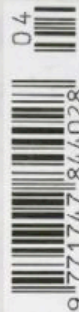


WONDER LAND



£4.95
April/May 2008
Photography
Chad Pitman
Jacket by
Levi's

hey
joe

joseph
gordon-levitt
where you
going with
that gun
in your
hand

+
guillermo
del toro

+
cosmic
disco

+
leelee
sobieski

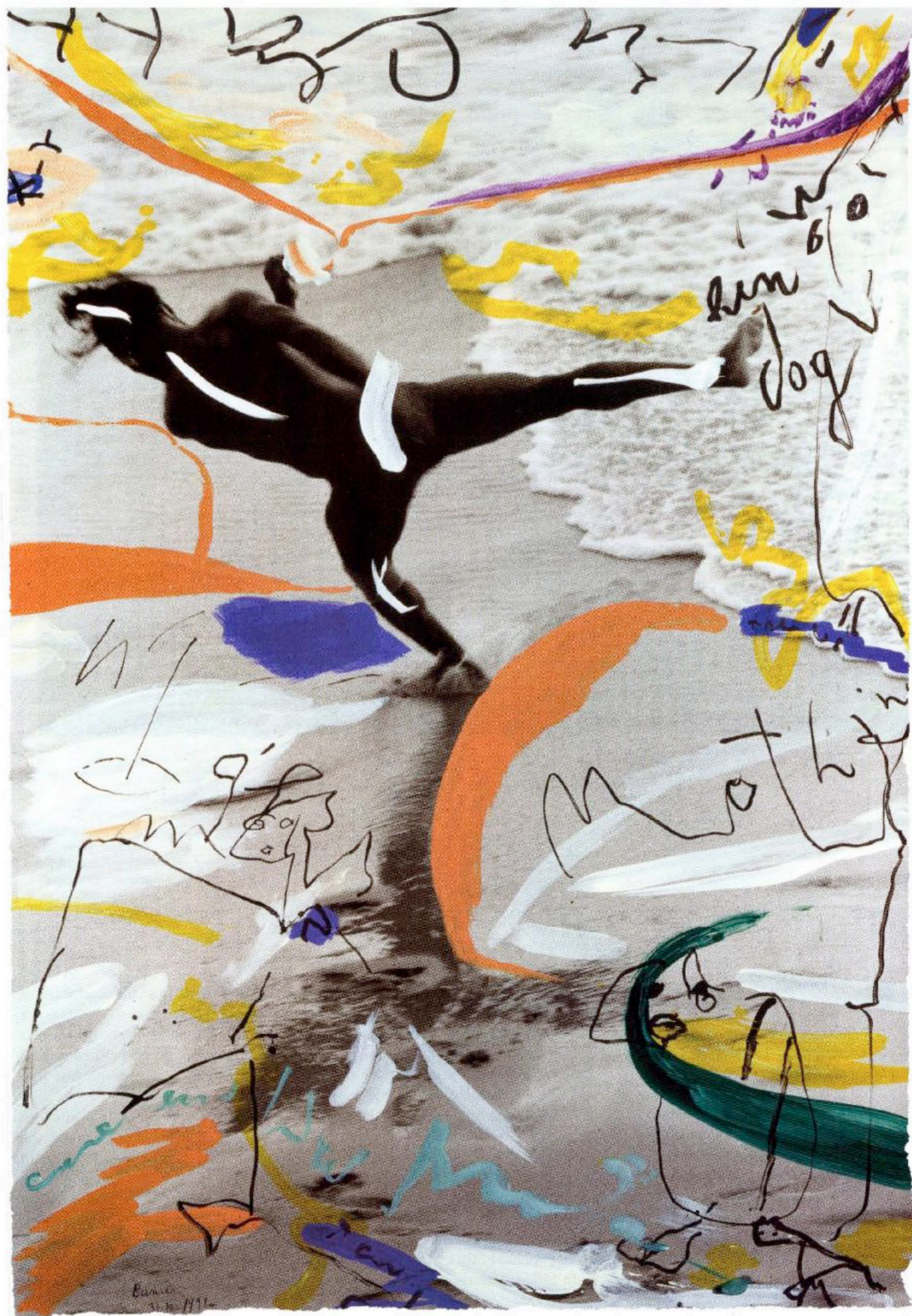
+
comic
stripper

multi- tittas king

François-Marie Banier is livingproof that it is possible to be a master of all trades. Each time he has turned his hand to a new career, acclaim has quickly followed.

The 60-year-old Frenchman published the first of seven novels at the age of 22; his 1991 photographic debut at the Pompidou Centre broke all attendance records; and these days his lively paintings fetch \$100,000 a pop. "And I never trained to do anything," he smiles. Banier makes his media-hopping triumphs sound effortless, but back when he first decided to swap

his typewriter for a camera, the would-be Renaissance Man met with strong resistance. "After I had published my fifth novel I went to Elle and asked if they wanted me to take photographs of five women," he says. "They replied, 'We aren't interested in your photographs. Who do you think you are?' It was an arrogant thing to say; and very French to think that I was a nobody because I wasn't known as a photographer. It hurt me because the man who had printed Cartier-Bresson's pictures for 20 years had told me, 'You





Previous page: *Le Baigneur* (1999), painted photograph.
This page, above: *Moulin Rouge* (1997), painted photograph

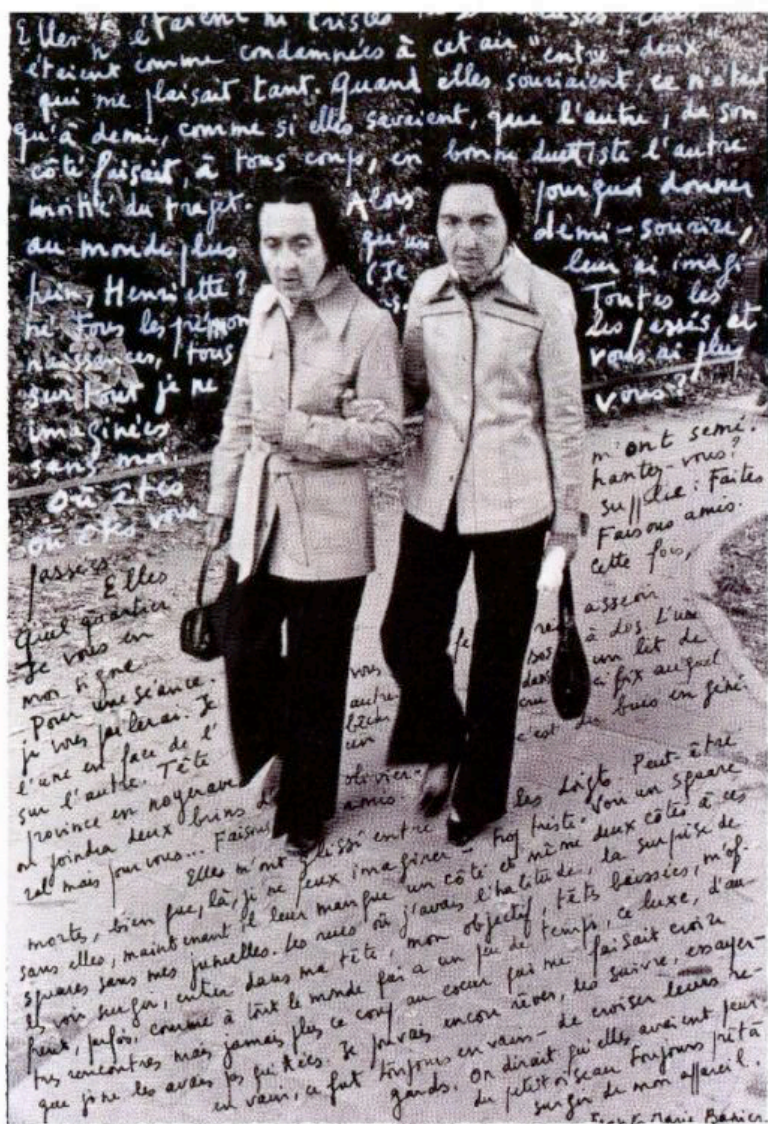
are a great photographer.' So I decided to show the work anyway at the Pompidou and 4,000 people came every day."

The gatekeepers at Elle must still be choking on their humble pie. Banier has been the best-connected photographer in France ever since. Film stars drop everything to pose in front of his camera; in fact, Johnny Depp went one further and cast him alongside Marlon Brando in his 1997 directorial debut *The Brave*. The fashion world adores him: Diane von Furstenberg went to Banier for her latest ad campaign

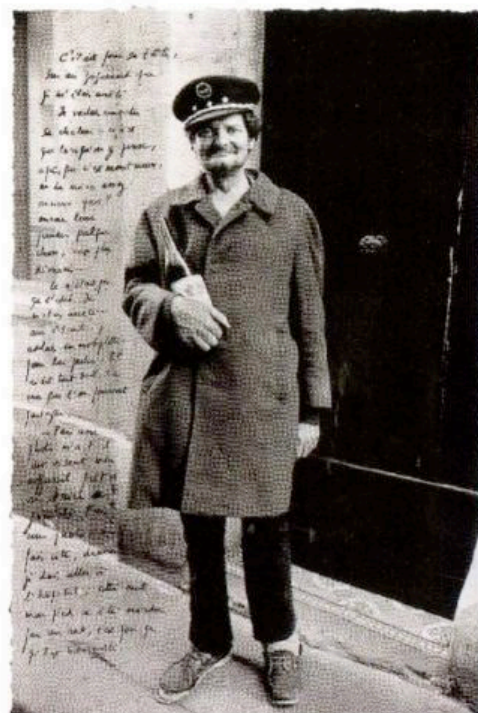
("I've met a lot of people but I've never met anyone as incredible as her!"); and Yves Saint Laurent revealed "all his many faces" to him over a 20-year span of portraits. This last collaboration worked the other way too, with Banier coining the names of YSL's Opium and Paris perfumes. He maintained a similarly long-running relationship with Samuel Beckett, who he snapped for the last time three days before the legendary playwright's death. During the 1980s and 90s Banier even enjoyed some political sway: he had the ear of President Mitterrand ("I spoke the truth to him"). Surprisingly, when asked

to pick a favourite from his illustrious list of subjects, Banier doesn't hesitate for a second: "Silvana Mangano (the 1950s Italian big-screen bombshell) because it was impossible to photograph just how beautiful she really was."

But Banier isn't only interested in the famous, the good-looking and the powerful. "One of my favourite things to photograph are ordinary people in the street," he admits. "To recognise that in everybody there is a star. And their star is their heart." Is this the sentiment he was referring to when he once announced, "I don't photograph, I take"? "Yes, I take the



This page, left: *Les Jumelles* (1991), written photograph. Below: *Rue Visconti* (1988), written photograph



Banier refuses to describe himself as a workaholic.

He has a simpler explanation: "I am a doer. It is my way. My earliest memory is looking out of the window and realising that life is difficult and lonely. At that moment I thought, 'I do or I die'."

emotion," he says. "Everybody is a story and I must be open to that. It's always a discovery for me what I photograph – I have no idea what I'll get."

The same principle applies to his other endeavours. Whether he's about to type the opening sentence of a new book or make his first paint stroke on a blank canvas, Banier has no clue as to how the piece will evolve. "I just know that I need to do it," he explains. "There is no method. Suddenly I become giddy and am driven by an energy." The walls of his Paris studio bear witness to this urgency: they are crammed with hundreds of paintings and drawings that

have never seen the light of day.

Despite his almost manic desire to create, Banier refuses to describe himself as a workaholic. He has a simpler explanation: "I am a doer. It is my way. My earliest memory is looking out of the window and realising that life is difficult and lonely. At that moment I thought, 'I do or I die'."

With a childhood epiphany like that it's no wonder the adult Banier is prolific. Over the last few years he has also been developing a series of multimedia works in which he writes and paints on the surface of his own large-format black-and-white photos. True to form, the ideology behind

these "written and painted photographs", as Banier describes them, is uncomplicated: "A photograph can be very boring, so I use words and paint to cut the picture up. It gives the photograph structure and alters its dimensions. It's a way of changing the way you look at things."

Like any genuine polymath, Banier has a hard time when asked what he would do if he had to choose just one last project to work on; would it be a book, a photograph or a painting? "It's a horrible question!" he blurts, before a long pause. "I would do a sculpture." **Ben Cobb**