

François-Marie Banier, the Rebel Child

A brief treatise, full of reasoned cruelty, on the “creatures” that people the closing century, depicted by a thrilling, elusive artist who reveals part of his autobiography.

PAST-PRESENT

Photographs by François-Marie Banier

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He may well have too many talents: he draws, takes photographs, writes novels, does business, and meets people in improbable or overplanned circumstances. He invents names for luxury perfumes, has designed a sword for a French academician, and travels to the other side of the world to spend the evening with a famous old lady – or a famous old man, or a famous young woman. You may not know him, but are you sure he has never taken your photo? You were crossing the road, you didn't notice anything. You didn't see the man on the opposite pavement? The man who stopped his old motor scooter and pulled out a small camera? But he saw you. Your loneliness, your strangeness, your apparent or hidden deformity. Watch out if you're too small, too fat, or hunchbacked; watch out if you only go out in the company of your twin; watch out if reality frightens you, if you look at someone tenderly, or if your face bears the furrows of your wounded past. He'll get you.

His name is François-Marie Banier. Unless it's a *nom de guerre* (which it is, literally: he wages his very own war, without anyone knowing whose side he's on, or why, or how). He is fifty years old, and has already lived twenty lives. Malicious gossips will tell you that he is a malicious gossip – which is not untrue -, that he is a superficial and violent society figure, that his friends have included Horowitz, Aragon, Silvana Mangano, Marie-Laure de Noailles, Paul Morand, Dali, François Mitterrand...and that today they include Isabelle Adjani, Nathalie Sarraute, Hector Bianciotti, Princess Caroline of Monaco, Johnny Depp, and a sizeable chunk of the French *Who's Who*. But does he have friends? Do artists have friends?

At twenty-five, François-Marie Banier had already written three novels, *Les Résidences Secondaires*, *Le Passé Composé* and *La Tête la Première*, in which his photographer's eye can be discerned, just as his novelist's eye can be detected in his pictures. He was stunningly handsome, an eternal adolescent who considered that everything was permitted, and who denied himself nothing. He looked like an angel, with blond hair and regular features, but even then his gaze was intense and sometimes dark. He readily behaved like a 'monster', saying out loud things it was not considered proper to utter in polite company, mimicking the rules of high society in order to immediately undermine them, blowing apart what was fortunately not yet referred to as *le consensus*. The young Banier was very 'decorative', but he could also ruin an evening with two words or three screams, criticizing a woman who thought she was beautiful for her poor taste, her makeup, or her ignorance, or upbraiding an old man for staring at him a little too hard...

At age 38, in 1985, he settled his scores with his childhood in *Balthazar Fils de Famille* (published by Gallimard). Here, he revealed where his wounds were: an abusive father who would punch him hard and humiliate him; the screaming child

who was labelled a monster and whom they tried to “cure”. “*There is only one age in life. We catch it when we are born, and we keep it*”, writes Banier. He has kept his age: that of the rebellious child. The beaten child.

As I read his books, I found I wanted to meet him. I might well have regretted it. He is exciting to be with. Or literally unbearable. Or both at once. When I met him he spoke in a thundering voice and was very unkind to the head waiter; he was downright unpleasant or irresistibly charming when he wanted to be, and almost brutal when he insisted on his friendship towards me. He embraced me, and I wondered if it was a gesture of greeting or hostility. He is too strong, too powerful, too rough-edged to be tender or simply amiable. He is without pity; frighteningly so. Despite all this, if you love life without really believing in it, you can't help but like him, read his books, and look at his photos. If you want to see at close quarters how the mad, cruel puppet theatre is playing out the closing millennium, and if you seek a clear-sighted view of things, there could hardly be a better guide than Banier. The photographs he has brought together under the title *Past-Present* are another chapter in his autobiography and a brief treatise full of reasoned cruelty on the “creatures” that people the late 20th century, from crowned heads to unhinged vagrants, from the jet-set to an overweight peasant woman posing for him with pride.

Banier wants to reveal something in his photos: a detail, a destiny, a situation, another person to help him hide himself, as he always does. But he has conceded an exception in this book: a moment where tenderness left him defenceless. His soft, delicate portraits of Silvana Mongano have a sense of intimacy and self-abandonment that verges on indecency. That day, Banier the rebel was battle-weary, tired of the laughter, the screaming and the rumours of vain high society. He let François-Marie in: a faithful friend. He stopped time and allowed silence to fall. He took simple, secret, troubling, moving pictures that say as much about him as they do about her.

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(Translation by Martyn Back)