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Michel Houellebecq's New Milieu

The controversial French author is back, this time with a New York photography show called "French Bashing"



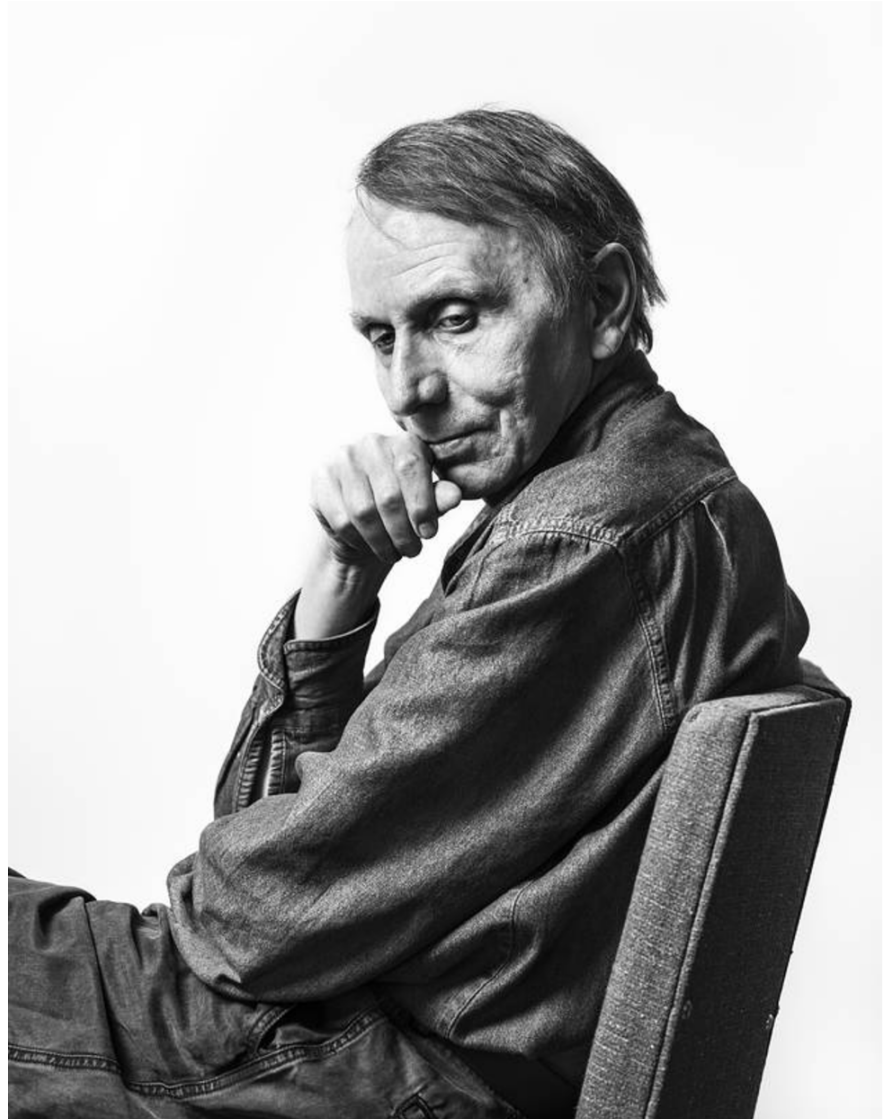
By *Alexandra Wolfe*

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Two years ago, the French author Michel Houellebecq again found himself at the center of controversy with his novel "Submission," in which an Islamic political party wins the French election in 2022. After some time out of the public eye, he is now in the U.S. to promote the other artistic mode in which he has expressed his relentlessly dark view of modern France: photography.

His new show "French Bashing," at the Venus art gallery in New York City, provides a bleak portrait of his home country, with photographs of highway toll booths, barbed wire fences, stark suburban housing sprawl and gaudy tourist areas. He wants to challenge the idea of France as a country of high culture, great architecture and fine food and wine; he sees it instead as a tourist destination and a place of rampant, ugly overdevelopment. The differences between France and America, he says, are diminishing, and he thinks it's particularly ironic to expose his own country from across the pond.

Mr. Houellebecq (pronounced *wel-beck*), 61, has long been one of France's best-known—and most notorious—writers. He is dismissive of political correctness and has been accused of misogyny,



Michel Houellebecq at the Venus Gallery in New York earlier this month. PHOTO: CELESTE SLOMAN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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anti-Muslim bigotry and (more generally) nihilism, based in large part on the vulgar, resentful, unhappy characters in his novels. His first U.S. hit, “The Elementary Particles” (1998), featured a protagonist who is obsessed with sex. Mr. Houellebecq says that his fictions do not necessarily represent his own beliefs.

“Submission” came out in January 2015, on the same day that two terrorists claiming allegiance to al Qaeda’s offshoot in Yemen killed 12 people in a massacre in the office of the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo. That week, a caricature of Mr. Houellebecq happened to be on the magazine’s cover.

The author, who lost a friend in the attack, canceled his promotional book tour and went into police protection because of fears that he might be targeted as well. (In 2001, he had called Islam “the dumbest religion.”) Some accused him of feeding into an anti-Muslim agenda with “Submission,” in which university teachers have to convert to Islam to keep their jobs and polygamy is allowed and even encouraged. The book sold more than 100,000 copies in France that week.

After spending time in Germany, his next big public appearance came in 2016, with a show of photography at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris. Mr. Houellebecq has been taking pictures for decades, but previously had only one small show in Paris in 2014. When asked why he decided to show his photographs, he only says, through a translator, “I had the opportunity.”

“French Bashing” includes his own photographs as well as items repurposed as part of the exhibition. One room of the gallery features his

Michel Houellebecq's 'French Bashing' »
Images from the French author's new show of photography in New York



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'Mission #001,' 2016 COURTESY THE ARTIST AND VENUS, NEW YORK



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'France #012,' 2016 COURTESY THE ARTIST AND VENUS, NEW YORK



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'France #033,' 2016 COURTESY THE ARTIST AND VENUS, NEW YORK



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'France #017,' 2016' COURTESY THE ARTIST AND VENUS, NEW YORK



shots of bleak industrial scenes under a dim glow. The pictures are mostly empty of people. “He uses his pen for portraits and his lens for landscapes,” says Venus founder Adam Lindemann.

In a second room, bright white light shines over images of kitschy tourist memorabilia from both France and elsewhere, such as photos of pastel beachside hotels and cheery signs and posters. Plastic place mats featuring different destinations cover the floor.

Sitting in the gallery one recent afternoon, drinking a bottle of Beck’s beer and smoking an electronic cigarette, Mr. Houellebecq says that he chose to photograph the industrial areas outside of Paris after noticing how much they had changed since he was young. He grew up north of Paris with his grandmother after his mother moved to Brazil to be with a boyfriend. Back then, the area was mostly farmland. Mr. Houellebecq earned a degree in agricultural engineering, but the career didn’t suit him.

In the years after he graduated in 1980, he was unemployed, got married, had a son, divorced and struggled with depression. He also began writing poetry. He went on to write six best-selling novels, including “The Map and the Territory” (2010), which won France’s prestigious Goncourt prize. He now lives alone in Paris.

He has drawn criticism for his disparaging depictions of women and minorities in his books. He tends to brush it off. “It seems like there are thousands of sources of political correctness and thousands more sources every day,” he says. In France, he adds, it’s politically

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correct to be a vegetarian now, but “in six months, it’ll be something else.”

Mr. Houellebecq says that he doesn’t see Islam itself as a negative force, only extremism. He is interested in the idea of the “homme économique,” or economic man—the notion that people are driven just by material incentives and make choices rationally. The idea, he says, is “destructive and weighs you down.” That’s why, he thinks, some people look to religion as a way to “infringe on their freedom and limit their freedom.”

Looking back to “Submission,” Mr. Houellebecq says that the hardest parts to write were the sex scenes. “Language isn’t really made for descriptions of sensual physical experiences,” he says. “There’s a dissolution of perceptions in sex which makes everything kind of blurry.” Fear is clearer. “When one is scared, we have a tendency to remember the event really well because the senses are really precise,” he says.

He won’t say when he might return to writing. When asked what he plans to do next, he responds, “I don’t know. I never know.”

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‘France #004,’ 2016 COURTESY THE ARTIST AND VENUS, NEW YORK



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‘Arrangements #004,’ 2016 COURTESY THE ARTIST AND VENUS, NEW YORK



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‘Tourisme #002,’ 2016 COURTESY THE ARTIST AND VENUS, NEW YORK