you only spend 90 minutes, and see what we have to offer, you can get free Disney tickets." And at seven o'clock in the morning, they're lined up at my resort. As they're getting out of their car, the wife is saying to the husband, "Don't you dare buy anything," and he says "Oh, don't you worry, they won't sell me anything."

And it just blows them away. That motel, if it looked bad before they came, it looks twice as bad after. And all they do is dream about coming back the next year and staying at Westgate. We show them how, with what they're going to spend on motels over the next 10 or 15 years, they can afford this timeshare.

Scene from *The Queen of Versailles*: A Westgate employee gives a tour to potential timeshare buyers.



A GREAT DEAL — WESTGATE SALES OFFICE

CUSTOMER

We don't really take many vacations, because it's really, really expensive. But if we had something that would make it cheaper...

RICHARD SIEGEL, WESTGATE VP

[Voiceover]

They will not buy today if they don't get a great deal, if they don't believe they're getting a great deal.

WESTGATE EMPLOYEE

The total down payment on this is \$2,090. It's a whole lot better than \$25,000.

CUSTOMER

Yeah.

WESTGATE EMPLOYEE

May I say welcome to Westgate?

CUSTOMER

I can't believe we did it.

WESTGATE EMPLOYEE

You're changing your life.





The Siegel children pose at home with toys and family pets. Top row, left to right: Daniel, 9, Victoria, 12, Jonquil, 16. Bottom row, left to right: Debbie, 8, David, 10, Jacqueline, 2, Jordan, 2, and nanny Jelím Villanueva. Youngest son Drew not pictured.



We like animals a lot. We have three tortoises, we have two chinchillas, one guinea pig, two mice, two hamsters, four dogs, four cats—no, five cats—and... I think that's it. Oh, yeah. And my tarantula. I keep forgetting his name.

We used to have a bunch of lizards—like, chameleons and stuff—but they all died. Most of them got eaten, because my mom made us put them on the back patio so my dad wouldn't see them. One time we had a blue-tongued lizard. It was huge. Jonquil's ferret got out of its cage and got into the lizard's cage and ate it. My Dad doesn't like animals that much. He doesn't even know about the cat that I have.

— Victoria



Debbie sits astride a lion at sister Victoria's eighth birthday party. Lions and tigers from the family's private zoo were once a feature of Siegel family celebrations.



Jackie at home with her dogs and head nanny Marissa Gaspay, 50, who emigrated from the Philippines and has lived with the Siegels since 2003.

