ARTSY

Controversial French Novelist Michel Houellebecq Photographs the Beauty of Our Brutal Society

ARTSY EDITORIAL
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JUN 15TH, 2017 6:17 PM

Michel Houellebecq, *Inscriptions #01*, 2017. Courtesy of Venus.

There's a description in the French writer Michel Houellebecq's best novel, *The Map and the Territory*, that recurs to me often. Jed Martin, a painter and photographer who gets entangled with the famous novelist Michel Houellebecq, is walking down a Parisian boulevard:

> *A Casino hypermarket and a Shell service station were the only perceptible centers of energy, the only social propositions likely to provoke desire, happiness, or joy. Jed already knew these lively places: he had been a regular customer of the Casino hypermarket for years, before switching to the Franprix in the boulevard de l'Hôpital. As for the Shell station, he also knew it well: on many a Sunday, he had appreciated being able to go there for Pringles and bottles of Hépar.*

I have never been to Paris, but I too already know these lively places. So do you. Fungible temples of the commodity "as a force aspiring to the complete colonization of social life," to quote Guy Debord. For most of us, such spaces are dead zones, not worth noticing, pit stops and way stations. (I never noticed the chintzy chandelier hanging from the ceiling of the deli I frequent almost daily until, thinking about Houellebecq's work, I took a good look at the place.) Houellebecq's protagonist sees these spaces as the only throbbing hearts in a diseased social body. Of course this means that contemporary society—French, but the idea extrapolates—is idiotic and brutal. Jed finds an oddly comforting beauty in it nevertheless.

I thought of this passage again while viewing Houellebecq's first U.S. art exhibition, "French Bashing," a scaled-down version of an assembly of original photographs and photomontages originally displayed as "Rester Vivant (To Stay Alive)" in 2016 at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris. The show is divided into two rooms, each a study in interstitial spaces that are politicized in ways both subtle and obvious. The first room is darkened, its pictures—which seem at a glance to be backlit—spotlighted from above. Here are images of what Houellebecq calls "peri-urban" zones, industrial suburbs and train stations and tollbooths, occasionally overlaid with lines from Houellebecq's novels and poems. The second room is garish, the floor covered in gaudy placemats culled from tourist destinations around France. The pictures—of rest stops and hotel lobbies, elevator banks and resort ads—pop from the walls.

Installation view of "Michel Houellebecq: French Bashing." Courtesy of Venus.

Houellebecq's camera discovers a depopulated—almost no people appear in any of the shots, even those of huge public housing blocks—and often depressing world. But like his novels, his photographs reveal the wit and allure of total disenchantment, the quirky loveliness of what Debord called "an insufficiently meaningful world." Giant concrete letters spell out "EUROPE" in front of a desolate, monochromatic car park. A hotel corridor—darkened glass doors in the middle distance, blue lights spaced evenly along wood-paneled walls—is drenched in an eerie greenish-red

glow. It can take the viewer a second to realize the corridor isn't quite empty: Ghosts of guests flicker in the frame, leaving an impression of the universal tourist costume of jeans, sandals, book bag. It's a simple but effective trick of exposure. In this pleasant field of corporate light and angles, people are an afterthought.

Houellebecq's technique is charmingly naïve at times—occasional Photoshop artifacts appear to have been (deliberately?) left visible in the finished work. But as Barthes says in *Camera Lucida*, perhaps it is precisely the amateur who most nearly approaches the *noeme* of photography. In interviews reproduced in a magazine published in conjunction with the Palais de Tokyo show, Houellebecq has conceived of the photograph in remarkably absolute terms, as though the person behind the lens were simply a medium through which the world presented itself, not a subject who positioned the camera here rather than there, chose this angle rather than that, pressed the button now rather than then—not to mention the possibility of later digital manipulation.

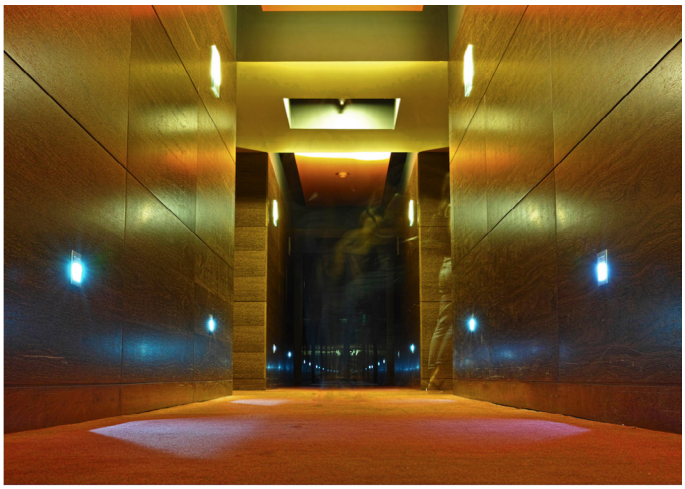
Yet the mind that flits within these images and their relationships to one another is enamored of contradiction and correspondences. A traffic sign for a forking road stands at the edge of a desolate rest stop, its white arrows diverging from a common root like a vertical dowsing rod. This symbol is coincidentally mirrored by two trees in the background curving away from adjacent bases.

The false but understandable dichotomy of the built environment and the

Michel Houellebecq, *France #014*, 2016. Courtesy of Venus.

"natural world"—false insofar as human structures are no less "natural" than beehives and beaver dams—is dramatized even more starkly in the last picture in the series, *France #002*, the finest of the exhibition. It shows a Leader Price discount store in Saint-Flour. The squat rectangles of the building plummet into a drab gray parking lot populated by nine cars and a single towering lamppost. The blue-and-red diamond logo of the storefront offers the eye a respite from an image of banality itself. Except that we see that the store, shot from a hillside several hundred yards away, is surrounded, nearly engulfed, by lush green countryside, wilderness and

foliage, fields and yellow flowers and pale dirt. An outcropping of flora-streaked cliff face to the right of the frame shoots out over the houses that sit slightly below the Leader Price, dominating the scene, the rocks' right angles echoing and overpowering those of the buildings below. And now we notice that the discount store's roof seems itself to be fuzzed grayish-green with encroaching plant life, a harbinger of the weed-choked cityscapes familiar from dystopian fiction.



Michel Houellebecq, *Tourisme #014*, 2016. Courtesy of Venus.

Michel Houellebecq, *France #002*, 2017. Courtesy of Venus.

"In a few millennia, this Leader Price will still be there," Houellebecq says in an interview, while admitting he touched up the photo by saturating the blue and red of the diamond and the green of the surrounding vegetation. Capitalism might well destroy us, as it has thousands of other species. But like the rocks above Saint-Flour, our shopping malls will remain, in midst of other woe than ours.

Houellebecq's novels, with their repellent protagonists, are known for their outrageous provocations, but they are also infused with an unflinching

melancholy born of a fascinated and equivocal antipathy toward *the modern world* (a phrase Houellebecq italicizes in his most recent novel, *Submission*, in order to acknowledge its received quality). "French Bashing" quietly advances this theme, but without the people whose hidden hearts spark the novels' drama. *The Map and the Territory*'s definition of art as "the production of representations of the world, in which people were never meant to live" is also a fair description of society under capital in its terminal phase, the society of spectacle and immiseration. When Michel Houellebecq (the fictional character), drunkenly haranguing Jed Martin, laments the brutality of modern life as an "an endless wandering between eternally modified product lines," the reader is meant to clock the shopworn banality of what has become a commodified critique, even while recognizing its essential truth. Soon the writer disavows his own despair and exclaims: "To love, laugh, and sing!" Then he knocks over a bottle of wine, which shatters into shards.

—Michael Robbins