The New York Times

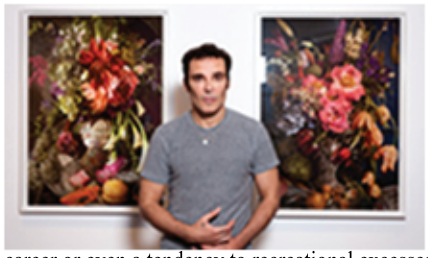
David LaChapelle: An Unexpected Life

Published: May 27, 2011

HE was hired by Andy Warhol. He fired Madonna. He photographed Pamela Anderson and Lady Gaga and also Hillary Clinton, and made a star of the transgender apparition Amanda Lepore.

He earned millions and spent much of that on a self-financed film about an urban dance form created in the rough neighborhoods of South Central Los Angeles. When the film, "Rize," failed to find a large audience, and with David LaChapelle weary after 20 years of 14-hour days, he packed up a career that any commercial photographer might envy, and he disappeared.

"It was 2006, and the money was rolling in and I thought I was going to die," Mr. LaChapelle, the 48-year-old photographer, said last week. He was making a brief touchdown in Manhattan on the way from Los Angeles, where he keeps a residence, to Hong Kong for an exhibition of his work. It was not just the pressure of a high-flying international



career or even a tendency to recreational excesses that spooked him, Mr. LaChapelle said. It was a long-held conviction that he had AIDS.

"I never got tested, and for 15 years I just assumed I was going to die," Mr. LaChapelle said, looking weary, his face puffed and his mood distracted as he sat for an interview at a gallery on the Upper East Side. While his doomful assertion smacked of melodrama, there was a kind of skewed logic in it, given that the artist came of age in Manhattan when the pandemic was decimating the creative community out of which he emerged.

He did not have H.I.V., as he learned when he finally was tested. ("It's the luck of the draw, really," he said. "I was 15 back then and in New York and having sex.") Both that reality and a desire to restore to memory a period in the early '80s before downtown life was tinctured by tragedy motivated him to return to the art he made when, as a high school dropout from suburban Connecticut, he first blew into town.In New York briefly, on a rare trip away from the farm he has carved out for himself on the dozen or so acres of a defunct nudist colony he bought in a remote corner of Maui, Mr. LaChapelle was overseeing a one-man show at a Madison Avenue gallery and a separate commissioned installation that opens in the lobby of the Lever House on Park Avenue on Thursday.

With their erotic gloss, their overheated aesthetics and their slick production values, the photographs at Michelman Fine Art are recognizably the work of a man who in his editorial work for Vanity Fair, Interview, Rolling Stone and others depicted David Duchovny dressed in Lycra bondage trousers, Kanye West as Black Jesus, a turbaned Elizabeth Taylor looking like a $5 fortune teller, Eminem naked but for a well-placed prop and other stars like Tupac Shakur (wearing soap bubbles), Angelina Jolie and Lady Gaga baring their souls for the camera, along with a good deal else.

At the Lever House, however, the artist has returned to techniques he employed when, at the start of his career — long before he became the go-to video director for pop music divas like Christina Aguilera — he used naïve, childlike forms like linked paper chains to make his work.

There, in a space that — during the eight years since the real-estate magnate Aby Rosen created the Lever House Art Collection to add cultural luster to his holdings — has been given over to artists like Barbara Kruger and Damien Hirst, Mr. LaChapelle has slung the chains from walls and ceiling in looping festoons.

The stapled links that at first glance look like decorations for a kiddie party on closer inspection reveal images of naked bodies, an allegory for human connection, Mr. LaChapelle said. More naked forms appear in two large circular configurations meant to replicate the stained-glass windows of medieval cathedrals. Titled

"Adam and Eve Swimming Under a Microscope," those pieces evoke cell division or, more ominously, viral replication, and bring to mind the work of creators as unalike as the Indian artist Bharti Kher or the British duo Gilbert & George.

"My dream since I was a kid was to show in a gallery," Mr. LaChapelle said. And in fact, in the '80s, before he was taken up by the editors of Andy Warhol's "Interview" and began formulating his over-the-top Pop photographic style, Mr. LaChapelle was affiliated with Lisa Spellman's influential 303 Gallery, where the careers of artists like Doug Aitken and Karen Kilimnik were forged.

"I was dumped" from the gallery, Mr. LaChapelle said. "If you blew up like I did, you weren't an artist in some people's eyes. I was dropped like a hot potato, and I was hurt." (When contacted by a reporter, Ms. Spellman confirmed this sequence. "We did show him," she said through a spokeswoman. "And we dumped him.")

To this day his detractors maintain that Mr. LaChapelle is less an artist than a commercial hack.

Even the novelty of his early ornate and often cinematic photographic productions, they say, grew stale well before his self-imposed exile.

"He's one of those artists who's heavily entrenched in the fashion world, and that has, historically speaking, been kind of a dirty word in the fine-art and auction-house worlds," said Joshua Holdeman, a photography specialist at Christie's.

Others term Mr. LaChapelle's work simple-minded or unserious, gimmicky and slick. "He has a very particular theatrical and situational way of looking at things," said Dennis Freedman, now creative director of Barneys New York and formerly the creative director of W magazine. "For me, to be interesting, the work would have had to go a lot further and be a lot tougher."Others term Mr. LaChapelle's work simple-minded or unserious, gimmicky and slick. "He has a very particular theatrical and situational way of looking at things," said Dennis Freedman, now creative director of Barneys New York and formerly the creative director of W magazine. "For me, to be interesting, the work would have had to go a lot further and be a lot tougher."

Even Richard Marshall, the curator of the Lever House projects, admitted to having "had the same prejudices," before seeing the early proposals for the LaChapelle project. "My understanding of the work was just the commercial celebrity photography," Mr. Marshall said by phone from California. "But when we got into the project, you saw that he was extending his expression in different ways, and I always find that encouraging in an artist."

Yet there are some who insist that it was precisely with the work-for-hire that Mr. LaChapelle achieved his real contribution. "I'm well aware that there are connoisseurs of photography and art and stylish magazine editors who don't endorse his work," said Jeffrey Deitch, the director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. In his last professional incarnation, as the director of the Deitch Projects gallery in New York, Mr. Deitch mounted several shows of Mr. LaChapelle's photography.

"David exists in this new territory, in the collapse between vanguard and pop culture, and it's a very interesting space," he added. "Look at the pictures of Lil' Kim or Christina Aguilera or the pictures he did of Amanda Lepore as Andy Warhol's 'Liz' and you see that he's really an important part of image making in our time."

ODDLY, even as Mr. LaChapelle was ignoring his career to tend to his organic farm in Hawaii, the market for his images, especially the allegorical ones notable for baroque, almost chrome-plated religiosity, vaulted. In recent years, prices for LaChapelle