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MANHATTAN LOS ANGELES



Michel Houellebecq exhibits in New York

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The floor of one of Michel Houellebecq's gallery rooms in New York is covered with postcards

Photo Yves Schaëffner, special collaboration

(NEW YORK) Michel Houellebecq is also a photographer, author, poet and filmmaker. He presents these days in New York his first exhibition on American soil. An opportunity to discover some of the images that nourish his writing and his vision of the world.

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This was to be one of the week's unmissable literary events in New York. Journalists from the New York Times , the New Yorker and many other media had taken their places at the French consulate last Friday to witness a rare discussion with the most controversial Francophone authors.

Obviously, Michel Houellebecq being Michel Houellebecq, he did not show up for the meeting. "He does not feel very well," one official told the hundreds of people who had traveled.

Zach Fischman, an employee of the Venus Over Manhattan gallery where Houellebecq's French Bashing exhibition was presented was hardly surprising. "He worked like a madman to prepare the installation of the exhibition," he pleads. And then, how to say, Michel Houellebecq is a bit special. The only request he has made since he arrived was to go to a grocery store to buy yellow American mustard pots! "Continues Fischman, still dumbfounded by the quirks of the author of the Elementary Particles .

Located on the third floor of a Madison Avenue building, close to luxury boutiques, the Venus Over Manhattan Gallery has been reorganized from top to bottom to accommodate the artist's work.

Lonely landscapes and sunny holidays

A miniature version of the exhibition To Stay Alive , presented last year at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, French Bashing occupies two distinct rooms.

In the first one, immersed in the darkness, he presents twenty or so large-format photographs depicting French landscapes in dreary colors: railways, HLM housing estates, motorway toll.

Landscapes shaped by man, but lifeless, where the concrete seems to have annihilated until the idea of pleasure.

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In the other room, white and bathed in artificial light, a dozen photographs and photomontages feature images that evoke tourism, sun and paid holidays.

But as in the dark room, the human is absent. The room, whose floor was completely covered with postcards that smell of cheese, wine and snapshots, is supersaturated with garish colors.

Methodical and well-cared for, the clichés of Houellebecq evoke a dehumanized universe, where trade and hedonism, 9 to 5 and holidays in the sun are only facets of the same reality. A rather glaucous reality.

Some of his photographs are accompanied or superimposed of his writings. A triptych composed of two pictures of gray buildings is accompanied by a quotation from his last novel (Submission): "I had no real reason to kill myself any more than most of these people."

Pessimism and gloom

It will be understood , the expo French Bashing (the denigration of everything French) transpires pessimism and gloom. Here, the French bashing does not seem so much to evoke the denigration of the Americans with regard to France as the self-defeatism of the French with respect to themselves, or Houellebecq with respect to itself and his contemporaries.

If the photographs of his exhibition do not ooze the joie de vivre, they certainly make it possible to better appreciate the images and the universe that inspire Houellebecq and made him the most contemporary French author of his generation.

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At the Venus Over Manhattan Gallery, until August 4th.