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**TheObserver**

**INTERVIEW**

# The man with the golden eye

For years David LaChapelle was the go-to photographer for the world's biggest stars. But in 2006 he ditched fashion for fine art. As an exhibition of his work opens in London, he talks to **Elizabeth Day** about death, divas and decadence

**D**avid LaChapelle is running late. Though the term "running" doesn't quite describe it. "He's sleeping," says one of LaChapelle's assistants, peering at me languidly through those ironic-retro spectacles that seem to be de rigueur for arty types. "People are working on it." Working on what, I wonder? Getting him out of his pyjamas?

The assistant explains that LaChapelle flew in from his home on the Hawaiian island of Maui yesterday and is still jet-lagged. This is why we've had to change the interview location at the last minute and congregate in the lobby of a chintzy five-star hotel just off Sloane Square in London. Besides, he's not that used to dealing with the press these days. LaChapelle, 48, announced his retirement from the fashion business six years ago to concentrate on art photography and has been fairly reclusive ever since. His fine art exhibits have included *Deluge* (a set of meditations on civilisation's tendency towards destruction), *The Rape of Africa* (Naomi Campbell as a bare-breasted post-Botticelli Venus) and the extraordinary Museum series (images of flooded art museums and semi-religious iconography). Today he is in town for the opening of an exhibition of his work.

It turns out I only have to wait half an hour before LaChapelle arrives with a flurry of apologies. "I'm so sorry," he says, shaking my hand. He is wearing a lumberjack shirt, the bottom half of which is printed with an image of three men in a boat. On his head, a small green hat perches on thick, brown curly hair. Around his neck hangs a silver necklace with a metallic pendant of Michael Jackson. He speaks in a soft voice at odds with his muscular frame and tanned, beefy arms.

He hates not being punctual. "I'm really not like that," he insists. "I'm not a diva." And he should know, given



**No diva:** David LaChapelle. Suki Dhandra

the number of divas he's had to deal with. During his time as a fashion and magazine photographer – one of the most pre-eminent of the past 20 years – he worked with them all, producing hundreds of theatrically executed, semi-surrealist images that have graced the pages of the world's most stylish magazines. Whereas contemporaries such as Annie Leibovitz sought to make their subjects beautiful, LaChapelle was all about concept.

He photographed the late rapper Tupac Shakur as a slave in a cotton field. Britney Spears was trussed up as a modern-day Lolita for the cover of *Rolling Stone*. Michael Jackson was given a pair of giant angel wings and pictured standing on a writhing red devil. The hip-hop star Kanye West was portrayed as Christ in a crown of thorns. "I was trying to rescue the idea of Christ from the fundamentalists," LaChapelle says now, as if this is the most natural thing in the world for a fashion photographer to want to do. He's done Hillary Clinton, Paris Hilton, Lady Gaga, Madonna, Pamela Anderson, David Beckham... He's been dubbed "the Fellini of photography". He once had to wait six hours to photograph Whitney Houston for the cover of her 2000 *The Greatest Hits* album.

"I was very used to people being late," he says, drinking a cup of black coffee. "It never bothered me. You know they're the star. [Houston] turned up at 6pm and we stayed until 9am. I knew she was on coke. I had to adjust the way I shot her because she couldn't keep her face still. She was really distracted but I knew that if I shot enough film... I kept shooting and shooting and finally we got that one shot of her."

Houston died in a hotel bathtub two days before we meet, so it is perhaps natural that the singer should be uppermost in LaChapelle's mind, even more so given that the exhibition he is here to promote explores questions of mortality. *Earth Laughs in Flowers*, which takes its title from a Ralph Waldo Emerson poem, consists of 10 lushly produced floral still-life photographs. At first glance, the images look like old master paintings. On closer examination, the flowers are surrounded by contemporary objects: burning cigarettes, plastic Barbies, an old mobile phone...

Striking as these images are, LaChapelle does not talk much about them. Instead, he contemplates the grisly fact that so many of his subjects have come to tragic ends – Michael Jackson, Amy Winehouse (for whom he directed a music video), Alexander McQueen, and his muse, the stylist Isabella Blow. LaChapelle counted McQueen and Blow as close friends, and they took their own lives within three years of each other. *Burning Down the House*, LaChapelle's fantastical portrait of the two of them, taken in 1996 when McQueen was 27, now hangs in the National Portrait Gallery in London.

LaChapelle says that watching McQueen and Blow at work in an increasingly commercialised environment brought home to him "the pressure that artists who were working within that business world were under."

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### ▲ Burning Down the House

I took the title from a Talking Heads song but this was Alexander McQueen and Isabella Blow burning down the house of couture. Both were on the verge

of what Tennessee Williams called the catastrophe of success. But it was a fun day. Alexander was really happy at that moment. He never liked this picture because he liked to come across as a brooding goth kind of guy, but he was this really jolly happy lad whenever I met him.

People think so much of my work is purely digital, but the flames were coming out of the building and the horse was rearing.'

### ▲ Deathless Winter

The title of my new show, *Earth Laughs in Flowers*, is borrowed from an Emerson poem. The gist of the poem is that man thinks he owns the Earth, but then he dies and he's buried and the Earth laughs back at him in flowers. When we're in this world of information, it's important to stay connected with nature in some regard, because, like the flower, we will wilt and age and decay and eventually die. It makes you look at life in a more precious way if you can accept that transience and find joy in the different stages or chapters of one's life.'



### ▶ Archangel Michael

'This is shot in Maui. The Archangel is always depicted killing the Devil. I know Michael was innocent. People attacked him because he looked different; he was an easy target, a vulnerable person. I believe it was a televised witch hunt to bring him down; this was the true Michael.'

### ◀ Lady Gaga Bubbles

'In 2006, I quit photography and went to Maui to become a farmer. I said, I don't want to meet another pop star as long as I live, but through a friend I did eventually wind up at a Lady Gaga gig. We became friends and she came out to Maui for a few weeks. I fell in love with her. She asked me to shoot her for the cover of *Rolling Stone* and it's the only editorial job I've done since 2006. She had this bubble dress she'd wear on stage and I just made sets around that. It was really just fun. There wasn't a heavy conceptual idea around it — it's pure visual escapism.'



### ▼ Deluge

'This was my return to working in galleries. It's a large-scale mural based on a panel from the Sistine Chapel depicting the flood of Noah from the Old Testament. I wanted to make the flood of the future, the apocalyptic fear that conscious people feel when they're informed about what's going on. I wanted to exorcise this fear. Even though all the people in this image know the end is near, they're helping each other escape the flood waters.'



# 'Warhol was funny. He reminded me of my mother'

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Issy was truly an artist. I tried to get her to come to Maui the year before she ended her life. She started talking about suicide a lot more than she had previously. She was going to come, and I wish she had."

Two years shy of 50, and LaChapelle already feels like a survivor. He lived through the Aids epidemic in New York in the 1980s – for years he was too terrified to get tested after a former boyfriend, Louis, died of the disease. The letters L-U-I-S are tattooed in faded green-black ink across the fingers of his right hand. "That's a different Luis," LaChapelle says when I ask. "He was my manager, he worked with me for 17 years and died in the studio of congenital heart failure in 1999." How old was he? "Thirty-four," he replies, unblinking.

He goes on to tell me that his mother, Helga, a Lithuanian refugee who came to Ellis Island in the early 1960s, is currently undergoing chemotherapy for polycythemia – a cancer of the blood. He lost his father 10 years ago to melanoma, but says: "I thought my mum would live for ever because of the way she took care of herself. She was a vegetarian, she exercised and, God, she was a worker! She worked in a factory, a restaurant, a nursing home. She had no help raising three kids, she cooked food, she sewed her own clothes."

LaChapelle was always close to his parents. The family moved from Connecticut to the conservative town of Raleigh, North Carolina when David was nine, and at 15 he left school after being bullied about his sexuality. The family moved back to Connecticut when he was a teenager, and "I used to go to school dressed as a cowboy". The other boys threw milk cartons at him. At one point, it got so bad that he considered suicide: "I'd got hold of tranquillisers and liquor and I was going to cut my wrists." The only thing that stopped him was the knowledge that "if I killed myself, I was going to end my parents' lives".

Instead, LaChapelle ran away to New York and blagged his way in to Studio 54, where cowboy costumes were all the rage. After training at the North Carolina School of Arts, he got

his first job on Andy Warhol's *Interview* magazine. What was Warhol like?

"Very funny. He reminded me of my mother." In the evenings, he would hang out with Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat. A sojourn in London in the early 80s brought him into the orbit of Leigh Bowery and the ballet dancer Michael Clark and left him with an abiding love of all things British – he is obsessed with Adele and later does an unexpectedly hilarious rendition of a *Catherine Tate Show* sketch. "Am I bovvered?" he says in a terrible cockney accent. "Do I look bovvered?"

From *Interview*, he went on to get a job for *Details* magazine. "I've been making a living [through photography] since I was 18." Recently, he came across a list he'd written as a teenager of all the people he most wanted to photograph. "I think I've photographed everyone on that list." The one person he was most nervous about shooting was Muhammad Ali. "He was really a hero to me." When Ali came on set in 2003, "he was so kind to everyone, making everyone laugh. He stayed and signed every single person's picture. What a gentleman." Athletes, he says, aren't easy to photograph. Most of them don't get "it", whatever "it" might be. "Apart from David Beckham. David Beckham was great."

But success hasn't been easy. LaChapelle admits he has "workaholic" tendencies, partly because he suffers from bipolar disorder and is therefore prone to bouts of manic energy and sleeplessness. "I definitely think it has informed who I am. In a sense, I wouldn't trade it." He was sectioned for a brief period some years ago but currently the condition is under control: "Exercise is my magic bullet... and I have to be on meds sometimes. I've got a great doctor, finally." Travel poses a particular problem. "It's difficult [because] manic episodes can be triggered by sleeplessness." Suddenly it becomes clear why LaChapelle was late to the interview and why, when he speaks, he can sound lethargic even though his thoughts are so fast-paced and vivid.

At several points in our conversation he veers off into circuitous semi-philosophical discussions that prove almost impossible to interrupt. "I'm getting there," he says with an impish smile halfway through one 10-minute monologue. "I'm coming back to what you asked me." When I look at my notes later, they read like a series of esoteric bullet points: Taoism, religion, Jesus, death, birth, Adam and Eve, cell division...

His deep thoughts are perhaps surprising given that LaChapelle's photography has in the past been dismissed by critics as superficial and materialistic. Did that annoy him?

"It did at the time, a little bit – and sometimes more than a little bit – but now, looking back, it's changing, and people are seeing things in the work today that they once weren't. With a little distance you can see that [the photographs] were about the choices America was making at the time. It wasn't condemning, it was done with humour and beauty."

In works such as *Death by Hamburger* (2001) or *I Buy a Big Car for Shopping* (2002), LaChapelle would do this quite literally: showing a woman flattened by an oversized piece of fast food, or a car crushed by a giant Coca-Cola can. They are not subtle pictures. And part of the criticism is based around the idea that popularity demeans artistic credibility.

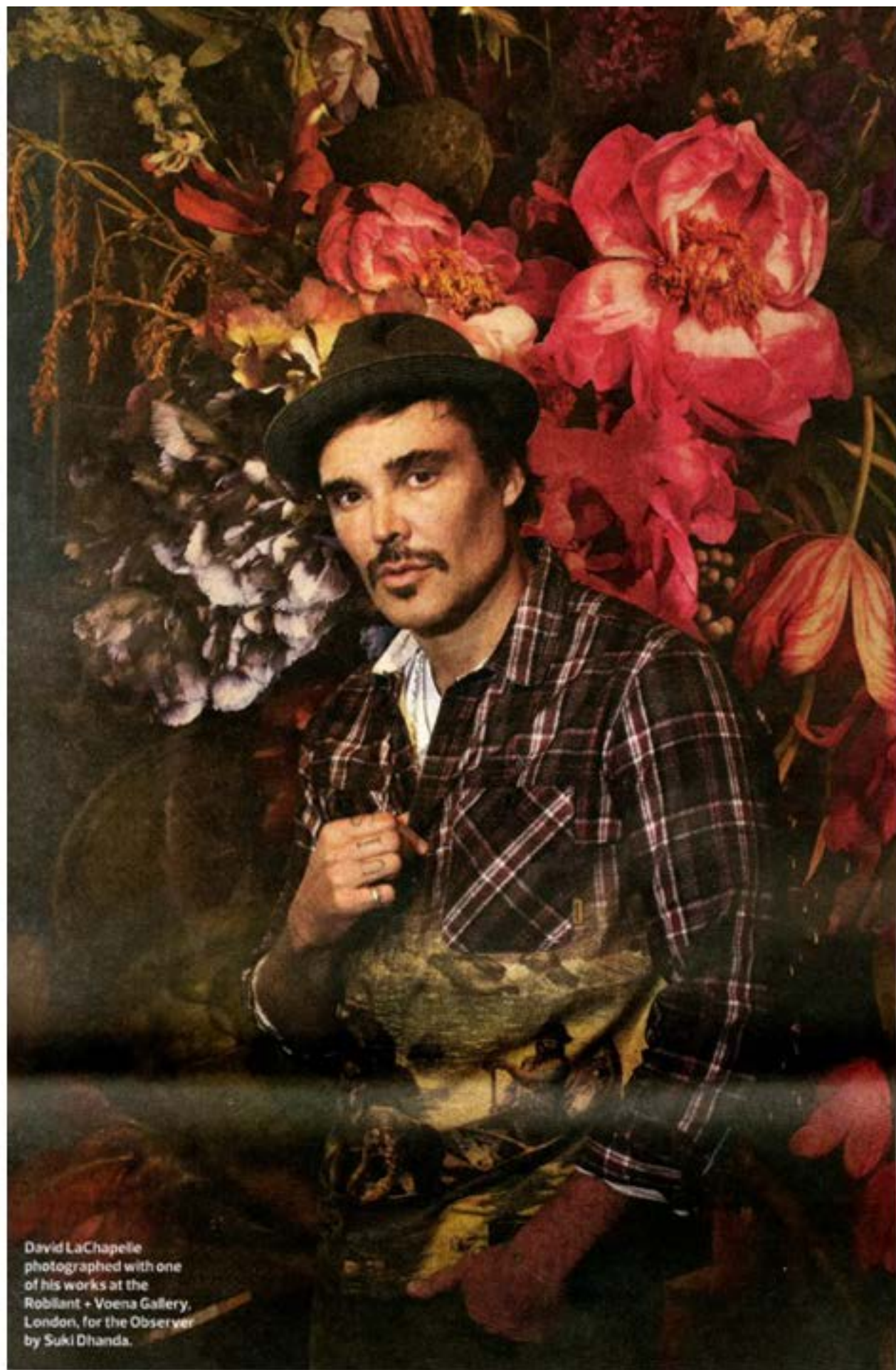
From LaChapelle's perspective, he wanted "to convey what was, in my mind, a paradox about consumption, that sort of decadence, selling the idea that happiness was going to come with the next acquisition, the next hard-to-get handbag for some insane price. I was questioning those values that were distracting from what was going on."

For years LaChapelle was in high demand. He directed music videos for Elton John, Jennifer Lopez and Christina Aguilera among others, before branching out into feature films. His 2005 documentary, *Rize*, about a dance craze called "krumping" that grew out of the roughest areas of Los Angeles, premiered at Sundance.

But it was becoming increasingly difficult to reconcile his artistic desires with commercial reality. "It was really getting hard to get published. My concepts were too much for magazines." He did a shoot for Italian *Vogue* in June 2005, featuring models posing against a post-apocalyptic backdrop of dilapidated houses and sandbags. He had been thinking, he says, about the environment and global warming, and it seemed a natural progression, but by the time the magazine was printed in August, hurricane Katrina had struck.

"The editor rang me up and said, 'David, why have you done this? Please, it's too much. Just show the dress! People think the photos are about the hurricane.' She'd had letters and calls complaining about how we were exploiting Katrina, but I'd shot them two months before. I knew then that it was the last editorial I'd shoot."

Why? He looks out of the window. "I love fashion, beauty, glamour. It's the mark of civilisation," he says, after a pause. "We use fashion for status and to beautify and there's nothing wrong with that, but when it becomes completely unbalanced, then you're living a decadent life. And when that happens on a global scale, you're



David LaChapelle  
photographed with one  
of his works at the  
Robilant + Voena Gallery,  
London, for the Observer  
by Suki Dhanda.

living in a decadent world. This mass obsession with owning things... I'm questioning those values." Later, he adds: "There were signs that I'd said all I had to say."

The people close to him, too, were concerned. An assistant noticed that LaChapelle had not had a single day off in 11 months. He took stock, slowed down and bought a former nudist colony in Maui, Hawaii, while on location for a Motorola shoot. The idea of being in the middle of nature appealed to him. "It's a very isolated part of Maui, way out in the middle of nowhere." For a while, he went "cold turkey. I took no calls. There is a tiny town nearby with one gas station and a general store where you can get phone reception. From there I'd call my mum and Fred."

Fred is one of LaChapelle's many long-term collaborators and appears solicitously at various points during the interview to pour water and gently remind him that there are

## 'My bipolar disorder has definitely informed who I am. It can be difficult but, in a sense, I wouldn't trade it'

appointments he needs to attend. Each time Fred does this, LaChapelle insists he just wants to finish answering this one question. "Fred's been with me since he left high school," he says. "I like the consistency of having people in my life for a long time." It was Fred who eventually coaxed LaChapelle out of his self-imposed exile and persuaded him to start showing his work in galleries.

Despite Fred's entreaties, we carry on talking in the car on the way to LaChapelle's lunch meeting, and he tells me all about Christina Aguilera's five-day wedding in Napa Valley and how Auto-Tune signals the death of real music. But what about the use of digital manipulation in his own work – isn't that the same kind of thing?

"No, when I shoot, the image has to be there first. And photographs have always been manipulated – [Richard] Avedon retouched all his American west portraits. I could take a photo of you now and crop it to make it look a certain way. But, with me, the image has to come first. If you look at some of the film on my website..."

He's off again. By the time we get to the restaurant, Fred is looking anxiously at his watch. LaChapelle keeps talking. "Hey, do you want to come for lunch?" I can't, I say, there's

another interview I have to do. "Just call them and say you'll be late," he says, smiling like a small boy. I make my apologies and he insists I at least take his mobile number so that I can let him know what I think of the exhibition.

He walks towards the restaurant table where a group of people in black clothes await him, seated around a starched linen tablecloth. I watch him go in his hat and his lumberjack shirt and I think he seems oddly detached from it all: a genuine man caught up in a superficial world.

*David LaChapelle: Earth Laughs in Flowers is at Robilant + Voena Gallery, London W1, until 24 March, and also in Milan and St Moritz. For more details see [robilantvoena.com](http://robilantvoena.com)*

### More online



David LaChapelle talks about his work in an audio slideshow at: [observer.co.uk/new-review](http://observer.co.uk/new-review)

## A MAN OF FASHION

### LaChapelle's life in brief

**Born** 11 March 1963 in Fairfield, Connecticut. The family moved to North Carolina when LaChapelle was nine and back to Connecticut when he was 14.

**Education** Bullied at high school, LaChapelle moved to New York aged 15 and worked as a busboy at Studio 54. He completed high school at the North Carolina School of the Arts and returned to New York to study at the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan.

**Career** At 18, after a period of showing his work in art galleries, LaChapelle landed his first professional job at Andy Warhol's *Interview* magazine. He later moved to *Details* magazine and his fashion photography has also appeared in *Rolling Stone*, *Vanity Fair*, *GQ* and *Vogue*. Among his many celebrity subjects are Leonardo DiCaprio, Madonna, Michael Jackson and Whitney Houston. LaChapelle also worked on commercials, including a controversial 1995 ad for Diesel featuring two sailors kissing, and music videos for artists such as Britney Spears. His documentary *Rize*, about the LA dance style krumping, premiered at Sundance in 2005.

**Recent work** In 2006, LaChapelle stepped back from commercial work to concentrate on fine art photography. His work has been exhibited in Milan, Paris, Taipei and, most recently, London. LaChapelle lives on a farm in Maui, Hawaii.

**Killian Fox**