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## Art Review: Thus Spoke LaChapelle at Galerie Rudolfinum

By Mimi Fronczak Rogers

David LaChapelle retrospective covers 30 remarkable years



Photo by David LaChapelle

A protégé of Andy Warhol, the celebrated photographer David LaChapelle is internationally known for taking the pop-art sensibility to heights Warhol probably couldn't have imagined. Whether you consider his extravagant celebrity portraits, fashion shots and elaborate tableaux to be works of imaginative virtuoso or over-the-top kitsch, they can often be as compelling as a car crash - a recipe for success that Warhol knew very well.

The exhibition "Thus Spoke LaChapelle" is the latest collaboration between the Galerie Rudolfinum

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and Otto Urban, the art historian who curated last year's "Decadence Now!," one of the most-attended exhibitions in the gallery's 17-year history. It seems to be a winning formula - some 55,000 visitors came to view the often-unbridled art works exploring the concept of decadence in 20th- and 21st-century art - and the LaChapelle show is likewise drawing in large crowds.

LaChapelle was one of the Decadents par excellence in "Decadence Now!," giving Prague audiences a small appetizer of his current 30-year retrospective, featuring more than 100 of his works. A sumptuous catalog with texts by Urban (and pricey at 1,500 Kč, or around \$75) includes all of the images that are in the show along with some not exhibited. LaChapelle called it his best catalog yet and said he couldn't wait to show it to his mom. The exhibition is having its world premiere in Prague, and LaChapelle traveled here with an entourage to personally open the show.

LaChapelle (born in 1963) got his start as photographer working for Andy Warhol's Interview magazine when he was fresh out of high school. He began showing his work in New York galleries in the mid-1980s and became a fixture on the downtown art and club scene. The commercial side of his work took off, and he launched a lucrative career taking celebrity portraits and fashion shots for high-profile glossy magazines and doing advertising photos, known for their vivid color and sometimes outrageous poses and props.

From Liz Taylor and Paris Hilton to Tupac and Eminem, LaChapelle became a matchless recorder of today's pop celebrity, more maximalist and outrageous than Annie Liebowitz. One of his portrait subjects, Pamela Anderson, called him "the Andy Warhol of our times." Intent on making iconic portraits while playfully realizing his own conceptions, he doesn't shy away from pomposity, grandiosity and apotheosis, from Michael Jackson as an angel with his hands folded piously to Courtney Love haloed in light in a pieta with Kurt Cobain.

In the past half-decade, LaChapelle has all but turned away from commercial work to dedicate himself to pursuing his own vision. A major turning point came in 2006, when LaChapelle "retreated from the world" to a cabin in the rainforest - apparently having raked in enough money to work in the same lavish style to which he had become accustomed to when shooting for high-paying clients. Since then, he has hugely ramped up his exhibition activities, holding solo shows and retrospectives around the world.

The retrospective in Prague is the first to include his early noncommercial work from the 1980s in the context of his fashion and advertising work and his most recent work created since 2006. At the press conference before the exhibition's opening, LaChapelle stressed how important to him the inclusion of the early works is, saying many of the models in these photographs were lost to the AIDS crisis that was devastating New York's gay community in LaChapelle's early years of living in the city.

At the heart of the show are LaChapelle's recent grand tableaux blending pop culture and fantasy in his signature style radiating light and super-saturated color. Recurring themes include celebrity, religion, mass consumption and the human form, not lacking overt shock value and voyeurism. LaChapelle's knack for story-telling and drama are hard to deny, as is a talent for pinpointing the heart of popular culture.

The English version of the exhibition's title, "Thus Spoke LaChapelle," pompously implies that LaChapelle is some kind of prophet, emerging from his cabin retreat to awaken humankind to the

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perils of decadent consumerism. The Czech version, "Tak pravil LaChapelle," while using the same word construction as the Czech title of Nietzsche's Zarathustra, also speaks more to the idea that he is a story-teller.

LaChapelle says he always intends to tell a story, even if it is one comprehensible only to few or even just the artist alone. Packed with narrative and detail, his photos are like film stills. The unreal-looking scenes he creates are not computer-generated or digitally altered, he says, but the result of elaborate stagecraft and lighting. The amount of time and money LaChapelle dedicates to a making a single image can be mind-boggling.

Whether LaChapelle's tales critique or glorify the cult of celebrity and hedonistic materialism, one thing is certain: controversy and shock value sell. As with "Decadence Now!," the LaChapelle retrospective is pulling in crowds and garnering plenty of media attention, even while the photographs themselves are often panned as banal kitsch. Galerie Rudolfinum remains one of the very few places in Prague that consistently brings international art stars to Prague so that local audiences can decide for themselves. The gallery is also an institution devoted to exploring all facets of contemporary photography, both the serious and the bombastic.

*Thus Spoke LaChapelle at Galerie Rudolfinum ends Feb. 26.*

*Alšovo nábř. 12, Prague 1-Old Town. Open Tues.-Sun. 10 a.m.-6 p.m., Thurs. until 8 p.m.*