

VENUS

MANHATTAN LOS ANGELES

ARTFORUM

OCTOBER 2017

DEATH DRIVE

Mathieu Malouf and Michel Houellebecq



Michel Houellebecq,
Tourisme #002, 2017,
ink-jet print, 39 1/4 x 55

IN HIS 2016 BOOK *Mémoires d'outre-France*, Gavin Bowd, a lifelong Marxist and close friend of Michel Houellebecq, reminisced about a night spent drinking with the novelist in Paris's thirteenth arrondissement. "I will give an interview in which I call for a civil war to rid France of Islam!" Houellebecq exclaimed. "I'll tell people to vote for Marine Le Pen!" The mini media scandal that ensued following the book's publication was hardly unprecedented in France, where Houellebecq is known for incendiary declarations. He has also spoken out against a proposed law to fine the (male) clients of prostitutes in France (also protested by other Gallic public figures, who signed "Don't Touch My Whore!", a "manifesto of the 343 bastards"). Here in America, many of Houellebecq's over-the-top right-wing splashes in the media are lost in translation. Instead, he arrives blended into a smooth, semi-marketable image of a tortured French writer who smokes too much, potentially hates women, and drinks a lot, while his politics remain always a little too idiosyncratic to really juice a good story.

Like Marcel Broodthaers, another poet who became bored with writing late in life, Houellebecq recently decided to begin making exhibitions. Other than a few prior instances of direct contact between the author and the American art world—such as a chaotic 2005 lecture at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles featuring a pole dancer with dwarfism—"French Bashing," at Venus (formerly Venus over Manhattan) in New York, was his first proper introduction as an artist. On the invitation of gallerist Adam Lindemann, Houellebecq built on a wildly popular (and by many accounts "atrocious") exhibition he'd staged at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris in 2016, which he used, so the rumor goes, partly as an excuse to clear out items cluttering his Paris apartment (among them a tombstone bearing his name).

The Venus show, by contrast, was mostly free of sculptural works, aside from a massive desk that literalized the existential burden of working an office job, a focus of Houellebecq's first novels and of the spleen of his poetry in the early 1990s. The exhibition took the form of an installation of recent photographs split thematically between two galleries: one dedicated to suicidal depression, with the imminent downfall of France and Europe looming in the background, the other to the joys of tourism.

In accordance with his deep and well-documented admiration for Arthur Schopenhauer and Auguste Comte, Houellebecq says that his visual art, like his novels, is an attempt to "tell the truth about the world." Once past the almost complete absence of ambiguity in his work, the viewer may find something very refreshing in his overbearing earnest, intently reactionary craft as an artist, which serves as a severely executed extension of his poetry in the visual realm. The photographs of crumbling highway exchanges, rotted-out monuments, and monumental office towers in Houellebecq's visual art become fully sincere Baudelairean signifiers of a European civilization in decline, expressions of a soul in deep pain and in search of meaning; he has referred to their effect as "visual electricity."

The first gallery of "French Bashing" was lit only by framing projectors illuminating individual aluminum-mounted digital prints. A lot of what was on display here looked like badly plotted airport ads, but the presence of these works in a gallery setting evoked that strain of contemporary art in which Photoshop looms large, Simon Denny's mass-produced canvases being among the most obvious examples. *Mission #001*, 2016, reassembles an oversize printout of a Tumblr meme dripping with teenage angst. *VOUS N'AVEZ AUCUNE CHANCE* (You don't stand a chance), reads a sentence superimposed on a grim, grayscale view of a small town from a plane window. *CONTINUER?* Underneath, a solitary OS X-style "OK" button seals the deal. Life must go on despite the fact that it is painful, albeit less painful than finding the strength to kill yourself.

Through a thick curtain, the exhibition continued in a brightly lit room whose floor was scattered with plastic place mats from tourist destinations from the South of France. In keeping with the narrative established earlier, this metaphorical space represented salvation and escape from reality for the ur-Houellebecqian hero: a white, thirtysomething, sexually frustrated, suicidal IT guy. In *Platform* (2001), salvation comes in the form of unlimited sexual tourism and, later, true meaningful love. In *The Possibility of an Island* (2005), adapted into an amazingly hard-to-watch Bergmanesque movie in 2008, the main character joins a Raëlian-like sect and enjoys the unlimited benefits of human cloning, eternal life, and mass orgies. At Venus, the fun was a little bit cleaner and perhaps better suited to the politically sensitive climate of New York's art world in 2017—no prostitutes or aliens in sight.

A high point of the exhibition, *Tourisme #002*, 2017, was a photograph of a mural encountered somewhere sunny and fun—a wall painting of a jubilating, openmouthed man with circus performers and tigers reflected in his aviator sunglasses. The picture, a very straightforward depiction of joy, delivered a rare dose of unfiltered emotion—universal and immediate—that mirrors the simple pleasure of being amazed by a great show (this one?). But the photo is also a very unconvincing *trompe l'oeil*: Images lie, and standing in front of such an oppressive effusion of manufactured glee, it was difficult not to think that happiness, too, is false.

"I hate you, Jesus Christ, for giving me a body," Houellebecq laments in *La poursuite du bonheur* (1991). Supposing Jesus was, in fact, listening (or in this case looking), this exhibition certainly managed to serve a generous-enough portion of human suffering, one that might even have made our savior feel a little bit of jealousy—or hope?—seeing that someone down here is trying so hard to die for the sins of man.

Mathieu Malouf is an artist based in New York.