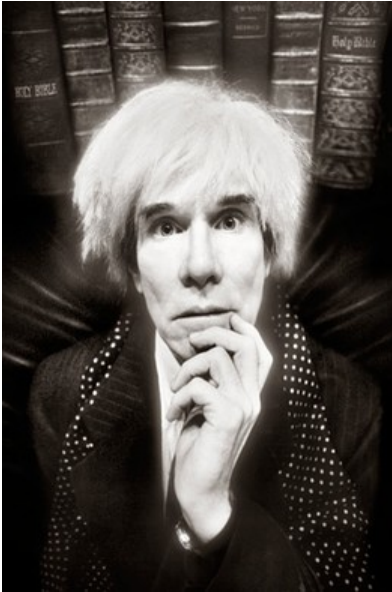


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David LaChapelle Confesses: I Shot Andy Warhol

By John Jannarone

For the next few days, the last photo of Andy Warhol will be on display at a gallery in Manhattan's Upper East Side. Earlier this week, David LaChapelle recalled the time he spent with Warhol before he took the photo in 1986 – long before he became one of the world's most famous photographers.

Mr. LaChapelle's presence in New York reflects another tie with the pop art pioneer: An attempt to transition from commercial success to greater recognition in the art world. Over the last 25 years, Mr. LaChapelle has become renowned for glossy, sexed-up magazine portraits of stars from Brooke Shields to Lady Gaga. Now, his art shows are selling out and he recently opened an installation at

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New York's Lever House, his largest exhibition to date.

The world was less flexible in Mr. Warhol's era. While he enjoyed fame as an artist in the 1960s, he struggled to maintain critical respect in the years leading to his death in 1987. "His work wasn't selling in New York," Mr. LaChapelle said to a small gathering. Those works included the "dollar sign" series completed in the early 1980s that have recently sold for several million dollars per work. But at that time, Mr. Warhol had become a socialite, making television appearances and skillfully building a profile in the media. Critics "didn't take him seriously," Mr. LaChapelle said.

Yet to Mr. LaChapelle, the pressure of commercial work has actually been helpful in his return to the art world. "It was schooling for me," he said. "I learned a lot about how to get people to stop and look at an image."

Indeed, the difference is visible in the two sets of works now on display at Michelman Fine Art, which bookends his career. The first group is a selection of Mr. LaChapelle's early work from 1984 to 1988, before he moved aggressively into commercial work. Mr. LaChapelle experimented with print negatives to add halos and other striking effects to subjects like angels and Christ.

But three recently completed prints, influenced by a typical old-master still life, are far glossier and reminiscent of advertisements. Mr. LaChapelle said he "doesn't necessarily" want his art to look like art-style photographs. "I like to use everything I learned in magazines," he said. In the new prints on display, Mr. LaChapelle juxtaposes elaborate floral bouquets with modern preoccupations like cellular phones.

Those prints are clearly a reflection of Mr. LaChapelle's own frustrations with the hectic commercial world. He now spends much of his time in a distant corner of

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Maui. Asked about New York, the photographer said the city has become too distracting for him to come back. "I don't think I could focus enough to do any work if I lived here now," he said.