

FRED TORRES COLLABORATIONS

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An Icon Comes Home: David LaChapelle

The colorful celebrity photographer opens an NYC gallery show with a whole new focus.

Time was, David LaChapelle's hyperrealistic, slightly subversive photography was everywhere you looked. His portraits of everyone from Madonna to Hillary Clinton were mainstays on the magazine rack, and then—poof—after years of unparalleled success (and the release of a highly acclaimed documentary in 2005), he seemed to disappear from the public eye altogether.

"I did disappear," LaChapelle says, back in New York briefly for the opening of his new show, "Earth Laughs in Flowers," which opened at Fred Torres Collaborations gallery in Chelsea last night and runs through March 24. "I checked out completely. I bought a 25-acre farm in the jungle in Maui and lived there with two friends and some pigs. I needed to change my life."

That worked for a while, but when Fred Torres Collaborations came calling about doing an exhibition at a gallery in Berlin, LaChapelle couldn't resist. "I was surprised. I didn't think the gallery world would even have me back," he says. "Usually when you leave the fine art world for the editorial or commercial one, you're done. It's one way or the other. There's no crossover." Now he's working only on fine art and doing gallery exhibitions again. "I'm through with editorial," he says. "I've said everything I can say in magazines. This is a whole new exciting way to work."

"Earth Laughs in Flowers," a title taken from a Ralph Waldo Emerson poem, is a collection of 10 new large-scale photographs that riff on Baroque still lifes by the Dutch masters. From a distance, you think you're looking at a gorgeous oil painting, bursting with colors and hidden meaning; up close, you discover that among the vases of flowers are random items such as cell phones, Flintstones vitamins, old cans, a plastic vagina, money, even ham. "What the picture is saying is that we're a disposable society," LaChapelle says. "It's pointing out the brevity of life. As a part of nature, we're not lasting forever. If you can keep that in mind, you can treat life as precious."

The images are both beautiful and amusing. Each time you circle back to a photo, you'll see something in the background that you hadn't noticed before. "We had so much fun finding the things we added to the pictures," LaChapelle says, noting the phallic lamp that he found so amusing in the print he calls Springtime. "We scoured old junk stores, antique shops, whatever. Sometimes we rented things." The images took about three years to complete in his studio back in L.A. "The funny thing is, the master painters were photorealists, so they would paint something to look like a photo. Mine are the opposite—photos that are made to look like paintings."

David LaChapelle's Earth Laughs in Flowers, through March 24 at Fred Torres Collaborations: 527 West 29th Street, 212.244.5074

- Gillian Telling