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## CHINADAILY

After Shock

Article by Andrew Sun



Photographer David LaChapelle's often garish satire has evolved into fine art, and he's finding plenty of inspiration in Asia, Andrew Sun discovers.

For someone whose images often provoke shock and sensation, David LaChapelle is surprisingly soft-spoken in person. Over the last two decades, the US photographer has established himself as the go to guy for outrageous and outlandish celebrity portraits and fashion campaigns. Whether it's Britney Spears'

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coquettish schoolgirl Lolita cover for Rolling Stones, Christina Aguilera's appropriately Dirty music video, or rapper Kanye West posing as Jesus Christ with a crown of thorns, his works in print, video, film and stage (he directed Elton John's Las Vegas show) are explosions of color and pop culture, garnished with garish religious icons and sexual fetishism. They celebrate and satirize TMZ's celebritydom as much as the sacred and profane of American excess. He is one of the most in-demand photographers in the business.

But enough was enough. Five years ago, the 48 year-old moved to an eco-farm in Maui, Hawaii, and refocused himself as a fine artist. Maybe that explains his calm and reflective mood.

"I walked away because I knew I had said what I wanted to say," LaChapelle explains. He is in Hong Kong for the ART HK 11 art fair and an exhibition of news works, The Raft, at the de Sarthe Fine Art gallery.

These days, LaChapelle says he only does Hollywood stuff when "friends" like Lady Gaga and Mariah Carey ask him.

"I still love pop culture and fashion and all the glamor. But more is expected of you in the galleries," he added. "It's always a risk in terms of putting out there things that are different than what you've done before. This is not what people have come to know me for. But it's a beautiful risk. One that is not dangerous. It's a challenge and it's authentic."

Returning to his roots in fine art galleries is also a full circle for LaChapelle's career. He moved to New York in the early 1980s after graduating from the North Carolina School of Arts, where he struggled along as a proverbial starving artist until he met Andy Warhol, who offered him a job at Interview Magazine. His distinctive eye and visual style soon drew the attention and acclaim of critics and of admirers. Some of his works have become iconic in the world of pop. Think of Brook Shields topless with some strategically placed whip cream, or more recently, Michael Jackson as an archangel with wings.

It would be easy (and lucrative) for LaChapelle to continue doing naughty, kitschy celebrity magazine covers - all of which look like they were lit by Florentine Renaissance lighting directors - but his more introspective and spiritual side beckoned.

The current display is divided into two chapters. One section is cut-out mixed-media collages on cardboard and canvas about the spiritual and emotional struggles of this mortal life, highlighted by a huge mural of nude characters on a boat in a rocky sea.

The other part features three computer photo chromogenic print collages of kungfu legend Bruce Lee. These were partially inspired by LaChapelle's first trip to China last year. As a tourist, he visited Beijing, but for inspiration he returned to Hong Kong and its first action hero.

"My feelings for China were very general coming from Western eyes. I can't pretend to have real insight other than my own. I recently started reading about Taoism but my first introduction to China as a child was Bruce Lee. Happily, the two have something in common. He used the Tao to inform his artistry and his life - and he elevated it. He also straddled East and West. He mirrored the future. The world is so global now. Bruce Lee was of China and Hollywood. He embraced artifice and ancient wisdom."

The Bruce Lee triptych features a lot of LaChapelle's trademark flourishes. They're cheeky, somewhat humorous, playing fast and loose with hokey Asian symbols including dragon ladies with long-nails and a long goatee'd Fu Manchu villain.

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"I realize in Hong Kong, Bruce Lee might almost be a kind of Hollywood cliché, but he was my first introduction to Chinese culture. To me it's a personal thing."

Now that he is retreating from commercial work featuring rock stars and celebrities, the linesman hopes to spend more time in the Far East. Prior to Hong Kong, he wrapped an exhibition at the Shanghai Duolun Museum of Modern Art, while retrospectives are planned in Seoul and Busan later this year and in Singapore in 2012.

"In general, the culture in Asia is very exciting. I think people here of all ages are very optimistic. I don't find a lot of cynicism here, especially in China. In New York, there's a kind of seen it all, done it all feeling that I get."

However, focusing on the cultural world doesn't mean LaChapelle doesn't have another eye on his commercial brand. In February, he made entertainment headlines by suing pop star Rihanna, claiming her video for the song S&M ripped off images and ideas from his work.

"Papers are still being drawn up," LaChapelle said about the litigation. "It was like, so many people were talking about it and mentioning (that the video resembled my work) to me, my lawyer said I had to do something. The thing is the director has (been accused of copying) a couple of other times, so it's more about making a stand for originality. It's not even Rihanna's fault. It has nothing to do with her."