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David LaChapelle
By Krytian von Speidel



David LaChapelle, *Pamela Anderson: Hollywood Nights*. All images copyright David LaChapelle. All images courtesy of Fred Torres Collaborations.

In this candid interview, photographer David LaChapelle touches on his diverse origins, what makes a subject natural, and his complex relationship with Christianity.

Perhaps best known for his dynamic, charged imagery from the 1990s, photographer David LaChapelle is experiencing a renaissance of sorts. He has emerged as a darling of the fine art photography world that had long shunned him for being too commercial. Although he spent decades capturing famous faces, it was advertisements that lent a pop aesthetic to his four books, an award-winning film, and a myriad of magazine covers. LaChapelle was not accepted as an artist but rather as a commercial photographer.

Then, as abruptly as he was everywhere, he was nowhere. Abandoning the fashion capitals and their jet-set lifestyle, LaChapelle decamped for a remote former-nudist colony on the North Shore of Maui that he has converted into a private retreat and studio. LaChapelle reassessed his career and returned saner, more

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sober, and surer than ever. Exhibitions around the world followed, most recently in Hong Kong and at Lever House in New York, where *From Darkness to Light* has been met with rapture from the uptown crowd. According to his own synopsis, “the three main components presented in *From Darkness To Light* stand alone, yet inform each other to create a unified installation, utilizing photography in three ways: collage, stickers, and paper chain. The pieces are inspired by the simplicity of childhood endeavors taught in early art lessons, re-imagined through the lens of adulthood. This will engage the viewer in that collective, shared experience, by taking these elementary endeavors and elevating them through figurative imagery to transcend the medium. With an innocence of material and application, the ideas conceptualized visually evoke metaphysical questions that appear at the onset of adulthood and continue throughout a life examined.”

His best friends, the iconic Amanda Lepore and babe-of-the-century Pamela Anderson, belie the fame that stems not from an outrageous aesthetic, but from brilliant talents that continue to mature and beguile: his keen eye for observing and interpreting the world around him. Following a lecture for the group show *Face Off: Portraits by Contemporary Artists* at the Lyman Allyn Art Museum in New London, Connecticut, contributor Krystian von Speidel sat down with LaChapelle at the apartment the artist keeps in New York’s Lower East Side.

Krystian von Speidel Describe the influence your childhood in suburban Connecticut has had on your work.

David LaChapelle First there was Simsbury from my birth to nine, then a short stint in North Carolina until I was 14, before that my parents lived in Farmington for almost 25 years. Then I lived in Fairfield on the dividing line. We weren’t wealthy. My mom took great care of herself. She was a refugee from Lithuania, the last year Ellis Island was open, she came through. My mother met my father the third day working in the tobacco fields in Connecticut. It was her third proposal in three days. She was beautiful. She was a loner. My friends were her friends. She loved her plants. My dad was the first to go to college: scholarship and valedictorian at Trinity. His brother was a priest, so . . . to have a son who was gay . . . I planned to kill myself at 14. The only reason I didn’t is because I knew it would hurt them badly. In 1972 when I was nine, there was an article in the Sunday paper about gay liberation. I was in their room and they were talking amongst themselves and there was an article about how a woman threw her daughter out of the house. My mother told my father, “I could never throw Sonia [my sister] out if she told us she was a lesbian.” Never hearing the word *faggot*, never hearing anything off-color. It wasn’t their make-up. When we moved to North Carolina and I was called a Yankee, it felt like such a dirty word. My parents were aspirational. They weren’t ambitious socially, but they wanted the best for us. The public schools in Connecticut were amazing. I took everything in art that was offered. When we moved to North Carolina, I went from a beautiful school in Connecticut to 30 kids crammed into a trailer. Connecticut had this incredible arts program and incredible schools. I was at Roger Ludlow High School, now closed. Typical story: I was attacked and bullied. My locker had *faggot* spray-painted on it—out of a movie. In North Carolina, someone painted *faggot* at the bottom of my driveway, which was so fucking humiliating. It started in Connecticut. I wasn’t a preppy kid. There were two groups. Preppy rich kids and the kids whose parents worked in blue-collar jobs. I didn’t fit in either group. It got bad, and I started coming to New York when I was 14, where I went to Studio 54 with friends, and I got let in right away. I met a girl named Vanessa, who lived on 1st and 1st. I took a photo of her at the Farmington Reservoir. In 1984 my boyfriend died. I was 21. I used to go to Connecticut all the time with him. I lived a Walt Whitman existence. I would lay on this one rock at the reservoir. I would write things and swim. I’d go to see my parents and go into the woods and spend all day there into the night. It was amazing to go figure things out. When you’re in New York and there are so many options, it was nice to be able to focus. Art demands a discipline and focus. I would go to that reservoir and focus on what I wanted to do.

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KVS Who were your artistic influences?

DLC Walt Whitman. In photography Avedon. I loved Helmut Newton and Dianne Arbus. It runs the gamut. I love more than I don't love. My art heroes weren't necessarily photographers. I love the Renaissance. Freedom, body—light were so important. The idea that God exists because of the beauty of mankind. I loved Pop Art. Andy Warhol. Georgia O'Keefe.

KVS What is it about actress Pamela Anderson and transgender icon Amanda Lepore that ignites such passion and creativity in you, resulting in some of your most memorable photographs?

DLC Funny enough, they are the only two real friends I've made and kept out of anyone I've ever photographed who is still alive. Through photography we became friends. You can not judge a book by its cover. Pamela is loyal and a good mother and a good, good friend. She'll be there for you. In a strange way Amanda is a guru to me because of her kindness. I met Amanda when she was just a club kid and now she's this international gay icon. Amanda hasn't changed a bit. All she ever wanted was a sex change and when she got her sex change she was content. There are two people I've never heard badmouth anyone—my father and Amanda. I loved how [Amanda] looked when we met. I call them Pamanda because they get along so well. I can be very melancholy, and Pamanda really lighten and sparkle the mood.

KVS Of everyone you've photographed, who in your mind stands out as the most natural?

DLC The more that is given, the more is expected. That also applies to the more famous. Muhammad Ali was so generous and kind. He could see how tense I was—it [the photo shoot] was for a Taschen book. Every time I'd turn around he'd be giving the crew the finger. He taught me to chill out. Ali made it so wonderful. He waited for every single person to be photographed with him. The pressure comes with the younger stars. Ten years later they're not even around. Their publicists are the worst. Who you have around is indicative of the choices you make. The baddest are from the NBA. Athletes can be difficult. Andre Agassi and Lance Armstrong were exceptions. Tupac Shakur was another. Sensitive, kind and generous. He was not homophobic—straight as an arrow and completely accepting.

KVS What was it like to photograph the recently departed Elizabeth Taylor, whom you cast as a turbaned and bejeweled Bel Air matron?

DLC God she was funny. Her birthday was coming up and someone gave her a diamond necklace and her reaction was like, "Oh thanks," like it was nothing. It was this huge diamond necklace that must have cost a fortune, but when you saw her diamond collection, you realized it was like me giving you a pen cap for your birthday. She was just very funny. I had a really good time talking to her stand-in, who had been working for her, even before Cleopatra. She was telling me how they had a drink for every occasion. That woman lived! She loved and she gave and she lived. She lived by her own rules. That's the way to go! All these people clinging onto relevance. It's very difficult to age in Hollywood. I've seen the disposability of a person. She channeled and parlayed that energy not in an egocentric way, instead, she used her fame and status wholeheartedly and with sincerity she made it okay to care about AIDS. There was ugly stuff going on, and here's Elizabeth Taylor and she was the first one who went all the way and didn't do anything half-ass.

KVS How do you feel when you look back at other portraits of now-departed icons? I'm recalling the photo you took of Alexander McQueen and Isabella Blow and how it is especially bittersweet in hindsight.

DLC I know we all have our time. I can't live without having a faith that there isn't more than just this plane. I feel privileged to have photographed them and to have worked with them. When you photograph someone and work with them, even if it's only for two days, you see them in a different light than you may see them on a talk show. Especially if it's an artist you really respect, when they're kind it's a thrill, because

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there are so many of the others. They could be having a bad day or they could be that way, you never know.

KVS What is the meaning behind the word *LUIS* you have tattooed on the fingers of your hand?

DLC Luis Nunez was my studio manager for 17 years, from the time he was 17 years old. In 1999 he died. For three years I didn't even pay him. At the end of his life I was depending on him. Two weeks after testing negative for HIV he had unprotected sex with his boyfriend. He had such a low amount of the virus in his system doctors decided to give him a lot of the cocktail [Highly Active Antiretroviral Therapy]. He died at work a year later of a heart attack. He was 34.

KVS What role does religion, and Catholicism in particular, play in your work? Why do you continue to return to the Pieta imagery?

DLC Pieta is the strongest image in art. It represents the ultimate loss. So for me Catholics don't own that idea. A mother losing a child is the ultimate loss. When I did the book [Heaven to Hell] with Courtney [Love], it was about my friend Brett, who was a bike messenger. He was addicted to heroin and had overdosed. He became a really good friend I met when I worked at Interview. That picture was haunting. I wanted to commemorate that loss. We have not progressed. That's why we still need gimmicks. We decided to worship the painter. I like the shepherd image of Jesus. Condemning the Church, it's like condemning a country. I will not let fundamentalists destroy what I know to be a beautiful guide. I believe in love and forgiveness.

KVS In your first book, *LaChapelle Land*, you wrote, "I've always thought of the magazine as the gallery and the refrigerator as the museum." After the many exhibitions of your work around the world, does that statement still hold true?

DLC I wanted to document America. Our obsession with consumption, the crazy materialism. I love glamor and fashion and beauty, and these things are beautiful and forms of expression so I use that in the work I do today. 1991 was the last time I had a show until 2006. I always felt I was more of a novelty during the magazine years.

KVS What changed?

DLC The difference now is that I'm not selling anything—I'm not building. I don't love to subvert the image with my hidden agenda. Not all those images accomplished that. There weren't always layers to discover. I didn't know I would be shown in galleries. It took me a while for me to believe they wanted me.

KVS What words of wisdom would you want to impart on art students who may be influenced by your career and work?

DLC It is flattering when students are inspired. As for advice, Julian Schnabel once told me about exhibiting, "When you're 100% ready and you know you're ready, wait two years." In a weird way I've waited 20 years to mature. The other piece of advice is to get quiet. When you're looking for that path, either in art or in life, please find time to hear yourself. I found it in nature in Connecticut. In Japan I went to a graveyard. Not finding inspiration externally. Those are only found through life. That's why going to a gallery museum is so important. Art history is so important. To learn about the lives of artists is a treasure and a gift. Moments of solitude when looking for answers are so important. To hear the voice inside, to listen to the choices. If you ask five people their opinions you'll get five different ones. We can get advice from trusted people but if they're not there we have to develop intuition.

KVS What are your plans for future creative expressions?

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DLC I want to support the arts. I'm creating a foundation that will give to programs in impoverished places in the US—our public school arts system. Art is transformative and can change people's lives. There are so many artists who must put food on the table. Privilege is a gift. As for artistic expression, I love collage and crafted things. I will exhibit *The Raft of Illusion, Raging Toward Truth* at Lever House [in New York City]. The storm can be anything. Is it going to break you or enlighten you? We all have that story. We can use that storm to enlighten us. *Good* isn't good enough anymore. We have to be *great*—artists, teachers or friends. Being sober isn't good enough. You can't awaken society if you're asleep. If we're raging and gossiping, how can countries get along? Art can change and awaken. I want to communicate with people and teach them like music can. Maybe they love similar images and the art touches them in some way. If you're talking about a heavy subject you have to use beauty. The artist's intention has to be beauty. No one wants to look at violence. That makes it photojournalism. Michelangelo was sublime. Botticelli was beautiful.