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## David LaChapelle: Life During Wartime

Article by Shana Nys Dambrot

A typical month in the life of legendary photographer David LaChapelle is a lot like the one that started the morning after this visit -- involving a flight to say, Prague or Istanbul, thence to Hong Kong or Guadalajara, with a stop in Paris or Miami en route home to LA, along the way opening one or more hugely anticipated new exhibitions, and/or shooting a gorgeous and expensive fashion story, and/or accepting invitations to the most fabulous parties you can think of.

But throughout it all, he never, ever stops working, not for one single second. Lately his obsessive creativity and an expanded production team (aka "the sexiest sweatshop on Earth") has been focused on the June-August show at New York's Lever House. Commissioned by this powerhouse east coast gallery, but made in Los Angeles, this exhibition weaves together several disparate threads of DLC's personal artistic practice, including brand new, site-specific elements and components of larger multi-part projects, and is anchored by "From Darkness to Light," the culmination of a profound group-portrait project that started 20 years and several lifetimes ago, and has been gathering meaning ever since.

The Lever House's glass-fronted, shiny-chrome modernist facade opens onto the street. Through the window, passersby see "The Raft," an imposing mural-size photo-object, partially obscured by an enormous origami dove suspended in between it and the window. "The Raft" is the middle of an ambitious trilogy that started with "The Deluge" and will end with "Paradise."

It is an edgy, heavily dimensional collage -- messy, visceral, and likely upsetting to fans of DLC's trademark high-fashion gloss and cheeky glamour. References to Gericault's 19th-century masterpiece "Raft of the Medusa," with its art historical and politically charged commentary, are unavoidable but mostly coincidental. As its distressed surface and epically allegorical tumult express, this work is about the darkest, lowest point in any important journey, when the outcome is hoped-for, but still unclear.

Once you enter the gallery and come around the side of the plain wood wall that supports "The Raft," the full space comes into view, revealing the ebbs and flows of a paper chain 25,000-plus links long, unfurled and coiled, festooned and pooled in corners, anchored to the back of "The Raft" and undulating across the room. "From Darkness to Light" is a human chain whose title contains its meaning and description -- as

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thousands upon thousands of unique, hand-assembled nude photos progress through flesh tones of earth, rust, and gold, gradually fading to cream, ice, and water.

It's the extension of a show he did in a tiny NYC space in 1991 called "Facility of Movement" which had to do with losing friends and losing innocence, about people who become angels, and whether there was solace or hope to be found anywhere in the AIDS crisis. In its new incarnation, the work is transformed, and has become fully realized as something new; something more about the intervening 20 years and the journey that took the artist to LA, where he has called home for some time now, and the life he's been leading since coming here. It's about what has shaped and defined his increasingly socially engaged, historically sophisticated, emotionally honest, and politically activist mature work -- it's the work he has been destined to make since the beginning.