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Nobody Will Make Us Do Yoga: A Conversation with Michel Houellebecq

CL

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The acclaimed and controversial French author discusses his new show of photographs.

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About an hour into my conversation with Michel Houellebecq at [VENUS over Manhattan](#), Adam Lindemann's Upper East Side gallery where Houellebecq photography exhibition "[French Bashing](#)" will be on display until August 4,

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photography exhibition "French Bashing" will be on display until August 4, Houellebecq wanted to go outside and have a cigarette. When he learned I also smoked he became animated in a way that none of my questions about his photographs, his novels, or politics in France, Europe, and America had made him. "The prohibition doesn't work!" he said. As Houellebecq, our translator O., and I walked to the elevator, he said that in California he hadn't met anyone who smoked. I told him there they were all preoccupied with health and activities like yoga. He said, "Nobody will make us do yoga."

The weather outside had Houellebecq spooked. It was very sunny and mild, and he said that in France when the weather's nice people generally don't bother going to gallery openings. (The next day Houellebecq didn't show up at Albertine Books, where he was scheduled to appear in conversation. A large crowd was disappointed.)

Houellebecq had come to New York after a tumultuous political season in France. The incumbent, President François Hollande, declined to contend for another term, and after taking an early lead, the Republican Alain Juppé was defeated in a primary along with former President Nicholas Sarkozy by François Fillon. In the general campaign, Fillon was crippled by the "Penelopegate" scandal, to do with his arranging fictional jobs for his wife when he was in the National Assembly. In the final run-off, Emmanuel Macron, who founded a new centrist party in April, defeated Marine Le Pen of the far-right National Front. As if from a farce in one of Houellebecq's novels, Macron's marriage to Brigitte Trogneux, 24 years his senior and a teacher at his high school when they met, has attracted a lot of prurient attention.

That afternoon on Madison Avenue, he became fascinated by a small child walking by with a backpack covered in large pink spikes designed to resemble the anterior of a day-glo stegosaurus. I asked him why the narrator of his last novel Submission—a depressive literature professor in a France where a Muslim president is elected and universities reward faculty members who convert to Islam—eats so much bad sushi. "It's not so bad, it's just standard. It's pleasant enough."

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MANHATTAN LOS ANGELES



Houellebecq's "Espagne #008," (2016) taken near the author's holiday home in Spain. Courtesy of VENUS over Manhattan.

Something like this attitude pervades the images in "French Bashing." The show draws on a larger set of works Houellebecq exhibited in 2016 at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, Rester Vivant (To Stay Alive), drawn from photographs he'd been taking for more than two decades. The show at VENUS is split into two rooms, one themed around tourism, the other Europe. The tourism room is brightly lit with white walls and the images range from sleek modern wood-paneled hotel lobbies and elevator banks to garish reproductions of resort signage and advertisements. I asked Houellebecq if a kitschy cow standing atop an advertisement for farm produce in front of a grassy seaside landscape at dusk was a sign of Americanization. "In France we like our cows too," he said. The floor of the room is covered in tacky placemats lifted from tourist holes all over the place. An image of hotel balconies under a "Beverly Hills" marquee struck me as nothing like anything I've seen in Beverly Hills. Houellebecq explained that it came from a town near his holiday home in Spain.

The Europe room's walls are painted black and the photographs are lit with framing projectors such that they seem to be glowing. A few of them are overlaid

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MANHATTAN LOS ANGELES

with lines from Houellebecq's writings, translated into English. An American novelist I brought with me to the opening pointed out that the line printed over an aerial photo of a barren desert-like landscape (probably Spain again) that reads "The world is average sized" at VENUS goes "The world is medium-sized" in Lorin Stein's translation of *Submission*. The latter version, with its commercial valence, says it better. Houellebecq told me that a series of aerial photographs of apartment blocks from the Avallon suburbs was shot from a hot air balloon, which he enjoyed riding in because it was possible to stop in the air and maintain a constant altitude. A poet I saw at a party the next night remarked that a hot air balloon was a good metaphor for being a novelist.



"Inscriptions #015" (2017). Courtesy of VENUS over Manhattan.

The gallery announcement for "French Bashing" calls these photographs "dystopian" images—of dreary buildings, roads, train stations, etc.—and likens them to scenes from Houellebecq's fiction, but "dystopian" seems to me the wrong word for both. Houellebecq has only written one properly dystopian novel—the clone-future science fiction *The Possibility of an Island*—and another, *Submission*, that views the near future of a Muslim-ruled France with

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MANHATTAN LOS ANGELES

equanimity. A better way to describe Houellebecq's fictional worlds—in *Whatever* (his nihilistic office comedy), *The Elementary Particles* (the international blockbuster about sexual liberalization and its despairing effects that made Houellebecq famous), *Platform* (his novel about sex tourism and terrorism), and *The Map and the Territory* (in which the murder of Michel Houellebecq is juxtaposed with the portrait of the celebrity conceptual artist Jed Martin)—is as zones alternately drained of enchantment and stuffed with phony enchantment.

That was the way the bleak and garish rooms at VENUS struck me. It's worth noting that a part of Houellebecq's Palais de Tokyo exhibition that drew much commentary in 2016 but is absent in the Manhattan show consisted of a series of images paying tribute to his dead corgi, Clément, including kitschy watercolors of the dog by Houellebecq's ex-wife. "As with his novels," Digby Warde-Aldam wrote in Apollo about the Paris show, "the exhibition is redeemed from the abyss of solipsistic miserablism by the rich strain of deadpan humour that runs through his work." The exhibition also included a *fumoir*, that is, a smoking room: "a fraternal thought for my fellow addicts." Thanks.

One mistake I made in advance of meeting Houellebecq was neglecting to revisit *The Map of the Territory*. I might have realized that I would be interviewing the fictional artist Jed Martin. In the novel his work consists of closeup photos of Michelin maps and portraits in oil paint of people in lowly professions (butchers and mechanics) and capitalist celebrities (Bill Gates, Jeff Koons, Michel Houellebecq). It's not quite what Houellebecq is up to here, but there's a similar insouciance. They also talk to interviewers the same way. "I want simply to *give an account of the world*," Jed tells an interviewer from *Art Press* of his work.

Houellebecq was similarly terse and deadpan with me. Here is a slice of our conversation, condensed and edited, and mediated by our translator O.:

Christian Lorentzen: What's the origin of this project, conceptually? And how do the two rooms relate to your books?

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Michel Houellebecq: Tourism is a concept that's present in *Platform*, where the tourism takes place in Thailand and Cuba, and *The Map and the Territory*, about French tourism.

CL: Has France become more touristic during your lifetime?

MH: France has adapted to being a permanent zone of tourism, with hotels and spas for tourists that didn't exist when I was born. There are information panels up in every city.

CL: What effect has that had on the French people?

MH: They're mostly happy because of unemployment. Any way you can find a job is good. When your kids start working in tourism, the parents are happy.

CL: How does tourism relate to migration, especially in terms of politics?

MH: They don't interact because migrants go to cities and suburbs, and the tourists go to nicer places. Rich Chinese tourists are often the targets of robberies. That's one interaction. The attacks on Paris have a depressing effect on tourism.

CL: Where are you living now?

MH: Paris.

CL: After *The Elementary Particles* you moved to Ireland. How long did you live there?

MH: Eleven years.

CL: Why did you move back?

MH: To speak French.

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CL: How long have you been back?

MH: Five years.

CL: What did you think of the election?

MH: It was the most fascinating we've ever had. More thrilling than any other political event.

CL: Has the National Front been weakened?

MH: No.

CL: Is this a permanent realignment—the center vs. the far right?

MH: It's not sure. What is sure is that there is no Socialist party to speak of anymore. You have the far left, the center, and the far right. The question is whether these will burst into different factions. We don't know what will happen.

CL: Was the election more fascinating than the one you fictionalized in *Submission*?

MH: Yes. There were much more surprises. In the last two years, Alain Juppé being one of the sure candidates, then Fillon taking the lead and all of the stuff against him, and then the collapse of the main parties. This couldn't have been foreseen.

CL: Were you surprised by Brexit?

MH: I don't follow Britain. I was believing in the polls like everyone else, so I was surprised.

CL: Do you think there could be a Frexit?

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MH: No. The two countries think of themselves in different ways. Britain sees itself as superior and thinks it does better on its own. France has a tendency to see itself as inferior to Germany. There's not necessarily a difference in sympathy towards the EU. It's a lack of belief that France will do as well on its own. It views itself as one of the southern European countries, like Spain, Italy, or Greece.

CL: Is that an e-cigarette?

MH: An electronic cigarette, yes.

CL: Do you like them?

MH: It's not bad. It's better than nothing.

CL: What role does the euro play?

MH: French people don't like Europe, but they're afraid of getting out of the euro.

CL: Greece has been made into a slave of the euro. Do you agree?

MH: I don't know. A lot of experts have said if France gets out of the euro it would be bankruptcy and misery, so people are scared.

CL: What do you think of Macron and his wife?

MH: What's your question about his wife?

CL: What do you think of that story as an aspect of the character of a political leader?

MH: It never happened to me, but it's the sort of thing you hear about happening in the world. It's a recurring trope so it's not that surprising.

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CL: Did you ever have a crush on one of your teachers?

MH: No, did you?

CL: No.

MH: In a sense, I regret it because it sounds exciting, with cigarettes and so on.

CL: Were you ever involved with older women?

MH: Yes, but not so much and never in a relation of authority.

CL: There's only one picture in your show that seemed to me very Catholic. The picture of the statue of Mary imposed on signs from inside the church with information about religious activities. What's the idea there?

MH: The difference between religion and getting involved with religious activities. Catholicism contaminated by Protestant procedure.

CL: Do you go to church?

MH: I've never been much. I'm not baptized.

CL: Is it true that your mother converted to Islam?

MH: That's not true. It was a story in the newspapers at the time of *Platform*, but it wasn't the case. It was just a good story.

CL: So you were never religious?

MH: There was a point when I went to church pretty regularly, and I thought about getting baptized, I nearly got baptized, but the preparation was taking too long, so I decided not to go through with it.

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CL: What do you think of the president of this country?

MH: It's weird that you elected him.

CL: Do you find him fascinating as a character? He makes a lot of liberals feel a sense of revulsion about their country.

MH: It shows that there's a big discrepancy between two parts of the country. That discrepancy also exists in France, but we've had the National Front for forty years, and it only took Trump one year to get elected. Very fast. That's the surprising thing. In France we thought everybody liked Obama, but maybe the media were lying. Maybe they didn't.

CL: There were people who voted for Obama and then voted for Trump.

MH: I don't believe that.

CL: My father voted for Sanders and then Trump.

MH: There's a logic to that.

I need a real cigarette. Let's go outside. You can smoke too.

CL: O.K. Are you writing a new book?

MH: No.

CL: Good answer.

MH: It's a clear answer.

CL: You want to come to the party at the *Paris Review* tonight?

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MANHATTAN LOS ANGELES

MH: What time?

CL: Five.

MH: I can't make it.

"French Bashing" is on view at VENUS over Manhattan until August 4. Christian Lorentzen is the book critic for New York Magazine.

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