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François-Marie Banier **“I’ve always been pursued by rumours”**

Interview with Michel Guerrin

Writer and photographer François-Marie Banier, 62, is accused of having manipulated Liliane Bettencourt, 87, heiress to the L’Oréal fortune, obtaining donations to the tune of some 800 million euros. Since the details emerged a year ago, Banier has made no public comment.

François-Marie Banier is sitting at a table in the Brasserie du Dôme in Paris. He is in the process of publishing two books, has an exhibition of his photographs of Beckett in Lille, and is working on several books to be published in the autumn of 2010. His responses to my questions often resonate with the scandal in which he is embroiled. Everything about this man with pale grey eyes speaks of seduction. The list of personalities he has frequented is stunning: Louis Aragon, Samuel Beckett, François Mitterrand, Paul Morand, Johnny Depp, Françoise Sagan, Princess Caroline of Monaco, Isabelle Adjani, Vladimir Horowitz, Marie-Laure de Noailles, Salvador Dali, Nathalie Sarraute, and the photographer Robert Frank to name but a few. His latest book, *Vous me manquez* [“I Missed You”] (Steidl, 328pp, 45 euros), combines portraits of personalities and anonymous people in the street.

You have the reputation of being a socialite who knows absolutely everyone. Is this true?

The people who say that don’t know me. I haven’t been out for thirty years. Do you see me in the society pages? Proust and Gide were socialites, not me. When I hear I belong to the jet set, it makes me laugh. The jet set is for airline pilots. People don’t come and sit next to me, because I can’t be educated. They’re afraid they might hear something they don’t want to hear. In this country, when one is misunderstood, one is said to be talking nonsense. They said Virginia Woolf was mad, didn’t they? I have taken 500,000 photographs, I have written eight or ten novels. I draw and I paint. I am working on several books. That is my work. When I used to go out, I would meet fascinating people. But I live a cloistered life now. And anyway, I’m not well-adapted to modern life. Have you heard of Hibernatus? That’s me.

What is your profession?

Writer.

Not photographer?

A photographer is like an artist: it’s all about inspiration. Being a writer is a profession. For example, it took me twenty years to decide to exhibit my photos. The first time was in 1991, at the Pompidou Centre. I owe everything to Hélène Ahrweiler, who was President of the Centre at the time and who wanted the exhibition

to happen. But I was born to write. I write every day for two or three hours, I've kept a diary since 1967. I won't publish it. It contains secrets and I am too respectful to violate other people's secrets.

What does your day involve?

I get up at 8. I write until noon. I have lunch with Martin d'Orgeval, who is my companion and whom I have known for seventeen years; he is 36. I go out to take photographs with my two cameras, a 90 mm and a 135 mm. And then I edit what I've written and I sort through my photos. In the evening and at night, I read, paint and draw. Forty years ago I used to go dancing alone at New Jimmy's. But I am old and I don't have much time left.

Would you say you were a *fil*s à papa, a rich kid?

People stuck a label on me saying I was a spoiled child, but the truth is I was an abused child. I was alone and unhappy. My father used to beat me every day. He would lift me up by my feet and bang my head on the floor. I saw only lies in the bourgeoisie. My father wanted so badly to be middle-class that he hid the fact that he'd been a factory worker at Citroën. I'd rather he'd told me.

How does one go about publishing three novels at age 25?

I have no school diplomas, no baccalauréat. I believe in unconscious, instinctive culture. I immerse myself in what I see, painting, Delacroix, Courbet...and I read a great deal; Proust, for instance, whom I rank above everyone else. Reading has taught me more than twenty hours of classes. My education comes from books, newspapers, and people I meet. I belong to a generation of people who would forego their morning coffee to buy *Le Monde*.

My first job, at age 17, was selling books at Baufile, a bookshop I chose because it was close to my parents' home, just to annoy them. I was paid 2 francs 40 an hour. I left home at twenty with a pair of corduroy trousers. I worked as a press attaché, as an adviser to a pharmaceuticals laboratory, I found names for perfumes, such as Poison for Dior which earned me a lot of money. I have worked very hard!

How do you charm people?

It's stupid to ask a question like that! I am privileged to have a gift for meeting people. Some people think I'm clairvoyant. Look around: that woman is preoccupied; that one over there is satisfied; that African man is very serious, and the waiter is as wily as a monkey. Few people are really interested in others. I am profoundly interested in the people I meet, whether they're famous or just passers-by. I talk to them with my voice, the same voice I had at 5 years old when people used to call me *grosse voix* ('loud voice'). In this way I convey a certain *joie de vivre*. I laugh a lot and I make people laugh, but I don't set out to entertain. I'm not a courtesan. I sometimes say things that are very direct, even brutal. At one time I used to be very emotional, I had to move people all the time; I've calmed down since then.

I met the pianist Horowitz at a dinner through the artistic director Alexander Liberman, and he played Chopin and Scriabine for me. I met Aragon when Edmonde Charles-Roux took me to see him at his home and I met him again six times during

the same week. I met Mitterrand through Françoise Giroud. I couldn't have met beautiful women and unique people if I'd had nothing to share with them.

What do all these people have in common?

I am attracted by secretive, independent people. Mavericks. People who are alone as I was, famous people or anonymous people in the street, whom I photograph and who are all living treasures. Man Ray's solitude was immense, as was Max Ernst's. Aragon was different, he used to work twenty hours a day.

What did you say to the pianist Vladimir Horowitz?

He only had two friends in his life, one of whom was Rachmaninov. He was sensitive to love. I was very good friends with his daughter, who committed suicide. So how could I be close to her father? By telling him the truth. I told him: "*Your daughter thought you were dreadful!*" And he replied: "*She was right – but she was worse*".

People have found your relationship with Aragon when you were a very young man intriguing

Aragon was a walking dictionary: I received billions of words from him in a continuous stream, for hours on end. It was tough going. He was a monumentally cultured man. We'd talk until two in the morning, he'd read to me from *La Chartreuse*, or we'd go and see a Kurosawa film together. He was also the opposite of a man of restraint. He exuded a form of violence that I have seen in no one else.

Beckett, whom I met the same day as Jean Genet, often asked me "*How is Aragon doing?*". These are mysterious bonds. Man Ray hated it when I talked to him about his photography. François Mitterrand was very kind but I will never reveal our secrets. I saw Beckett walking in Tangiers, I was struck by his body. I used to see Nathalie Sarraute twice a day. I had to be very patient, as she was very, very sensitive. Louis [Aragon] gave me a lot, whereas Nathalie taught me a lot. These personalities feel the tenderness and respect I feel for them.

People have talked about a physical attraction between you and Aragon...

Yes, I'm supposed to have been Aragon's lover. That is complete nonsense. I was not attracted to Aragon, and he wasn't affected by my looks! Like Beckett, Aragon was touched by my willingness to listen. And anyway, I was never part of their world. I had my own life.

Today, a lot of people are wondering about the influence you may have over Liliane Bettencourt

I'm used to slanderous rumours. It's a shame it's come to this, but these rumours don't affect me. I've always been pursued by rumours. When I was little, I used to get into trouble. I was already a rebel. As if some people believe that my life has been about attaining some kind of position or status! People have said I wanted to be adopted by Liliane Bettencourt. We never even mentioned it!

My life is in art. The people I see and photograph, and the diary I keep, all contribute to my art. This has nothing to do with that pathetic rumour. What counts is making one's life into an artwork.

You've been accused of forcing Liliane Bettencourt to give you a little under one billion euros. Is this true?

These are donations that I refused to accept for a long time. These donations come from a woman who is in full possession of her faculties. The first dates from 1995, and they were spread out over a period of about ten years. And I am not the only one to have benefited from them – far from it. What bothers people is the fact that a woman of her caste should go against socially accepted behaviour. Two days ago, Liliane said to me: “*My daughter will receive a large amount. But I intend to live for five minutes*”. What really happened will be demonstrated in court. If there's a trial, I am not worried in the least.

Do you feel guilty?

You can't be serious! There is a very strong, living world beneath all this which will triumph in the end. The truth will explode. It doesn't matter if anything happens to me, it's all in different safety deposit boxes and I fear nothing. Everything I have done is written down. My books have been sponsored by L'Oréal for the past ten years. Do people sponsor crooks? But this is also a very sad business. This scandal is causing great pain to a brilliant, free-spirited woman. To do this to her in the twilight of her life is inhuman - even if Mme Bettencourt is stronger than all this.

What is your relationship with Liliane Bettencourt?

How is it possible to tell the story of 40 years of companionship and shared affection? I met her in 1969 at Pierre and H el ene Lazareff's home. That day, I mostly talked to her husband, Andr e Bettencourt. We talked about Henri Michaux and Andre's brother Pierre Bettencourt, whom I see as a bad painter but an immensely gifted writer. I soon saw Liliane again, at the home of the industrialist and arts patron Paul-Louis Weiller, and also at Marcel Dassault's home. She was the most sought-after woman in the world. She was impressive, and extraordinarily beautiful. A woman of independence, of will, and of action.

What she has given me is nothing compared to what she has taught me. Nothing compared to the treasures of optimism, hope and elegance I have received. We'll see who was under the sway of whom, her or me! We've exchanged thousands of letters. She is hard of hearing. She loves to write, and does so marvellously. I often wrote to her husband as well. Liliane likes people who do things. It's a hugely respectful relationship.

Do you still see Liliane Bettencourt?

Of course I do. She phoned me yesterday, and we're having lunch tomorrow. They want people to think she's senile, whereas she is a free woman.

Doesn't the doubt arise from the fact that you've always been attracted by elderly rich people?

Young people have fewer secrets than old people. Old people are more than just old, they are solitary. And people are more beautiful to look at when they're 108 than when they're 8. But I also photograph young people.

Why take photographs?

My experiences with people I meet cannot be described in words. Photography gives them a form of density. And when I frequented Marie-Laure and Charles de Noailles at age 19, I became aware that I was at the heart of a vast amount of intelligence, at the heart of a world that was going to disappear.

Didn't you have anything better to do when you were 19 than seeing Marie-Laure de Noailles, who was 64?

Do you have any idea how stupid that question is? It's like asking why I went to see Leonardo da Vinci. Marie-Laure helped me to understand modernity. And she introduced me to some fascinating people, for example the Brazilian artist Roberto Burle Marx. But I also frequented janitors in apartment buildings and tramps on park benches.

Have you exploited people?

No. I don't absorb people, I let them flourish, because I love and respect them.

The way you take photographs seems aggressive. Don't you in some sense violate people in the street?

But it's about sharing! The street is my studio, and I travel along it by bicycle. I want other people to radiate with their own splendour. You can't calculate a photograph, because we're always inferior to the gestures of others. I'm not a virtuoso like Cartier-Bresson or Kertész. I'm direct, brutal, unpredictable. I don't go by the rules. I take photographs two feet away from people's faces, I kiss them more than I photograph them. I'm attracted to them, I talk to them and they talk to me. It's like a sexual appetite.

The world of photography also sees you as a rich socialite

That's not really true. Thousands of people saw my exhibition at the Pompidou Centre, far more than the exhibition next door of the works of portrait photographer Gisèle Freund. I'm writing a book on the people I've met in the world of photography. It's a very engaging brotherhood made up of highly educated personalities, whereas the world of art, especially collectors, is grotesque, with lots of enormous patrons lounging about amidst all their wealth.

In the book there'll be Man Ray of course. Kertész, who was the most boring man on earth, but who is also in my opinion the greatest, an overwhelmingly sensitive artist. Cartier-Bresson, who owed a lot to Kertész. The war photographer Don McCullin, who is more important than Capa, and so charming...And Guy Bourdin, who was a ray of sunshine in my childhood.

You also collect photographs. What is the extent of your collection?

I buy photographs, just as I used to buy paintings when I was younger. When I was 22, with the royalties from my first novel *Les Résidences secondaires* (Gallimard), I

paid 200,000 francs for a painting by Courbet, a view of the Château de Chillon on Lake Geneva. Aragon talked to me for hours about that painting.

I own a practically unique portrait of Baudelaire by Nadar, whom I think is one of the three greatest photographers because of the way he sees through people with his portraits. But I'm not a collector; that might give the impression that it's just a whim. I'm crazy about the photographs of Eugène Atget and his sense of composition. One could hardly be more French, with that combination of meticulousness and poetry. I love his photograph of a naked prostitute on all fours on a bed, that you published in your newspaper a little while ago.

That nude by Atget was purchased by an anonymous collector at Sotheby's for 440,750 euros on Friday 20th November. According to our sources, you were the buyer. Just as you bought a daguerreotype portrait at Christie's in October 2009 for \$233,000.

You're wrong about the Atget, but right about the other one. But as soon as a photo is auctioned for a large sum people say I'm the buyer.

What are you going to do with all that money?

I have no children. The meaning of this money comes entirely from what I will do with it. Among other things, I am financing a trauma unit for injured children in Paris. My main idea is to create a foundation. I'd like to help young people who want to do something with their lives but who can't because their way is barred by this grey-suited society. Because they're queer or Arab or black or white or whatever...I am deeply affected by different forms of racism. I want to found a school of trust. I would like to change society a little.

The establishment is all lies. It's the triumph of money and sharp dealing over the world. A society of shiny-shoed, shallow bourgeois, conservative and conventional, devoid of emotion. These are people who only discourage others.

If people met you, would it change their opinion of you?

Meeting people changes the way you look at them. It avoids gossip and idiotic situations. And when people have met me once, they want to meet me again. You didn't want to meet me for years because you don't like my photos, and now I get the feeling you'd like to see me again. One day I might be one of your favourite photographers.

(Translation by Martyn Back)