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# HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

## I Fell Asleep in Front of David LaChapelle

by Jocelyn Silver

David LaChapelle has returned to his career. Much like the similarly-named Dave Chapelle, LaChapelle retreated to a farm after his documentary *Rize* flopped. But evidently nature wasn't quite thrilling enough for him, and so he's back in New York, with a retrospective at the [Michelman Gallery](#) and a show of new work at [Lever House](#). I attended LaChapelle's talk on his new exhibition at the Michelman Gallery, a retrospective of early works from the 1980s.

LaChapelle spoke thoughtfully, choosing his words slowly and with great care for how each phrase would be perceived (a good choice, given the reaction to his recent [New York Times](#) profile). He was gracious, soft-spoken and polite. The gallery's tiny audience hung on to his every word. I did not. I fell asleep.

I fell asleep at an intimate talk given by one of the wealthiest and most famous photographers working today. He laughed, the audience laughed, my friends laughed and I felt like an asshole.

Mr. LaChapelle, if you ever see this, I apologize from the bottom of my heart. The room was warm, I was starting to get the flu, and my senior year of high school I won "Most Likely to Fall Asleep in Class" by forty votes. It was probably inevitable that I commit such a faux-pas at a gallery on the Upper East Side.

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Despite my somnolence, LaChapelle was wholly engaging, offering up keen insights into the New York scene in the 1980s, and what it was, and is, like to vacillate between commercial art and high art, shooting for magazines then showing in galleries. Think what you will of his work, his personal life, his slightly-too-obvious plastic surgery: LaChapelle presented himself as a warm and intelligent man with interesting recollections of the art world.

The key moments in LaChapelle's lecture (or at least the ones I was awake for) involved his observations on New York in the 1980s, and the judgment of art critics, especially in terms of the giant, Tijuana-like border between commercial and fine artists. "This feels like coming home again," said LaChapelle, his speech punctuated with soft "um's" and "ya knows." "After I started working for Interview and doing magazine shoots, I never thought I would show in a gallery again."

As someone who moved to New York at a time when things are more than a bit sanitized, I was interested in LaChapelle's stories of the East Village in the 1980s. He namedropped [Andy Warhol](#), [Jean-Michel Basquiat](#) and [Keith Haring](#). His comments on the heavy criticism Basquiat and Warhol received towards the end of their careers could be viewed as a parallel for how LaChapelle himself wishes to be viewed.

"When those [collaborative paintings](#) between Basquiat and Warhol came out, the critics were just vicious ... they said they hated them ... yet after they both died people said the work was genius," he suggested. The photographer also commented on the intense amount of criticism Basquiat received towards the end of his life, implying that it contributed to his early death. "For a sensitive guy like that, to go from being the toast of the art world at age 20 to being told 'you're done' at 25 ... that must have hurt so much."

LaChapelle used Haring as an obvious example of the boundaries between commercial and fine art. Haring opened his [Pop Shop](#), where he sold things like t-shirts and buttons with his drawings on them, and was roundly criticized for "selling out." LaChapelle pointed out how unfair that was, saying, "It's not like Keith was even making money with this stuff ... and he was able to bring art to

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kids, skater kids, who wouldn't normally be interested in it or have access to it.”

LaChapelle discussed Basquiat, Warhol and Haring for a great deal of the talk, and if he was teaching an entry-level art history class, that would have been perfect. But the moderator of the lecture kept suggesting that the criticism those artists received could be applied to LaChapelle himself. While he didn't say he agreed, he didn't deny it either. Not only is comparing oneself to three of the greatest artists of the 20th century an egotistical move for anyone, but LaChapelle is an entirely different category of profession.

Haring and Warhol bridged gaps between commercial and fine art, taking commercial philosophies to a conceptual place, whereas LaChapelle did advertisements and magazine shoots for millions of dollars. Showing in a gallery may have been something he wanted to do since childhood, but this is the first time in 20 years that he has made any attempt to do so. There's nothing wrong with being a commercial photographer, but it is wrong to suggest that his ads for [Maybach](#) or shots of [Lady Gaga](#) might some day be viewed in the same way as Warhol and Basquiat's collaborative paintings.

The work itself that was shown on the walls of Michelman is from LaChapelle's first two exhibitions in New York, before he started working at Interview and transitioned into a wholly commercial career (until now). The images reflect his oft-criticized house style: they are loud and garish, with colors bright enough to induce a migraine. [Rihanna](#) videos notwithstanding, I haven't always been a fan of LaChapelle's work. But I enjoyed these images far more than his digital photography. The colors and themes are similar, but film softens him, taking away the some of the tastelessness that so often permeates LaChapelle's work. One particularly touching series, entitled Angels, Saints and Martyrs, deals with the AIDS crisis. LaChapelle represents the afterlife through naked bodies surrounded by beautiful light. It's kind of an obvious tactic, but it remains moving nonetheless. And as an amateur photographer myself, I could appreciate LaChapelle's use of complex darkroom techniques.

I enjoyed hearing David LaChapelle speak. Hearing about the East Village of the 1980s was great.

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But it doesn't matter if he is a commercial or a fine artist, whether he gets paid a million dollars per shoot or works out of a cardboard box, because his work is garish and a great deal of it doesn't appeal to me. I did enjoy this particular show and hearing about the prolific artists of the eighties from someone who actually knew them was fascinating. But I do wish that his insights had gone deeper than something any undergraduate could have come up with. The questions of the differences between commercial and fine art that he explored were nothing new. I appreciate that he didn't mock me for sleeping. But in the end, my favorite thing David LaChapelle has ever done will always remain this classy, understated piece of filmmaking:

[Christina Aguilera featuring Redman - Dirty](#)

Now that's fine art.

David LaChapelle spoke at Michelman Gallery at 23 E 74th St. on June 6. His exhibition [David LaChapelle: Early Work](#), ended on June 15 and is now available to view by appointment. His exhibition of new works is on display at the [Lever House](#) at 390 Park Avenue until September 2.