

INTERVIEW

With François-Marie Banier by Martin d'Orgeval

How do you work?

I walk the streets. I take photos every day. I set off across Paris, or wherever else, with no preconceived plan, though I can see how easily we become prisoners of the tracks we lay down the first time by chance, and which we return to through force of habit. I go to Barbès, the Rue de Tombouctou, Square Montholon, the banks of the Seine near Bercy, or opposite the Eiffel tower (though I've never caught a soul down there). What's so good about Paris is that you can come across a protest march more or less every day. I blend in like a fish in water and click away, making portraits of teachers, postal workers, fire-fighters, single mothers, high school kids, kids with no class at all, parents of schoolkids, from primary schools, from secondary schools, marching in favour of private education, against private education, farmers, potatoes, pigs, winegrowers, sailors, doctors, leftist union members, gays, anti-nuclear protesters, anti-Bush protesters, anti-Castro protesters. People who are pro- all that as well. André Maurois told me to read Balzac; for me there's nothing like photography to provide knowledge about humanity.

How do you photograph people?

I don't photograph: I take. I take what I find striking: a guy, a lady, a dog, a kid, a cement mixer, clouds. What attracts me in people is the stories they have inside them, the inextricable complexity they somehow manage to cope with in order to exist. What holds my attention is the moment when singularity becomes universal. Pain, seduction, the ravages of time, life problems, looming death.

Do you establish a dialogue?

What I really look for are monologues. Like the doctor who lays his stethoscope over your heart, I train my lens on that which "speaks" to me, even if it is not always with words. It's what speaks of the charm of the person, transcribing his or her inner truth.

The person usually quickly understands that my way of seeing is first and foremost a way of searching. It's in the feeling that the person reveals (I almost said "contains") that I find his or her identity. It's up to me to bring it out. This is the "I" of the photographer. We're like those travelling showmen with dancing bears: when I detect a feeling of loneliness, concern, indifference, plenitude, ineffable joy...I set to work. I use the person's inner light to illuminate the picture. This could be why I seldom do studio work: artificial light, artificial gestures. Whatever the face, whatever the figure, there's always a particular philosophy being expressed.

I prefer it when the person is not aware that I'm there. Except at the very last second: something happens between us, like an electric current, often in the eyes. The child, the hunchback, the churchgoer, the old man - they all know that what they carry with them is the expression of a thousand battles, feelings, responses to life, to the time that was theirs, and that a single line can contain all of that. They know that they are part of a mysterious, implacable, inexplicable rhythm. It is sometimes unpleasant for them when they look in the mirror. "But", they seem to say, "if you – lover of emotions and forms – see something else, take it from inside me! I saw it in your eyes, when you looked at me, that you had lost your head – so go for it!"

What are you interested in showing or not showing?

What I don't like showing is what the person himself exhibits, what he thinks of as satisfactory. The other person is unaware of what we like in him – that's what love is all about.

Why show several consecutive photos of the same person, instead of just choosing one?

So that you go further. So that you get to know them better. A portrait is sometimes made up of several expressions.

In my book *Past Present* I showed pictures of the same faces of "models" taken ten or twenty years apart. The idea, or rather the proof, that we have 'several faces' is of great interest to me. What do we see in a face? A process, a journey. How can we refuse the invitation to get on the train with these people?

Why did you choose to place portraits of artists, writers and designers among all the anonymous faces?

Ernesto Sabato, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Michel Tournier, Alex Katz, Emir Kusturica, Louise Bourgeois, all have in common a tonality of thought in their eyes that goes beyond the cliché of the 'accomplished artist'. All the exhibitions and books leave out some faces and places, but at some point they might suddenly seem indispensable. Encounters are not always immediate.

What is an exhibition?

A place where an artist and his world, its ideas and forms, come together, and which the outside world enters and violates.

Why show old people and down-and-outs? Do you see yourself in them?

The old and people on the fringes of society, whom I attract magnetically with my camera which is just an extension of my heart, strike a special chord. Be it honest or mocking, their music carries me away. When I was a child I used to listen to the "gospel"

on park benches. It may sometimes have been incoherent ramblings, but how much more alluring were those ramblings than the idle chit-chat from people around me wearing shoes as shiny as their coffins!

As for down-and-outs, who does not envy their courage, who does not admire their originality, who does not approve of their distance from us, old sticks-in-the-mud that we are? We who go along with the roles society gives us, the comedy of artificial hierarchies, out of fear and above all to keep control of our place in society, which is the opposite of art that is all about risk, like any step into the unknown.

Beauty is others. In their entirety. Others cleansed of clichés and preconceptions; others who are all too often locked in the grasp of a society that misunderstands them and crushes them

Do you think you create a portrait of today's world, of the world as it really is?

Today's world? The street is its most faithful reflection, with its diversity, its suffering souls who still manage to stand, or hardly manage, or no longer manage at all, and from whom fools have learnt to avert their gaze.

Why “Perdre la tête” (“losing your head”)...

Because you forget everything about yourself, and about the world, when you come face to face with another person who absorbs you and whom you decide to depict via an image of that unique instant. It's an encounter with an entire world.

What are your projects?

Living.

Paris, 15 September 2005