

VENUS

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For Michel Houellebecq, Bleakness Is A Brand

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Michel Houellebecq appreciates an aerial view — but a low one, slightly askew, not too far off the ground. This might seem a metaphor for the much-celebrated and also much-reviled French novelist’s societal perspective: elevated enough to survey and dismiss, yet almost close enough to touch. But it describes, too, Houellebecq’s actual experiential preference — as seen in his choice to live on a middle floor of a high-rise, in the south of Paris near the Périphérique highway; or in the pleasure he once took in a hot-air balloon ride at low altitude across the outskirts of Avallon, a small city in Burgundy.

We know this from Houellebecq’s photographs, thirty of which are on view in large format in “French Bashing,” his first U.S. gallery show, at Venus Over Manhattan on the Upper East Side. From the balloon, where Houellebecq has said he felt the same low hover he recognized from his recurrent dreams of flight, he captured near-lateral vistas of bleak parking lots and residential blocks. From his apartment window, he shot a stunningly dense architectural composition, lines of buildings from different eras stacked up the hill into the inner-ring suburb of Kremlin-Bicêtre, with its long, seventeenth-century hospital and modern housing blocks still above. Beside this image is a classic Houellebecq statement, from his 2015 novel, *Submission*: “I had no more reason to kill myself than most of these people did.”

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Kremlin-Bicêtre, with its long, seventeenth-century hospital and modern housing blocks still above. Beside this image is a classic Houellebecq statement, from his 2015 novel, *Submission*: “I had no more reason to kill myself than most of these people did.”

Houellebecq’s bleakness is legendary, built into his brand since he broke out with his second novel, *The Elementary Particles*, in 1998. Now 61, he trained as an agronomist and worked for a time as an IT systems engineer; he published a first novel in 1994, after a number of poems and essays. A brilliant stylist in French, he can sustain an erudite digression on philosophy, literature, or science and puncture it at just the right moment with a rueful jab that returns his characters to their tawdry exertions. These have included hippie nudist camps, a cult obsessed with cloning, sex tourism, consumerism, banal



cocktail parties, and, in *Submission*, the placid drift of bien-pensant society, led by university professors, toward the moral order of an Islamist party that has come to power in a France of the near future. In *The Map and the Territory* (2010), Houellebecq appears as a character, only to be found decapitated with his dog, their bodies shredded in a tableau that the main protagonist, an artist, compares unfavorably to a Jackson Pollock.

Real-life Houellebecq is famous for no-shows, feuds with press, and erratic behavior; he cultivates a depressed persona, fueled by alcohol and tobacco and freighted with cynicism, that shades easily into his fiction. “He is clearly the most Houellebecquian of his characters,” wrote *Le Monde* journalist Ariane Chemin. “That’s his talent, his genius.” A kind of participant-observer of Europe’s cultural and political decay, he often treads ambiguous ground: He seems as much to further reactionary politics as to critique it, and misogyny is clearly an issue, even though his novels also brutally show up male fragility. Houellebecq was never truly an outsider, but his book sales, his Goncourt — the top literary prize in France — for *The Map and the Territory*, and his return to France in 2012 after twelve years of seclusion abroad (mostly in Ireland, which he claimed he chose for the lower tax rates, and partly in Spain) now make him an institution on the French cultural scene, with close pals in literature and politics, and also virulent critics.

This context pre-loads “French Bashing” with expectations that a typical exhibition of moody built-environment photography might be spared. Of course, it also creates much of the interest in the show. “French Bashing” is based on a large multimedia exhibition that Houellebecq staged in summer 2016 at the Palais de Tokyo art space in Paris, to mixed reviews. But

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where that show, “Rester Vivant” (“To Stay Alive”), was grandiose — with guest artists, a shrine to Clément, Houellebecq’s deceased corgi, and what sounds like an embarrassing short film Houellebecq made of young women having arcadian sex by a riverside — the New York version is limited to photography and filtered for coherence and quality. As it turns out, Houellebecq has been a photographer for as long as he has written. In part, he uses photography in service of his writing, shooting settings he plans to use in his novels, so as to put himself in the mind-frame of his characters when he writes. But he has a formal vision as well, and a deliberate process — he likes to identify a location, then return and shoot when the light and conditions are optimal. The images in this exhibition were made at various times from the mid-Nineties till just recently; while the selection underscores his mournful worldview, the work has poetic qualities as well.

The show is staged in two rooms separated by heavy curtains. The first is dark and lugubrious, the images shot in color but often highly desaturated toward shades of brown and gray. They show toll plazas, railway lines, apartment blocks, fences. The parking lot of a shopping center is nearly empty; in the foreground, big letters of brutal, stained concrete spell out EUROPE. Signs forbidding vehicles and dogs mark the entrance to a dirt road that leads to a beach on an overcast day. A sound installation, by French cinema sound editor Raphaël Sohier, plays rumbling traffic noises and the chime that precedes railway station announcements. Two pieces are composite images of bridges, pipelines, and so on, overlaid with notes that Houellebecq took for a talk in Brazil; among the doodles and scribbles (in French), various Houellebecquian themes surface: “porno film,” “retreat of the French language,” “Balzac,” “Vonnegut.”

The other room is jaunty, bathed in light. The images here are bright and vivid: a bus panel advertising a water park, a high-end hotel lobby, a cow statue indicating a farm-stand, the jumbled panorama of a schlocky seaside resort in Spain, identical pink-ocher buildings rising up an escarpment, capped by the community’s name, BEVERLY HILLS. Sohier’s soundtrack for this side is dominated by children at play, but the few humans who appear in several of the photographs are tiny, lost in the landscape. Meanwhile, roughly 560 colorful placemats from French tourist restaurants are laid out like paving-stones from one end of this room to the other, forcing the visitor to tread on them. Each one touts in loud color some attraction — a mountain, beaches, a cathedral, regional delicacies, a wine-tasting route. The aggregate message, clearly, is to do with the banality of organized leisure, faux enthusiasm, and enforced norms, as if to confirm that from the cinderblock dystopia of modern life shown across the curtain, there is truly no exit.

And yet. The narrative Houellebecq proposes is grim, as his reputation requires; but many of his images are alluring individually. The dark rail-and-concrete shots retain, at least at trace levels, the Modernist romance of infrastructure and industry; in some of the tourism scenes, nature remains the strongest redemptive force. Even the show’s title, “French Bashing,” is slightly off-key, as France, under the unexpected presidency of 39-year-old Emmanuel Macron, is now an object of cautious hope that the social-democratic model might not be doomed after all. At least the rise of a new centrist force disrupts *Submission*’s scenario of spiraling conflict between fascists and Islamists, with everyone in between making craven compromises. More so than his novels, Houellebecq’s photographs admit a slender possibility: There’s still life.

“Michel Houellebecq: French Bashing”

Venus Over Manhattan

980 Madison Avenue

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