

Michel François

Photographs

22 July — 4 September 2022

Press Release

Xavier Hufkens is pleased to present an exhibition on photography in the work of Belgian artist Michel François (b. 1956). The selection surveys the artist's diverse and compelling encounters with the medium since the early 1990s. Among others, François' photographs have been included in the following institutional exhibitions: *Danser brut*, BOZAR, Brussels, Belgium (2020); *dix-neuf mille affiches. 1996-2016*, Frac île-de-France, Rentilly, France (2016); *45.000 affiches* (1994/2011), Mac's Grand Hornu, Hornu, Belgium (2011); *Plans d'évasion*, SMAK, Ghent, Belgium (2009); *Horror vacui*, Belgian Pavillion, 48th Venice Biennale, Italy (1999). A major survey exhibition of François' work will open at BOZAR in Brussels in spring 2023.

Much has been written about photography as a medium, but how to approach the photographs of an artist who subverts a signature style? How to define photographs within the practice of an artist internationally acclaimed for his personal universe and conceptual poetry that has found expression in such diverse media as sculpture, video, photography, printed matter, painting, and installation work? Rather than resort to familiar theories on photography, an intimate anthology offers solace here.

Since 1988, François has been making photographs at unbroken intervals, casually yet systematically, a selection of which are gathered here. The earliest photo in this selection, *Savon Mâle*, dates from 1991: it captures an anonymous touch, a tactile encounter between a child's hands and a nostalgic ball of soap on a bar, a *porte savon* in French. The scent of rose, lavender, lemon or olive is offered as an invitation to the sensitive viewer. It is a striking image in our present post-Covid moment. Automated sanitization stations and pocket-sized disinfectants are familiar to us all, connoting collective safety and control in the new every day.

Perhaps even more remarkable is the time of its creation. In 1991, the Internet became known to the public through HTML and the WWW project. Anyone with a computer and a connection could access it. Meanwhile, the digital image became an inherent part of our global reality, entity, and identity. In 2003, the science-fiction writer William Gibson used the word 'atemporality' to describe this hybridity: since the inception of the Internet, all eras seem to exist simultaneously. With each photographic capture, François injects, within the non-stop flow of digital images and physical detachment, a sensual counterpoint of pause and reflection. *Savon Mâle*, like its companion *Savon Femelle* (1991), occupies a middle ground between the timeless and the temporary.

The most recent photo in this exhibition, *Mud Volcano* (2022) was created in Baku, Azerbaijan during the installation of François' exhibition "Panopticon" at the YARAT Contemporary Art Space. Here, we see a close-up of a local natural phenomenon: bubbles of bursting gas in one of the many natural gas fields surrounding Baku. Seen against the background of the current war, the image—indirectly and without declamation—refers to global geopolitics and changing ecosystems. By emphasising singular moments of reality, François draws attention to the ways in which our society is determined, categorised, and understood. Through a precise use of intimacy and proximity, he reveals new meanings about a political era that is largely defined by detachment.

In the photo *Film* (2005), moonlight hits the car bonnets of a desolate residential area. Rather than autonomous images, François' lens introduces authentic scenes. Imagining a before, a now and an after, each photograph

Xavier Hufkens

6 rue St-Georges | St-Jorisstraat, 1050 Brussels, Belgium
www.xavierhufkens.com +32(0)2 639 67 30

elapses in time. The captured events are as generous as they are enigmatic, deliberately left undefined. This cinematic charge is perhaps best explained by the focus on what lies beneath the surface of the everyday. "Photography is for me the transcription of a form of identification or fusion with a moment of personal life, a block of sensation. (...) The subjects are often chosen for the vitality of the acts that they translate", ¹ François explains.

His is a humble and generous position, free of fixed definitions and always open to suggestion and synaesthesia. The aspect of transformation is typical of a border. It is a physical and mental zone where one thing flows into another, a moment of in-betweenness, becoming and searching. A peripheral environment that embraces ambiguity and opacity. Although the scenes François portrays in his photography are extremely diverse, we could say that they all explore the boundary between nature-culture (culture as synonymous with human invention: money, tattoos, airports, residential areas). Look at *Cactus Gravé* (2001) where the skin of the plant bears traces of human incisions, or the soft stamps of *Bébé Tampon* (2003), or even the draped textile in *Arbre India* (2018) entwined, almost naturally, with the silhouette of a tree.

Abstract photographs such as *Broken Neon* (2002) or *Froisser* (2012) possess an incredibly strong plastic quality. They flirt with painting, sculpture, or installation art. It is therefore not surprising that François' photographs frequently serve as preliminary sketches for later works in other media. The term prelude seems indeed appropriate here: an instrumental composition without a fixed form. Originally, it was a kind of improvisation, performed just before the real work. The photographs mentioned can be considered stand-alone works, but also, preludes to the sculptural works *Néons brisés (Broken neon lights)* (2003-14) and *Bleu Ciel (Blue Sky)* (2010).

Equally crucial is the fact that many of the photographs take their final form as posters. In 1994, François began to anonymously distribute these posters in public spaces. Each was printed on a fixed format of 120 x 180 cm. Since then, the posters (and thus the photographs) have been presented in exhibitions—often as stacks free for the taking—with the same standardized format. Narratives emerge through the juxtapositions occurring within a given ensemble. The choice of the poster as a carrier of the photograph is significant: captures from reality reappear in other realities. This format stimulates a string of associations. At the same time, it reinforces previously inherent dimensions of virtuosity and plasticity.

Looking at the photos, I can think of nothing but the thoughts of Simone Weil (1909-43), the French-Jewish mystic, philosopher, and political activist whose radicalism resonates greatly today. In her first publication, *Gravity and Grace* (1947), she pointed to, "attention as the rarest and purest form of generosity." "Beauty," she wrote, "captivates the flesh in order to obtain permission to pass right to the soul. Among other unions of contraries found in beauty there is that of the instantaneous and the eternal."¹

For further inquiries please contact the gallery at info@xavierhufkens.com or at +32(0)2 639 67 30. For press enquiries contact anazoe@xavierhufkens.com

#xavierhufkens
#michelfrançois

Twitter: @XavierHufkens
Instagram: @xavierhufkens
Facebook: Xavier Hufkens



Savon Mâle, 1992
silver print
80 x 60 cm, 31 1/2 x 23 5/8 in.

Courtesy the Artist and Xavier Hufkens, Brussels

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Mud Volcano, 2022
silver print
60 x 80 cm, 23 1/2 x 31 5/8 in.

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Le monde et les bras, 1996
silver print
80 x 60 cm, 31 1/2 x 23 5/8 in.

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Cactus gravé, 2001
silver print
80 x 60 cm, 31 1/2 x 23 5/8 in.

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