



MICHEL HOUELLEBECQ, "MISSION #002" (2016).  
PIGMENT PRINT ON BARYTA PAPER MOUNTED  
ON ALUMINUM, 23 7/16 X 34 7/16 INCHES.  
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND VENUS, NEW YORK.

*"We feel nostalgia for a place simply because we've lived there; whether we lived well or badly scarcely matters. The past is always beautiful. So, for that matter, is the future. Only the present hurts, and we carry it around like an abscess of suffering, our companion between two infinities of happiness and peace."*  
– Michel Houellebecq, *Submission* (2015)

On June 1<sup>st</sup> at 2pm, I walk into the Venus gallery located on the third floor of a posh Madison Avenue building on the Upper East Side. As I enter, I see Michel Houellebecq seated in a lightless corner. He is staring at the empty space where young gallery assistants are hanging his photographs. The images are bleak. They portray cold and miserable French suburbs, high-rise housing projects with grey skies, isolated and empty shopping malls. Sad and distant grey architecture is shown with debatable artistic quality. Some images have adjacent or overlaying sentences that read: "I had no more reasons to kill myself than most of these people did," "the uncertainty principle," "the world is average sized," or "you have no chance." The gallery's publicist introduces me and we aim for the conference room where he opens a brown paper bag containing what seems to be a hotdog but is actually filled with appetizing lobster.

In France, writers are as important as actors or politicians. They are celebrities, appearing on TV in prime-time talk shows. Houellebecq (pronounced "well-beck") is no exception, and every single French person knows him and his public persona, which, like his oeuvre, has always been characterized as pessimistic and negative. He has been labeled a misogynist, an Islamophobe, and a nihilist, provoking left and right in equal measure.<sup>1</sup> If you like half-empty glasses and do not believe in happy endings, you will find a sympathetic presence in Houellebecq's characteristically embittered, misanthropic narrators and his somber views on the contemporary world.

**Why this title: French Bashing?**

"I feel like this is what my photos are doing. They show France in an unflattering way."

Despite being the most famous French writer of his generation, Houellebecq's spiteful relationship with his home country isn't news. His most recent book, *Submission*, imagines a dark future where France is ruled by Sharia law...

**Do you think that the American public will understand and be receptive to what you are presenting here?**

"Yes, I believe so. There must be similar urban zones in the United States. I don't know where but there must be," he says while chewing his lobster hot dog.

I tell him that in New York they are called 'projects' and, like in France, they built these giant towers with the least amount of positive thinking for the communities who inhabit them. However, his photographs depict the phenomenon of peri-urbanization – the hybrid landscapes present between cities and rural areas.

He continues, "In France there are different types of 'peri-urban' zones. First there are these zones where you see a juxtaposition of things like fields, highway entrances, railways, housing subdivisions, etc. It's different from the suburbs because suburbs are essentially a diminution of density while here you literally have things laid in the middle of nowhere. Another type are small towns that have been so impoverished that they now also belong to the 'peri-urban.'"

Houellebecq started taking photographs when he was sixteen years old. Today, at sixty-one, he owns both a digital and a film camera: "When I shoot film I'm really scared to fail. I like to be able to see the results right away. Actually, when I shoot film it's only after I already have shot the same image digitally because one has to admit the quality is better with film."

# MICHEL HOUELLEBECQ

*Is That a Hot Dog in Your Literary Oeuvre,  
or Are You Just Taking Photos and Eating Lobster?*

Written by Alexis Dahan



MICHEL HOUELLEBECQ, "ARRANGEMENTS #008" (2016), PIGMENT PRINT ON BARYTA PAPER MOUNTED ON ALUMINUM, 39 1/8 X 57 1/2 INCHES. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND VENUS, NEW YORK.



MICHEL HOUELLEBECQ, "ESPAGNE #008" (2016), PIGMENT PRINT ON BARYTA PAPER MOUNTED ON ALUMINUM, 39 3/16 X 55 1/2 INCHES. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND VENUS, NEW YORK.

We stand up and walk towards a large photograph depicting an international shopping mall with large concrete letters spelling EUROPE in the foreground. "This is one of my most well-known photographs. This is Calais and 'Europe' is the name of the mall. It's a recent photograph but the concrete has not aged well. I love things that are in the process of degrading."

**Even the cars look like they come from another era.**  
"Yes, it's one of France's poorest region. That's why people keep their cars for an extremely long time."

Houellebecq isn't mocking poverty and its effect on the urban landscape. He genuinely finds it interesting aesthetically, even beautiful perhaps.

We now walk towards a large curtain to look at the second room of the gallery. There, he has decided to show a seemingly opposite narrative: colorful, bright, saturated touristic postcards from various French regions are covering the floor and on the walls, photos using a similar color palette depict touristic centers of interest.

**So you separated the show in two parts: the truth and...**  
"...and the reconstruction for a touristic purpose," he says.

I point towards an image of a run-down cow sculpture over a sunset in the water. Writing on a sign indicates this was a place where you could buy meat from Burgundy. "This Burgundy cow lost in the North of France, you can't say that she succeeded in life. It's a sad absurdity. I wrote a lot of poetry like this, both absurd and sad."

His calm and gentle-sounding voice contrasts with the harshness with which he portrays France. On one side you have a slow and dark

depression and on the other, the possibility of escaping depression that is actually even more depressing! Did he come to America to show his contempt for France?

As the art handlers start drilling and sawing to finish the installation, we decide to continue the conversation outside. In the elevator, someone is holding a green smoothie and Houellebecq is visibly amused that there is such a thing as a drinkable salad. While laughing, a bad cough erupts and he pulls out a cigarette that he lights as soon as we're outside: "These are the posh neighborhoods," he says while pointing at the Carlyle Hotel across the street, "I'm staying there." If you had seen him in his loose Canadian tuxedo and messy hair you'd wonder what the guys at the Carlyle thought when he first walked in – not exactly your regular Upper East Sider.

The word photography comes from the ancient Greek "photos," for light, and "grapho," to write. Photography etymologically means "writing with light." I wonder if he defines himself more as a writer or a photographer. "I continue to consider myself a writer. But in reality I define myself the way others define me. It's terrible to say that but I believe this is the truth."

**Which one do you take more pleasure performing?**  
"The pleasure with photography is more immediate."

**And with writing?**  
"Writing isn't pleasing or displeasing. It requires an incredible amount of nervous energy. It's exhilarating to the limits of sanity."

**Is there a connection between your two practices?**  
"Photography for me is closer to poetry. You get a result rather quickly. In some ways it's immediately gratifying."

**However photography is only limited to what is there, while poetry grows from language.**

"I am not sure that for me poetry grows out of language. I rather feel like it comes from an instant of perception. That being said it is true that there is more meaning at stake in poetry. I often have noises in my poems. Images, but also noises."

As we cross 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue to enter Central Park, I am thinking of my next question about literature and philosophy, and I start to feel the urge to change subjects and hear his opinions on politics. I mean, I'm walking around with Michel Houellebecq, the famous pessimist intellectual, and I'm not going to ask him about Trump? Yes, enlighten us Michel! Give us the knowledge!

"Actually, since we had such a passionate and completely unusual election in France, I haven't thought about Trump very much." He sees the disappointment in my eyes and carries on. "It's effectively not a good idea to cut federal funding in a lot of places but I think that the foreign policies he proposed were not that bad. The great catastrophe

in American foreign politics was with both Bush administrations and how their interventionism resulted in tragedies. Actually Trump wants to go in Obama's direction but even more so."

**"Are you referring to isolationism?"**  
"Yes, but especially to renounce being the great world organizer. In my opinion that was a good idea, but it seems that he is not going to follow through. Americans only think to win wars and impose a new government that works with them but that does not work. It does not work at all."

Have you ever heard of "Freedom Fries"? Do you remember the "cheese-eating surrender monkeys"? Anti-French resentment in America possibly dates back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but more recently the feeling commonly known as "French Bashing" reached its pinnacle after France vetoed U.N. support for the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 during the Bush presidency. But don't worry – Michel Houellebecq is in town and ready to bash some more.

<sup>1</sup> "A best seller across Europe, *Submission* hit a nerve in France, where it has sold an impressive 650,000 copies. Literary critics praised it. Feminists condemned its depiction of women (supine, in all senses of the word, including in not standing up to the imposition of Shariah law). The right called it prescient. The left called it a gift to the right-wing National Front. Prime Minister Manuel Valls denounced it, saying: 'France isn't Michel Houellebecq. It isn't intolerance, hate, fear.' – Rachel Donadio, *The New York Times* (2015).

"So began the still fierce debate over whether Houellebecq should be hailed as a brilliant realist in the great tradition of Balzac or dismissed as an irresponsible nihilist. (One flummoxed *New York Times* reviewer called the novel "a deeply repugnant read." Another described it as "lurch[ing] unpleasantly between the salacious and the psychotic.") – Susannah Hunnewell, *The Paris Review* (2010).

"A panel of three judges, delivering their verdict to a packed Paris courtroom, acquitted Houellebecq, 45, of the charges of provoking racial hatred in remarks made in an interview with the literary magazine *Lire* last year. The charges had been brought by France's Human Rights League, the Mecca-based World Islamic League and the mosques of Paris and Lyon in a trial reminiscent of Britain's Salman Rushdie affair. [...] The prosecution claimed that Houellebecq had said that Islam is "the most stupid religion" and that the "badly written" Koran made him fall to the ground in despair." – *The Guardian*, (2002)