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"Into the Heart of the Human"

François-Marie Banier is rarely at a loss for words. A man of great aplomb, he receives visitors at the cafeteria of the Maison Européenne de la Photographie as if it were his own home, which in a sense it is. For the next three months, this photographer-writer has all three floors to himself for a unique exhibition of some 200 photographs. From his first efforts at the age of 14 ("My father, my mother with the two chihuahuas") to his latest, this is an invigorating show designed with panache and full of high spirits—unlike the rather bland book, even if it does have Beckett on the cover. Here we find a number of portraits that caused a real stir (Caroline of Monaco with her head shaved like an East German swimmer, Marcello Mastroianni as a dervish, the tragic beauty of Silvana Mangano) combined with the anonymous figures that he has made famous, like those twins in the Luxembourg Gardens.

Over the years, Banier has gone back to some of these photos, daubing them with paint or dashing down words, like messages in bottles. These interventions are not always to the point but sometimes, miraculously, they work: witness the image of young Brazilians on a beach in Bahia, with delicate ink openwork like a young girl's handkerchief.

François-Marie Banier will celebrate his 56th birthday on June 27. He seems happy and this man known for his impertinence answers my questions assiduously. Is there something wrong with him? His dark blue eyes look heavenwards and he starts getting angry. A good sign. Here is a chance to capture a few memories from this man who was taken as a child prodigy until he turned out to be like everyone else: half Cinderella, half Robin Hood.

Childhood. "My father was a publicist, my mother a Frenchwoman. I caught the unconscious photography bug from my father. He used to get all the illustrated magazines—*Vogue*, *Jardin des modes*, *Elle*, *Modes & Travaux*, etc. My father was Hungarian. He came to France in the 1930s, and that's why I'm so crazy about those photographers of genius that were Brassai, Kertész and Moholy-Nagy. My father and I never really got to know each other. There were three children, all of us born in June, all strangers to each other. What I am looking for through my photography is the identity of the other."

Street. "Right from the beginning, I lived in the street, and that's where I got my taste for vagabonds. I looked for truth, the taste for the truest, frankest individuals. First tramps, then artists. That's how I talk with Yves Saint Laurent. I know Horowitz and Nathalie Sarraute by heart, and lots of others, too. I am

attentive to what they're looking for, to their lacks. I come from a family that doesn't exist, and I am the friend who doesn't exist."

Poses I hate poses in photography, which are the archetype of the failed photograph, because they are forced. My obsession is with bringing onto the paper moments that will become imperishable. That's what I'm after, eternity. I watch out for it, I mark it down, I wait for it. A photograph only reveals itself when it is printed. When you have before you this rectangle or this square. Is the other person wholly there? Are they play-acting? And since sometimes photographs are boring, I started writing on them. A photograph is telling a story, writing on a photograph is telling it a story.

Painting "Painting came naturally. It was a real joy to see certain photographs again and to be able to change the color of the sky or slip a young mouse between Johnny Depp's legs. Suddenly, the intrusion of a new world freighted with memories and another future. I have been painting on my photos since 1994. It's like a fury. You're pretty close to madness when you do that, you're someone else in another reality. You yourself become a visionary. Didn't Victor Hugo have to cut out the séance tables because he almost went mad?"

Man Ray & Co "I met Man Ray through Dali and Marie Laure de Noailles. He was 80, I was 18. He kept repeating "I'm not a photographer, I'm a painter." I love Nadar, his intensity, and that gaze that turned things into statues. I loved Diane Arbus, violently. And then Robert Capa—what strength. And also that great photojournalist, Don McCullin. He has a panoramic, exact vision. He is the closest of all to the earthquake that is in all war photographs. I knew Horst well, and Lartigue, our Miro of photography.

Landscapes "No, I never photographed landscapes. The truth is that landscape is complicated. You have to find the right distance. With people I can do that, because of my dud childhood. But I don't do nudes, either—have you noticed that?"

Time frozen "To photograph is to plunge into the heart of the human. There is a philosophy behind all that, a distance, limits too. A lot of the people I have known are dead now. I just cast a gaze over their lives. Doctors produce death certificates. I do life certificates.

Brigitte Ollier