

Article posted November 22, 2011

THE KOREA TIMES

First in the Nation

David LaChapelle: photographer of surreal ingenuity

By Noh Hyun-gi



“Archangel Michael and No Message Could Have Been Clearer” (2009)

For a world famed artist, LaChapelle follows a rather simple and humble work philosophy. He finds that unconsciously — being in the right place at the right moment, inspiration just comes. “I feel like I’m wearing a conductor’s uniform but not actually driving the train,” he explained, “sometimes I don’t know where (the pictures) come from; I look at them and I get scared.” He stressed that his works are results of a collaboration effort; much like a jam session where everyone intuitively strives to hit the right harmony.

Provocative, surreal yet stunningly artistic; that’s how the works of David LaChapelle, 48, a renowned photographer are esteemed. But LaChapelle was surprisingly humble and soft-spoken, who openly shared his life story including his withdrawal from the world and his unadorned take on art.

He is in Korea for his retrospective exhibition, “David LaChapelle,” which will be held at the Hanman Design Museum at Seoul Art Center (SAC), southern Seoul, through Feb. 26, 2012.

This show is the artist’s second exhibition in Asia after one last year in Taipei, Taiwan. The exhibit hosts some 160 pieces spanning the artist’s 25-year career starting in 1985. Viewers will be able to see his earlier works commissioned for fashion and celebrity editorials, as well as his “The Raft of Illusion” the site-specific installation “Chain of Life” and his most recent work “Gaia.”

To call his work provocative is almost a cliché now, but the artist never sets out to shock or upset people. He called it a hollow motivation that produces shallow art. In the world where we see too

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much sadness and anxiety around us, LaChapelle's goal is to create pictures that evoke completely opposite sentiments being true to himself.

A high-school dropout from Connecticut, LaChapelle's career took off under the mentorship of the late pop-art icon Andy Warhol in New York. He took countless portraits of celebrities and spread his unique and bold style.

But the pressure and hysteria surrounding celebrities eventually drove him over the edge. He described the world as a cruel place where people take someone to the top and take perverse pleasure in urging and watching that person fall. From his facial expressions when he recalled the suicides of his close friends, Alexander McQueen, a fashion designer, and Isabella Blow, a magazine editor, it was clear that LaChapelle's heart was closed on the issue.

So he packed his things and moved to Maui, Hawaii, in 2006 and created a sustainable farm. Surrounded by nature, LaChapelle finally had time to question his role in the art world and be free of the subconscious fear of becoming homeless after dropping out of high school that led him to become a workaholic.

Then he got a call asking him if he wanted to show at galleries, which opened a new chapter in his career. Ever since, he has showcased his works in such places including Musee de la Monnaie de Paris in France and Palazzo Reale in Milan, Italy.

He uses the concepts and techniques that he learned working for fashion magazines.



Alexander McQueen & Isabella Blow – "Burning Down the House" (1996)

"I love glamour, I love beauty, and I love flesh," he said. Though his work is often described as overtly sexualized, he in fact condemns the rampant commodification of the physical body in our society. Quoting Michelangelo who called the human body proof that God exists, he emphasized his fascination and appreciation of the human form. "It is okay to enjoy your body and your youth. It's not narcissistic or vain. It's only narcissistic and vain when you think you are better than other people because you are more beautiful," he urged. "It's OK to enjoy your beauty, your youth and your vigor, because you know it's not going to last."

Though often described as an artist who straddles both worlds of pop art and fine art, he does not think much about the binary. If he had to define pop art, he would reference "vox populi," or the "voice of the people."

"I want to reach everybody," he stressed. He strives to produce art that is accessible like the works of Keith Haring and Diego Rivera.

After many ups and downs in his career, he learned a lot about an artist's life while witnessing

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Warhol's career. "I learned to keep my feet on the ground and not care about what people think because they change," LaChapelle said.

The hearty artist calls his mother the biggest inspiration in his life and recalled how his grandmother used to sign off letters with "Be brave," which supported him during tough times.

Feeling lucky to be in a city whose name sounds like soul, the artist said he feels honored and excited to share his work with the Korean audience. "Art transcends," he said. He also praised the fluidity he experienced working with the SAC.

"I hope the works speak to you. Hopefully, (you will) hear them sing," he said.