

VENUS

MANHATTAN LOS ANGELES

HYPERALLERGIC

ART

Michel Houellebecq's Cynicism Persists in His Photographs

For his US gallery debut, Michel Houellebecq presents an exhibition which amounts to a theory attempting to explain the dysfunction of French society.

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July 28, 2017



Installation View of Michel Houellebecq: French Bashing at Venus, New York (all images courtesy Venus, New York.)

Prolific French writer Michel Houellebecq is not one to shy away from controversy. His six novels oscillate between anti-Semitism and blatant, gross misogyny, with an overarching, looming sexuality. *The Elementary Particles* (1998) specifically comes to mind: a novel in which Houellebecq dissects the relationship between two brothers by carving out their differences: one is the intellectual, the other is a sexually impotent, sex-hungry, misogynistic, quintessentially French middle-aged man. His latest novel, *Submission* (2015), was at the heart of much debate. Portraying a France in the no-so-distant future in which an Islamist party has established a theocracy that has taken over the government and controls social life, Houellebecq exacerbated the already rampant paranoia and Islamophobia present in France. This would become all the more clear in the 2017 presidential race, where second-time candidate Marine Le Pen attracted a third of the French electorate. But beyond misogyny and racism, Houellebecq's signature touch often involves making himself a character in his novels. In *The Map and the Territory* (2010), he creates another Michel Houellebecq, who he deftly characterizes as a rotting, dying writer. This self-reflexivity is what makes his novels poignant. As readers, we are asked to witness his narrative decomposition but remain powerless when faced with his death, which we are forced to confront. The dissolution of the self within a larger story or context is what fascinates Houellebecq, and, for the past few decades, he has taken to photography to document the many places he's lived in and visited, in an effort to bring visual meaning to his writing practice.



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For his U.S. gallery debut, Houellebecq presents a sample of his body of work in a solo show entitled *French Bashing at Venus Over Manhattan*. The exhibition showcases an austere array of urban scenes, with Paris as their focal point. The show is inspired in part by *Rester Vivant (Staying Alive)*, an exhibition of Houellebecq's work that took place in Paris at the Palais de Tokyo in 2016. Premiering a year after Houellebecq's seclusion in Germany in response to the Charlie Hebdo attacks, *Rester Vivant* drew a large audience eager to hear his thoughts on the current global state of affairs. "The French population got their answer with an exhibition of photographs instead of a series of words. If you were looking for his opinion about a political situation, he instead wanted to show you a picture of landscapes," explains gallery associate Zachary Fischman.

As the title of the show suggests, the dour lens through which Houellebecq captures the city captures a violent evacuation: most photographs depict empty city streets from a bleak aerial view and function as would an empty page waiting to be filled with language. "Houellebecq talks about a grammar of images, treating images like words in paragraphs and chapters, and rooms like chapter separations," explains Fischman. *French Bashing* is divided into two antithetical rooms: one very dimly lit, with lights pointed directly at the photographs, and the other overwhelmingly bright with vibrantly colored, kitschy tourist placemats completely covering the floor. Overheard are two distinct audio tracks composed by Raphaël Sohler. In the dark room, one can hear sounds of wheels over train tracks and the wind whipping against the locomotives implied in Houellebecq's photographs of empty spaces. The trains have replaced people. No human sounds are audible. In the second room, however, Sohler has produced a soundtrack of children's laughter, echoing among photographs of hyper-commercial spaces in largely peri-urban zones — amusement parks and global supermarket chains. Walking from one room to another is literally night and day, with the second, vivid room acting as a sort of exposé of the ways in which the tourism industry tricks us into believing in a country's happiness. The signs and placemat may be bright and joyful, but the streets are still empty.



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This exhibition amounts to a theory attempting to explain a dysfunctional French society. On the one hand is the white-collar professional, who travels like a ghost through the city's infrastructures that were constructed under capitalist models of corporate, financial, and commercial behavior to assist her in developing and sustaining her businesslike livelihood. On the other hand, these districts created to support the professional class have priced out blue-collar workers, and the spaces designated for these workers are glutted, leaving hardly any room for the inhabitants. Houellebecq's antipathy and cynicism here is not news for those who have been following his writing, and, as viewers might expect, the storyline Houellebecq suggests as the future for Europe is bleak and hopeless, on the brink of impending violent catastrophe caused by a hyper-globalized society. While I might take these theories on civilization's demise as just metaphorical, Houellebecq's cynicism at times gets tiresome. All is not always already lost; the power of the people can be reclaimed.

Unlike his novels, where his characters embody the despicable aspects of the human mind, his photographs represent the space in which the decrepitude is formed. Here, Europe has already rotted, and he is just a bystander, a tourist in his own world. Houellebecq is powerless as he witnesses the collapse of modern-day society. Trees grow higher and leaves cover the stores, the streets, and eventually human graves, which, for him, is the ultimate rezoning. Houellebecq summarizes his critique of cultural and political ideals in a photograph of a collapsing concrete sculpture in the shape of the word "EUROPE" right in front of a brightly lit supermarket chain. "When asked what he thought of the state of the Europe," says Fischman, "Houellebecq didactically pointed at the photograph."



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