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527 W 29TH ST, NEW YORK, NY 10001 T212.244.5074 F212.244.5075 FREDTORRES.COM

ARTnews

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David LaChapelle

by Mary Krienke



Some of the works' titles here explicitly referred to the seasons- Springtime, Late Summer, Early Fall, Deathless Winter- while others were more oblique,

evoking the cycle of life or states of mind. In Late Summer (2008-2011), the detritus of picnic lunch and a death mask underscore the approaching demise of a fading bouquet. In Wilting Gossip (2008- 2011), a scrap of New York Post brandishing a scandalous headline peeps out from under a vase of drooping tulips and overripe peonies. These painterly photographs marked a new twist in LaChapelle's hyperreal esthetic.

"Earth Laughs in Flowers," David LaChapelle's series of ten large, high-intensity photographs inspired by 16th century still lifes, took its title from the poem "Hamatreya," by Ralph Waldo Emerson, in which flowers mock the arrogance of humans for refusing to acknowledge their mortality. And, in a sense, these voluptuous renderings of floral bouquets, all bursting with blossoms well past their prime, did just that. They reminded us that beauty, as life, is ephemeral.

The artist, who has penchant for embedding cultural references or humorous asides in his painstakingly choreographed works, walks the line between sublime beauty, disorderly decadence, and comedic kitsch. Through acts of visual trickery, he transmutes the polished perfection of Baroque compositions of flowers, fruits, masks, classical busts, and candles into the medium of photography. As opulent as they first appeared, these knowingly delusional images carried a whiff of emptiness and decay, in the artistic tradition of vanitas. Within each elaborately constructed arrangement lurks a note of subversive surrealism in the form of objects representative of contemporary consumer society: mobile phones, cigarette butts, a toy airplane, balloons, a child's water pistol, a can of Reddi-wip