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ARTS & LEISURE

David LaChapelle Retrospective opens in Prague

By Joann Plockova



'The Last Supper' (2003, C-print) is part of LaChapelle's 'Jesus is my homeboy' series
© David LaChapelle, Courtesy Fred Torres Collaborations

'Thus Spoke LaChapelle,' now at the Gallery Rudolfinum, highlights three decades of the renowned American photographer's work

At the press conference introducing his current Gallery Rudolfinum exhibition, photographer David LaChapelle said of his images — recognized around the world for their hyper-vibrant color and provocative nature — that he never "sets out to shock."

He certainly turned heads, however, when making his entrance into a packed house with a young man and a tall, dark handsome model, whom he later introduced as Perry, wearing a tight pink mini dress, sunglasses and black stilettos.

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The renowned American photographer's discussion about the exhibition itself, "Thus Spoke LaChapelle," was somewhat more humble. This perhaps reflects his feelings toward the photos on display, which include rarely seen work from his early years, when LaChapelle was showing in galleries, through to his most current work.

After bringing his two-decade career in magazines to a close (during which time he shot the faces and figures of Hollywood's A-list and pop stars like Madonna and Michael Jackson) LaChapelle opted for a quieter life in Hawaii, in what he called "a whole new chapter in my life" — his return to gallery work.

"I've taken the techniques I've learned in 20 years of magazine work and now come full circle and applied it to gallery work," LaChapelle said.

Divided into seven sections "surveying all the seminal phases of his creative career," the exhibition includes his 2006 Pieta with Courtney Love, a shot of Pamela Anderson where a portly woman wearing a pig mask is having her way with the busty Baywatch star; (Pamela Anderson: But I'm A Vegetarian, 2004); and The Deluge (2009), a modern-day apocalypse, inspired by Michelangelo's The Flood, featuring a car, a grocery store cart, a chunk of Caesar's Palace and signs for Burger King, Gucci and Starbucks sinking.



'Amanda Lepore: Addicted to Diamonds' (1997, C-print) © David LaChapelle, Courtesy Fred Torres Collaborations

"The work is addressing the apocalypse," he said of The Deluge. "But it is hopeful, because they are helping each other. It is the best of human nature."



David LaChapelle at the opening of the exhibition © Stanislav Honzik, 2011

This piece is included in the section of the show entitled "Chain of Life," which makes reference to an installation LaChapelle included in an exhibition at the New York gallery Lever House in 2011. As stated on the panel, "the installation at Lever House is in a sense a coming together of the circle, or perhaps an ultimate confirmation of his return to the world of museums and galleries."

Also included in the section, and presented at the Lever House, is The Raft of Illusion Raging Towards Truth. Completed in 2011, this work is an example of LaChapelle's series of three-dimensional sculptural murals and collage work. The Raft, as it is referred to, is a collage of photographs on metallic photo paper incorporating prints on watercolor paper, cardboard, acrylic paint and plastic bags on canvas and origami doves printed on rice paper.

Somewhat of a departure from LaChapelle's typical style are works from his 2006 series "Recollections in America." He used amateur 1970's-era Polaroids bought on eBay — mainly

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documenting family parties and celebrations — into which he inserted his own social commentary, through small details like the inscription Drop Bush Not Bombs on beer cans and an older woman's t-shirt.

In "Stories in Faces" one can catch a glimpse inside the world of celebrity images that LaChapelle chose to leave behind. "[My period of shooting celebrities] was just a moment in time." Including photos of David Bowie, Lil' Kim, Uma Thurman and Bjork, the accompanying panel states:



'The Deluge' depicts modern-day apocalypse inspired by Michelangelo's 'The Flood' © David LaChapelle, Courtesy Fred Torres Collaborations

"It was precisely at this time that LaChapelle's unique visual style took form, full of radiant color, imagination and dream imagery. His view of pop stars was something radically new. Actors, singers and models played together new roles in his photographs, taking on new identities."

Of his photo of the late Michael Jackson, Archangel Michael: And No Message Could Have Been Any Clearer – included in the section "Miracles and Disasters," LaChapelle said, "He represents to me a modern day martyr or saint. The picture speaks for itself. He was someone on top of fame in the US, and then the world turned against him."



Hollywood actress Uma Thurman is one of myriad celebrity images shot by LaChapelle © David LaChapelle, Courtesy Fred Torres Collaborations

LaChapelle's most subdued works are those of his "Early Works," which start the exhibition and began his career in the 1980s when his work was shown in small galleries in New York. A black-and-white image of Andy Warhol, Andy Warhol: The Last Sitting, November 22, 1986 is the first photograph in the room.

It was through Warhol that LaChapelle got his first assignment, leading to his successful career in magazine photography and his rise to fame. After persistently presenting his portfolio to Warhol — with whom LaChapelle had a very strong desire to work — he shot for Warhol's Interview magazine, the top pop-culture magazine at the time.

"For 25 years these images have been in boxes," said LaChapelle. "When I saw the images hanging for the first time yesterday, I was very moved. ... For the first time I'm the including these pictures from when I first started out. There was no production — they were shot in my small apartment — but I was still dealing with the same themes, like my ideas about life after death," he said, adding "Please don't forget

the early images."

At the beginning and the end of the press conference, LaChapelle thanked all those involved in

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putting the exhibition together, expressing appreciation for what he called their sensitive approach and for “really understanding the work.”

In a message to the general public, he said: “All I ask is that you look at the work with an open mind and open heart. Know that some of the pictures here were taken just for humor, escapism, to make someone laugh or smile. ... Some of them have other meanings. Every picture tells a different story. My hope is that some picture here will touch you, strike a cord, some recognition, beauty, escape, or maybe something deeper.”

Thus spoke LaChapelle
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Alšovo nábřeží 12, Prague 1
Through Feb. 26, 2012
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