

“Suffering that’s still standing, or hardly standing, or no longer standing at all”

Perdre la Tête/Losing Your Head

by François-Marie Banier

Gallimard/Steidl, 266 pp; 28 euros.

Le Chanteur Muet des Rues/The Silent Street Singer

by Erri de Luca

and François-Marie Banier

Translated from the Italian by Danièle Valin

Edited by Martin d’Orgeval

Gallimard, 92 pp; 22.50 euros

Often, in the city streets, we pass by without seeing them. Without looking at them and without meeting their gaze. It’s a matter of will, and a matter of generosity. It’s as if we were afraid – or simply unwilling – to discover the reality of the world in their eyes. Erri de Luca tells us that Pieter Bruegel liked to write in the margins of his drawings *Naer het leven* (close to life). “*It was a way of acknowledging his debt to reality. He thought of painting as a form of loyalty*”, says de Luca. One might say the same about François-Marie Banier’s photographs of Paris down-and-outs. *Perdre le Tête* and *Le Chanteur Muet des Rues*, two books published by Banier in recent months, reflect the same quest for the Other: a desire to show, in his words, “*this suffering that is still standing, or hardly standing, or no longer standing at all, which blithe fools have learned to ignore*”.

He likes what he calls the “*singular music*” of people on society’s margins. “*Who does not envy their courage, admire their originality, or think they are right to keep their distance from the ossified individuals that we are, we who accept social roles and the comedy of artificial hierarchies?*”, asks Banier. In both books, the photographer’s words are echoed in those of writer Erri de Luca.

A very short text by de Luca in *Perdre la Tête* (along with another by Patrice Chéreau) and a few magnificent pages in *Le Chanteur Muet des Rues*, alternate with Banier’s photos, creating a fraternal dialogue between writing and photography.

“Mute language”

First, Chéreau: “*He pictures bodies, and thus deformities: François-Marie seldom portrays beauty, or even simply youthful flesh. Instead he prefers old women who have lost their minds or who twist around in nightdresses to reveal the hidden side of their own armchairs; deep creases in the skin; puffy faces; behaviour that is close to madness – and in which we can recognize ourselves. His subjects sometimes rebel, sticking their tongue out at the photographer, making mute, threatening gestures, calling out when we miss something, like passers-by at the lycée Montaigne no longer paying attention to the down-and-out sleeping on the air vent*”.

Now de Luca: *“One of my friends spent a quarter of a century in France as a political refugee. His time in exile wiped the slate clean, and his captivity has now permanently come to an end. He now has an ID card, which he likes taking out of his pocket and showing to people, like others might show off pictures of their children. He says “what is moving for me is not owning a passport with my name on it again, but to know that I might lose it. I think this feeling is the opposite of what the artist feels when he has a fleeting talent and is scared that it might vanish. We have to go to the school of exile in order to experience the joy of losing our own ID papers”.*

Read these two books: you won't regret it. And be sure to stop and look at pages 105 and 106 in *Perdre la Tête*. You'll see a little girl looking, amazed, at Ray Charles playing the piano. She shows us, as Chéreau says, *“how profound and generous François-Marie's work really is”.*

Franck Noughi

Perdre la Tête has just been awarded the prize for best German book of 2006 in the art and photography section.

Solitary men and women, you form a true family album. Old, strange and rejected you may be, but you have a flame within you! I feel only tenderness for you who have given me access to the truth. The truth of your condition, the truth of your quest, the truth of pitiless time whose designs I scupper, using photography to make your scorn of conventions eternal.

François-Marie Banier

(Translation by Martyn Back)