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David LaChapelle, *The House at the End of the World*, 2005. C-print

First fully representative retrospective of David LaChapelle's work at Galerie Rudolfinum in Prague

PRAGUE.- David LaChapelle (born 1963 in Farmington, Connecticut, USA) has ranked among the world's most eminent photographers since the mid-1990s. His work has exerted an influence on dozens of other artists and over time, LaChapelle has evolved a style entirely his own, one which is recognizable at first glance. In the context of his exhibitions, the present show, entitled *Thus Spoke LaChapelle* and held at [Galerie Rudolfinum](#) in Prague, occupies a unique place. It is the first fully representative retrospective of his work, as it includes also his early works from the mid-1980s. His early photographs are only shown rarely, and the Prague exhibition is the first to present them in the context of the artist's oeuvre thus far. The exhibition presents an extensive selection of LaChapelle's work, surveying all of the seminal phases of his

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creative career. Still, the emphasis is largely on work created in recent years, when LaChapelle all but retired from fashion and advertisement commissions in order to revisit his artistic premises and independent work. The present exhibition includes all major works from this stage of his career, including the monumental pieces *The Deluge* (2006) and *The Raft of Illusion Raging Towards Truth* (2011).

EARLY WORKS

In the mid-1980s LaChapelle's work began to appear in various small New York galleries. His first exhibition in 1984, for the newly-founded 303 Gallery, bore the symptomatic title *Good News for Modern Man* and consisted of a series of black and white photographs. In these works, the human body was already the main focus. In the fall of that year LaChapelle was again featured at 303 Gallery, with *Angels, Saints and Martyrs*. Although these exhibitions did not elicit any sort of broad response from the general public, LaChapelle's name nevertheless gained currency in art circles. His photographs of that period have a peculiar atmosphere, a kind of out-of-time quality; they could just as easily have been created at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, reminiscent as they are of the work of Fred Holland Day, Edward Steichen or František Drtikol.

LaChapelle's black and white photographs are characterised by the ecstatic gestures of the figures, anchored in the Baroque tradition of intense emotionality. In spite of their tangible spirituality, it is far from obvious which religion they are referencing; the photographs combine motifs drawn variously from Christian iconography, Classical notions of harmony and pagan ritual. The figures in the photographs are however above all concrete people with their own personal stories, transformed into more universal gestures and symbols. LaChapelle's early black and white works already evoke a certain painterly quality, as his artistic temperament is characterised by an unremitting effort to discover the evernew possibilities offered by the medium of photography. Works from the 1980s often represent a sort of fusion of photography, collage and graphic art, their contrasting, sharp colours only accentuating their spiritual content. An important feature at the time was also an almost conceptual type of installation in nest-like groups, as well as the *passee-par-tout* in relief metal frames.

STORIES AND FACES

LaChapelle's entrance into the world of advertising derived from his experience of the art and gallery scene. In the early 1990s, the fixed stars in the pantheon of advertisement were photographers such as Mario Testino, Peter Lindberg, Annie Leibovitz and Steven Meisel; a special position belonged to figures like Richard Avedon and Helmut Newton, artists of extraordinary significance to David LaChapelle. In fact, both Avedon and Newton soon recognized LaChapelle's talent and the originality of his contribution. Avedon was one of the first to note LaChapelle's links to Surrealism, comparing his work to that of the painter René Magritte. Within a relatively short time, LaChapelle evolved into one of the most respected representatives of advertising and commercial photography. Over time, the most influential brands became his clients (Rémy Martin, Perrier-Jouët, Maybach, L'Oréal, Nokia), and the most prestigious fashion and lifestyle magazines (Flaunt, Vogue, GQ, Rolling Stone, The Face, Vanity Fair, Detour) vied for who could have more covers and photo-editorials by LaChapelle. There soon appeared hosts of imitators. He not only documented the world of fashion, but little by little he came to exert a fundamental influence on it. He stylized his models in compositions never before seen, materializing both their own and his dreams and secret fantasies. It is usually said that it was LaChapelle who brought elements of Surrealism into advertisement and fashion photography. Terms such as Surrealism, or surreal, are actually rather frequent in regard to his photographs.

Unfortunately in many cases this is due to a certain reluctance on the part of reviewers to contemplate each individual work more deeply, or within a broader context. Links at least as strong as those to Surrealism can be found to other periods or styles across the history of art. The harmony of Renaissance-era contrapposto is clearly visible in a number of LaChapelle's photographs, as are dynamic gestures evocative of the Baroque. However, it was precisely at this time that LaChapelle's unique visual style took form, full of radiant colour, imagination and dream imagery. His view of pop stars was something radically new. Actors, singers and

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models played altogether new roles in his photographs, taking on new identities. In years to come, the famous and the admired queued in droves in front of his lens, desirous of subjecting themselves to whatever adventure LaChapelle had in store for them. The spectrum of his sitters was indeed a broad one, spanning as it did denizens of the alternative cultural scene as well as heavily marketed celebrities from tabloid covers.

CHAIN OF LIFE

In the early summer of 2011 David LaChapelle opened the exhibition From Darkness to Light, held in the New York gallery Lever House. Alongside The Raft he also presented the installations Adam and Eve (Swimming Under A Microscope " Plague Of An Ancient City") and Chain of Life. In these installations LaChapelle returns to his early work, alluding to his images of the early 1990s. In 1991, the exhibition Facility of Movement at the Tomoko Liguori featured the first variant of Chain of Life and 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.

In 2007 he created the first pictures which would be based on in the monumental 2006 photograph entitled The Deluge. At that time, LaChapelle created the loose cycle Museum. The chaos of the contemporary world likewise forms the central theme of the monumental photograph entitled The Raft, completed in 2011. Here, too, LaChapelle finds inspiration in the history of art, drawing as he does on the primary work of French painter Théodore Géricault, The Raft of the Medusa (1819). In 2007, LaChapelle created the extensive cycle Awakened, again reflecting the subject of the deluge, this time in a more intimate manner. The photographs portray human figures in water suffused in light. The figures, mostly clad in contemporary attire, have an ambivalent character, and the message of the whole cycle is not without ambiguity. The viewer may read them as the perishing victims of some tragic disaster, as well as newly-born creatures. The photographs encompass both inception and doom, birth as well as death, light alongside darkness. Instead of famous faces, LaChapelle here works with anonymous figures, which lends the cycle a broader, more universal validity, addressing the fundamental questions of life and dying.

MIRACLES AND DISASTERS

In the middle of the first decade of the new millennium, LaChapelle gradually arrived at a turning point, a decision to reduce his work for advertising and to return to the premises of his career as an artist; namely, to independent work. Already in 2003 he produced Jesus is My Homeboy, a series of six photographs depicting scenes from the life of Jesus Christ, but this time reconfigured in the anonymous setting of a contemporary metropolis. The photographs were however not met with much enthusiasm on the part of the editors of the style magazine i-D, who had commissioned the cycle. Contrary to their expectations, the nexus of the signature LaChapelle style with classical religious themes was altogether too atypical for this medium. Christ is portrayed here in keeping with traditional iconography but is confronted with the bleak reality of the streets, in the midst of prostitutes, junkies and homeless people. Religion became one of the points of departure for the slow change in the evolution of LaChapelle's oeuvre. Several times he addressed the motif of the Pieta, a powerfully emotional symbol of loss, a symbol which has become ever more relevant in terms of contemporary global culture. The Courtney Love: Pietà from the diptych Heaven to Hell dates to 2006. Courtney Love has frequently modelled for LaChapelle's photographs, and in the context of their collaboration, this work is among the most compelling. The gravitation towards religious themes also brought a tendency towards the history of art as a source of inspiration, something which LaChapelle had previously drawn on in his early work during the 1980s.

In referring to his newer works, terms such as "Renaissance" or "The Enlightenment" attain an evergreater frequency in LaChapelle's vocabulary. In a time which is spellbound by its own crisis, such a view has a certain foundation, a kind of compelling pathos of entreaty. The faith that a work of art can influence the atmosphere of society, that the world could become a better place, and that beauty continues to have an ethical value, is rather rare today, so much so it can often appear somewhat misguided. This is perhaps also due to the fact that views of what is meant by the term "beauty" are so hugely diverse. There essentially

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exists no universally received ideal of beauty, the consensus of tradition having been replaced by the apparent chaos of plurality.

RECOLLECTIONS IN AMERICA

Alongside photographs of stars and celebrities, for whom it soon became a matter of prestige to be photographed by LaChapelle, the artist also pursued social projects in which one will not find any well-known or famous figures. The protagonists of his cycles *Hotel Issue* (2000) and *Chelsea Village Project* (2001) are people living their lonely and banal lives in obscurity, at the margins of society. An altogether special position in this context is represented by the 2006 cycle *Recollections in America*.

LaChapelle here used found pictures – amateur 1970s Polaroids, mostly snapshots documenting family parties and celebrations, bought on eBay. He nonetheless intervenes in the existing compositions with a number of details, which the viewer might overlook at first glance. 2006 was the second year of the second term of the Bush administration, and the political, social and cultural decisions made under President Bush were systematically criticised by intellectual and artistic circles. References to this predicament run throughout the cycle, epitomized by inscriptions such as *Bush Kills. Drop Bush not Bombs* featuring on the T-shirt of one of the elderly ladies and on cans of beer; in these scenes LaChapelle also inserts a symbolism relating to militant patriotism (flags, arms, pictures of tanks or explosions on the walls).

DECADENCE LAUGHS IN FLOWERS

Decadence: The Insufficiency of All Things Attainable, represents a kind of altar to contemporary consumerist society. The upper part is framed by a pair of deluxe limos, while the foreground features a series of female and male nudes in Classical poses, another reference to Renaissance painting. Again, the image includes dozens of details relating not only to issues of hyper-consumption, but also to religion (the automobile wheels adorned with Christian crosses, a group of women reminiscent of the subject of the *Descent from the Cross*), history (an open book with reproductions of Michelangelo's images of the *Deluge* and *Noah's Ark* from the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel) and contemporary art (Damien Hirst's notorious sculpture of a diamond-encrusted skull, *For Love of God*). What is peculiar in this work is that it was created at the same time that the first symptoms of the impending world financial crisis appeared.

Once again, LaChapelle seems to be predicting the near future in his work. His images suddenly gain in relevance, transfiguring generic symbolism into direct references to contemporary reality. LaChapelle's last extensive cycle to date is *Earth Laughs in Flowers*, a series of photographs created in the years 2008-2011. Floral still life images once more provide a reference to an inspiration from the history of art, in this instance the 17th century Dutch masters. The title of the cycle is a quote from Ralph Waldo Emerson's poem *Hamatreya*. Various objects are inserted in the painterly composition of the still life images, symbolizing and simultaneously updating the Baroque topos of the *vanitas*. These represent mementoes of the transitory nature of things in the ceaseless cycle of nature. Paradoxically, the flowers which will inevitably wither and turn into dust are far more viable symbols than the seemingly eternal trappings of the contemporary consumerist world.