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MICHEL HOUELLEBECQ, THE PHOTOGRAPHER

The French writer takes pictures of the things he finds impossible to capture in literature. His first American show recently opened on the Upper East Side.



By Lauren Collins

Michel Houellebecq was at home the other afternoon. He lives in an apartment in a nineteen-seventies high-rise in the Thirteenth Arrondissement of Paris, a neighborhood of efficiency hotels and Asian grocery stores. The welcome mat had an English bulldog on it. Houellebecq answered the door wearing a denim shirt and jeans—hiked up to a seemingly concave chest—and ushered a visitor inside, past a polka-dot shopping cart, some metal shelves stocked with bottled water, and a closet filled with three-ring binders. One had the feeling that Houellebecq, like a lot of his characters, might not get out much. His most recent novel, “Submission,” published in 2015, was in some ways a prophesy of the political upheavals of this year, but the line that came to mind was more prosaic: “To maintain order in your bureaucratic life, you more or less have to stay home.”



Michel Houellebecq

Illustration by Tom Bachtell

VENUS

MANHATTAN LOS ANGELES

THE NEW YORKER

Houellebecq is an aesthete of mundanity. The deflated breast or the sad sprig of chervil never escapes his notice. He is also a photographer, who, last summer, showed his work in a solo exposition at the Palais de Tokyo, in Paris. His first American exhibit, “French Bashing,” recently opened at the Venus Over Manhattan gallery, on the Upper East Side. Houellebecq has visited New York perhaps four times. “I find it rather calm,” he said, sitting down with a bottle of Chablis at a wooden table in his living room (TV, recliner, lots of yellow). He was planning a return trip to attend the opening. “They’ve found me a hotel with a smoking room,” he said. He has no friends in the city, and mainly wanted to go on a helicopter tour.

Houellebecq was sixteen when he took his first photograph, of a river called le Grand Morin, in the Seine-et-Marne region of France, where he was brought up by his paternal grandmother. He wanted to capture the movements of the water. He uses two basic cameras—one digital, one film—without a zoom. “That simplifies things already,” he said, firing up a cigarette with a lighter that bore a picture of doughnuts. He was practically whispering. The art world, he said, was a mystery, full of rich people and smooth relationships. “Literature is a lot more mainstream,” he added. “The pro of that is that you don’t have the impression that what you do is in vain. The con is that you’re forced to do dumb stuff. Dumb TV shows. Particularly in France, where writers are as well known as actors.”

Houellebecq has acted, too (most recently he played the dour owner of a bed-and-breakfast patronized by Gérard Depardieu). The sense of social decay that pervades his novels is visible in his photographs. The most bitterly amusing of them features a piece of public art—a set of weather-beaten concrete letters spelling “europe”—in front of a bleak supermarket parking lot. (It was taken years ago outside a Carrefour in Calais, where Houellebecq had gone to attend the opening of the Channel Tunnel. He ended up skipping the ceremony, because he wasn’t getting along with an official from the Culture Ministry.) “I don’t take pictures of human beings, because I prefer literature for describing a human being,” he said. “And I don’t do much description of the landscape in my books, because I find that a photo is better.” He must have been chewing on his cigarette,

THE NEW YORKER

because it hung from his mouth like a broken limb. He went to get another bottle of wine. When he returned, he admitted that he found it impossible to write about landscapes.

“For most people, it’s sex,” his visitor said.

“No, that I’m pretty good at.”

In “Submission,” Houellebecq imagines a French Presidential election in which the two major parties have collapsed; Marine Le Pen is running against the head of a newly formed party who draws support from the weakened ranks of the Socialists (in this case, he’s a traditionalist Muslim who wants to expand the E.U. to include North Africa). “I get most of my political news from television programs,” Houellebecq said. “I love ‘Borgen,’ ” the Danish political drama. Although he didn’t vote—he has said that, out of principle, he votes only in referendums—he’d always believed that Emmanuel Macron would win. “He’s very talented, but I’m waiting to see,” Houellebecq said, adding that Macron’s psychology struck him as “less bizarre than Sarkozy’s.” Of Brigitte Trogneux, Macron’s wife, he said, “She’s a little bit his mother, but in the Greek sense—an iniatrice to the world.”

The living room, which is also Houellebecq’s writing room, was full of grammar books and dictionaries. The art on the walls was limited to a few animal paintings. “I bought them from a guy who only paints his dog,” Houellebecq said. He said that he didn’t know whether his photographs would be for sale in New York. (They are; prices range from around five thousand to more than twenty thousand dollars.) “In principle, no,” he said. “I took a tourist visa, so I’m not supposed to earn any money during my trip.” ♦



Lauren Collins began working at The New Yorker in 2003 and became a staff writer in 2008. She is the author of “When in French: Love in a Second Language.”

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