

VENUS

MANHATTAN LOS ANGELES



ARTSEEN

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WEBEXCLUSIVE

MICHEL HOUELLEBECQ: French Bashing

by Seth Cameron

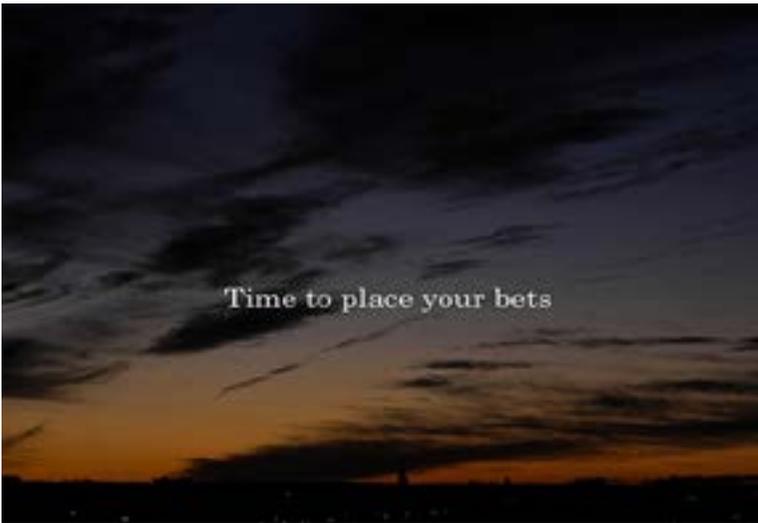
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Michel Houellebecq, *Mission #001*, 2016. Pigment print on Baryta paper mounted on aluminum. 23 7/16 × 34 7/16 in. Courtesy Venus: Manhattan.

Michel Houellebecq is a wielder of blunt instruments. In the best of his novels the cartoon crudity of his chosen conceit—an Islamist takeover of France (*Submission*, 2015), two brothers as matter and anti-matter mattering and not mattering to each other (*The Elementary Particles*, 1998), or clones writing about clones writing about clones (*The Possibility of an Island*, 2005)—serves as a necessary sugarcoat for the bitter pill of abject pessimism that underpins his work. And while he is often over-reliant on the sad sociology of prurient interest, the otherwise consistent virtuosity of his performance raises his parables of contemporary inhumanity—critically, traumatically—into the pantheon of great literature.

A related strategy would seem to be at work in Houellebecq's photographic installation, *French Bashing*, which was on view at Venus: Manhattan this summer. Taken as a work of spatial theater, *French Bashing* is brutishly unsubtle.



Michel Houellebecq, *Inscriptions #013*, 2017. Pigment print on Baryta paper mounted on aluminum. 23 7/16 × 33 1/4 in. Courtesy Venus: Manhattan.

Entering the gallery, we encounter equal sized photographs, muted gray, lining black walls with low light. From on high, as if man has become a drone, we are presented with the callousness of global capitalism by an eye that seems to believe that strident indexicality or self-indulgent mournfulness are its only options. And yet, Houellebecq chooses neither. Blithely artful and cheaply processed, the theatrical impression is that of a permanent historical display in an under-funded regional museum.

We pass through to the second room, this one white with the fluorescent lights turned all the way up. The floor is covered in saturated color-laminated tourist placemats. The photographs retain their listlessness without arriving at existential ennui, even as they tend more fully toward montage. The *mise-en-scène* of this room is less specifically mimetic, though perhaps we're in the store-room of an economically depressed travel agency.

Were the formal analogy to Houellebecq's novelistic strategy to hold true, we would expect this ham-handed theatricality to belie a laser light photographic talent: just the right framing of just the right subject at just the right moment to declare for us Yes! Global capitalism is a big fucking drag and there's absolutely nothing to be hopeful about, but damn if he didn't capture this pessimistic sentiment perfectly! Or perhaps some wink in the press might point us toward a crack in the fourth wall, with Houellebecq's Triboulet grin peaking out from the other side—more fuel for the public fire of his authorial celebrity.

Unfortunately, this is not the case. Houellebecq takes a decent picture, not a great one—certainly nothing that has earned more than a thumb-scroll of engagement. And nothing in the processing and printing hints at the mastery that might make the on-the-nose-ness of this mundanity a feat of fiction rather than just the facts. There is an aloofness to his image making that recalls Godard's *Goodbye to Language*, sans the filmmaker's stunning revelation that he can make a great film out of anything.

And while Houellebecq's public caricature has strengthened the capacity of his work to serve as a metaphor for aspects of our own moment, both intentionally (as in *The Map and the Territory*) and through devastating serendipity (as with *Submission*), neither his own talent nor horrific world events have aligned to add any vicious charm or supranatural heft to French Bashing.

C'est la vie.