

# VENUS

MANHATTAN LOS ANGELES

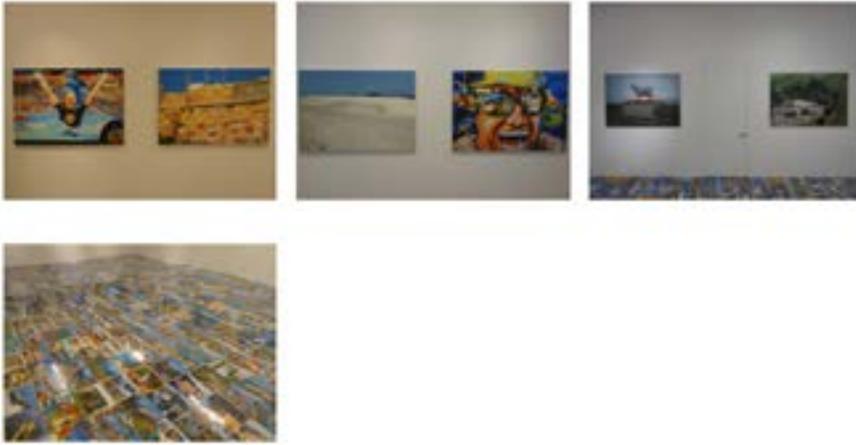
COLLECTOR  
DAILY

## Michel Houellebecq: French Bashing @Venus Over Manhattan

By Loring Knoblauch / In Galleries / July 19, 2017

**JTF (just the facts):** A total of 31 color photographic works (30 single images and 1 triptych), unframed and mounted on aluminum, and alternately hung spotlit against black walls in the main gallery space/entry area and against white walls in the side room (with laminated tourist placemats covering the floor). All of the works are pigment prints on Baryta paper, made in 2016 and 2017. Physical sizes range from roughly 20x28 to 39x58 (the triptych consists of three 39x58 panels), and all of the works are available in editions of 4. The installation includes soundscapes composed in collaboration with Raphaël Sohier. This show is a subset of a larger exhibition of Houellebecq's work that was on view at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris in 2016 (here). (Installation shots below.)





**Comments/Context:** There is a certain seductive logic to the idea that creative people who have had proven success in one medium might plausibly be able to cross over and find similar success in another. But while the ubiquity of camera technology has made everyone in some sense a photographer these days, the number of famous artists who have achieved respectability (much less greatness) in photography is surprisingly small. Among the notable converts are the writer Lewis Carroll who made sensitive 19th century portraits of children, the sculptor Constantin Brancusi who reinterpreted his works in the context of his studio, the musician Patti Smith who has used her camera to capture poetic moments of inspiration, and the actor Dennis Hopper who channeled the brashness of celebrities and pop culture, but the list is by no means endless. Most importantly, these few each found a way to not only translate his or her distinct artistic voice into photographs that feel consistent with their more celebrated accomplishments elsewhere, but to extend those stylistic ideas in new directions using the unique power of the camera.

As seen in this gallery show, the celebrated French writer Michel Houellebecq is yet another creative type who has been moonlighting as a photographer. For those that may be less familiar with his primary artistic occupation, Houellebecq is a self-styled literary provocateur, his novels (from *The Elementary Particles* and *The Map and The Territory* to his most recent book *Submission*) moving between sparkingly innovative brilliance and deliberately polarizing controversy, his characters steeped in the grim underbelly of failing Western society (among other hot button topics like sex tourism and the rise of Islam). Depending on one's perspective, his deep cynicism and acute disillusionment are either the basis for eye-opening, radical truth telling or a wearying march of intolerable annoyance, and he seems to have created ardent admirers and incensed detractors in somewhat equal measure. The good news is that walking out on this knife edge of risky cultural analysis has made for some consistently thought-provoking work in the past decade, even if his themes and subjects make a majority of his readers decidedly uncomfortable.

Houellebecq's photographs try to bite with some of this same incisive acidity, but for the most part, simmer in the nether regions of cultural emptiness. His show is divided into two distinct halves – a dark room and a light room, with multiple bodies of work on view in each area. Against the black walls, Houellebecq has probed the grey soulless architecture of modernity, from hulking apartment blocks and suburban warehouses to highways, airports, toll booths, and other fenced in (or fenced out) infrastructure. A stained concrete EUROPE sign tops off the dreary mood, the inadvertently ridiculous parking lot lights in the background creating the appearance of arrows flying around half cocked. On their own, many of these photographs wouldn't be particularly memorable, but in some cases, Houellebecq has added text captions that hit the ennui harder. The triptych pairing endless windows and faceless buildings with "I had no more reason to kill myself than most of these people did" is the best example of this approach, his literary flourishes smartly complementing the imagery to create a deeper sense of grinding contemporary despair.

As we move through the heavy curtain and into the bright room, the splash of colors makes it seem for a moment like the mood might shift. Houellebecq's images here come from tourist spots in France and Spain, and the floor is covered in laminated tablemats touting the happy blue-skied enticements of countless mountain and beach resorts. But Houellebecq's tourist destinations are just as hollow as his cities – the hip hotel lobbies and hallways are cavernously empty (or worse, inhabited by ghosts), and the beach is like a deserted moonscape. Endless Spanish condos pile up under the name Beverly Hills, but the exclusive brand doesn't quite fit the ugly clutter of balconies. And a few of these images are reminiscent of the playful work of Martin Parr (especially the gleefully smiling faces that shout from murals and the sides of buses), but it's as if Parr's wry visual wit has been replaced by something more darkly caustic, the mocking jokes not even funny, just depressing. The Leader Price store nestled into the glorious green valley has the same effect – Houellebecq's dispiriting (but all too real) observation that our desire for cheap convenient stuff has overrun our natural treasures feels like a not-so-subtle kick in the face.

So as the title of the exhibit implies, there's plenty of French Bashing going on here, but Houellebecq's photographs deliver those attitudes and concerns with a bit less durable resonance than his prose. Houellebecq is clearly experimenting with photography as a means of expression, trying out different picture making styles (including multiple image compositing and aerial imagery) and testing alternate ways of incorporating text and hand made inscriptions, so his desire to extend his literary talents into the visual medium of photography feel genuine. Photographically, we can hear Houellebecq's distinctive voice in these pictures, but the images still feel disconnected and almost preliminary. In the end, this show offers us a glimpse of a something unfinished but still promising – a sophisticated and surgically acerbic point of view, searching for its ultimate expression in pictures.

Collector's POV: The works in this show are priced at either \$5000 or \$8000, based on size, with the triptych priced at \$18000. Houellebecq's photographic works have little secondary market history, so gallery retail remains the best option for those collectors interested in following up.

Read more about: [Michel Houellebecq, Venus Over Manhattan](#)