



# 40 yrs. later, rivals' ugly Model Wars are back in fashion



**'STEALING' BEAUTY:** The feud between Elite Model Management's John Casablancas (above left) and Ford Models' Eileen Ford (above right) is on again, with the former's agency accusing the latter's of poaching models Caroline Trentini (left) and Josephine Le Tutour (opposite).

By JULIA MARSH and LAURA ITALIANO

## 'Theft' suit is Elite vs. Ford — the rematch

**I**N 1977, Eileen Ford — the tough-as-nails headmistress of Ford Models — bought a stack of Holy Bibles.

Going through each one, she underlined every reference to "Judas Iscariot" in red marker.

Then she had couriers hand-deliver a copy to each of the international residences of her cigar-chomping employee-turned-rival, John Casablancas, whose new Elite New York agency was so aggressively poaching her models that he had earned the nickname "The Body Snatcher."

Such was the ferocity of the notorious Model Wars, a cutthroat, years-long back-and-forth of bidding battles and litigation between Ford and Elite in the 1970s and '80s.

Well, spandex and shoulder pads are still out of fashion — but the Model Wars are making a comeback.

The combatants are, once again, Elite and Ford, for decades the two biggest names in the modeling industry.

But 40 years after Mrs. Ford sent out her infamous stack of Bibles, the stiletto is on the other foot.

In a newly revealed Manhattan Supreme Court lawsuit, Elite now says it is Ford doing the body-snatching.

"Elite and Ford are in the business of not liking each other," the judge on the case, Charles Ramos, noted wryly during a hearing in the spring.

**I**N the past year, two of Elite's top New York executives, two of its key Paris staffers and three of its top mannequins have all jumped to Ford — including Brazilian model Caroline Trentini, a staple of the Victoria's Secret Fashion Shows and a perennial favorite of Marc Jacobs.

Elite is crying foul, claiming in its suit that its two top New York execs broke their noncompete agreements and are now luring Elite's models to Ford.

"Caroline Trentini is a huge talent, and her defection sends a clear signal to other supermodels that Ford is back on top, in a big way," an industry source told The Post.

In addition to Trentini, German-born blonde Alena Blohm and Frenchwomen Josephine Le Tutour and Cora Emmanuel have also recently catwalked over from Elite to Ford, according to Elite's lawyer, Brian S. Cousin.

The two alleged turncoat execs are modeling-biz powerhouses Kwok Kan Chan and Christopher Michael Williams, both named as defendants in the suit along with Ford Models itself.

The Hong Kong-born Chan formerly repped gap-toothed beauty Georgia May Jagger — Mick's daughter with model Jerry Hall — and was top scout for The Society Management, the name of Elite's US division.

Williams, who helped launch the modeling career of Kendall Jenner, was "one of The Society's top-performing agents," Elite argues in its suit.

Both Chan and Williams started with The Society in 2012, signing five-year contracts and earning in the mid-six-figures, according to Cousin.



**DEFECTORS:** Modeling-biz bigwigs Christopher Michael Williams (left) and Kwok Kan Chan (right) quit their executive jobs at Elite to join Ford Models.

But last October, four years into their contracts, Chan and Williams resigned within four days of each other to work for Ford, Cousin alleges.

And while Elite held up its end by continuing to pay Chan and Williams until the five-year contracts ran out, the two have been busy flouting the contracts by helping Elite models jump to Ford, the lawsuit alleges.

"If there is a model war going on, it should be fought on the runways and on magazine covers, not in state Supreme Court," said Williams' lawyer, James Wicks.

Ford is trying to "replicate" Elite's operation, Cousin complained.

Elite's suit says that by stealing Williams, Ford gained his "unique set of skills and abilities," namely his relationship "with many of The Society's most highly valued models."

Elite also charges that "Ford has improperly utilized [its] confidential and ... proprietary information to gain an unfair competitive advantage."

"Ford's unfair competition has been willful and malicious," the suit says.

Ford also hired away two other high-level Elite staffers, Alexi Louison and Aurelie Bachelier, "who were both key Paris-based employees of Elite-Paris," the lawsuit alleges.

Since the suit was filed in January, the back-and-forth has been contentious.

Ford argued successfully to get out of the suit entirely, convincing Justice Ramos there was no evidence it "tortiously interfered" with Elite's business.

Elite now intends to force Ford back into the suit by deposing Williams and Chan this fall to prove through their words that the agency was complicit in the migration of talent, Cousin said.

Chan and Williams are meanwhile fighting back by saying any noncompete agreement they had with Elite was voided because "corporate restructuring" made it a precarious place to work.

"There was a lot of movement at the top" of Elite, complained a source close to Ford — a claim Elite denies.

Wicks, Williams' attorney, said: "Several of the claims in this case have already been dismissed, and those that remain are also without merit."

Lawyers for Ford and Chan did not return calls for comment.

**T**HE current battle of Elite against Ford is so staid — lawyerly and supermodel-free — that it makes you nostalgic for the bad old days.

Elite took on the New York modeling world in 1977 via many flamboyant acts of piracy.

Casablancas poached some of the world's biggest models to staff the upstart New York branch of Elite Model Management, mostly from Ford.

"It's me, big-lipped Janice," Ford supermodel Janice Dickinson once told Eileen Ford in a phone call announcing she was defecting to Elite — referencing one of Ford's common insults.

"I'm going to Elite," Dickinson said she told Ford. "I don't like you. I never liked you." Dickinson was one of a 20 models defecting from Ford to Elite.

Esme Marshall left Elite for Ford. And Beverly Johnson, the highest-paid black model at the time, left Elite for Ford, then returned a week later.

In one of a volley of lawsuits, Ford sued Elite for \$32 million in 1980.

Casablancas was a playboy, a rogue who wrecked his second marriage by getting caught bedding one of his best and youngest models — Stephanie Seymour at age 16.

Eileen Ford, in contrast, had started her agency in 1947, when the best models earned just \$40 an hour. She ran Ford Models with her husband, Jerry, "like a convent," as her New York Times obit noted in 2014.

Young models far from home often lived with the Fords in their Manhattan town house, including Jerry Hall, who has described her year with the Fords as the most boring of her life.

When Mick Jagger came courting in the mid-'70s, Eileen would call the still-teenage Hall's mother. "We both agreed: Jerry had to be home by midnight," Eileen once recalled.

When the irresistible force that was Casablancas clashed with the immovable object that was Eileen Ford, sparks — and words — flew.

"Eileen Ford's game is crystal clear," Casablancas told People in 1980. "She wants my skin. There's so much ego and conniving in this business — anyone will do anything. But I am a warrior. I will fight. I will never sleep with both eyes closed as long as that woman is around."

To which Eileen responded with a shrug: "I haven't got time for it."

Cousin is confident that when the dust settles, Elite will still reign.

"Ford has not been a stable or successful destination for serious talent in over 30 years," he said.

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