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photo by Film Magic

David LaChapelle: 'I don't see anything superficial about fashion'

By Melissa Whitworth

From fashion photographer demi-god to farmer: David LaChapelle made a rare appearance in New York last night, with Daphne Guinness, Uma Thurman and Amanda Lepore, to open his latest exhibition.

David LaChapelle has become one of the art world's most collectable photographers. He was discovered and mentored by Andy Warhol, who started the photographer's career at Interview magazine.

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LaChapelle went on to create iconic images of Michael Jackson as a Jesus-like figure; model Karolina Kurkova as a modern-day Birth of Venus; and rapper L'il Kim tattooed with the Louis Vuitton monogram for one of the label's advertising campaigns.

The reverence he has for his famous subjects is evident in his portraits, although he isn't afraid of a tussle or two: he once hung up on Madonna as he found her too demanding and he sued Rihanna for copying his images for her S&M video earlier this year. (He cited eight examples where her video had copied concept, costumes, props and composition from his photographs.)

Katy Perry poses for renowned fashion photographer David LaChapelle

What has made the photographer even more intriguing is the fact that he gave up the hedonistic and lucrative world of advertising campaigns, fashion parties, art auctions - his pieces sell for six figures - and exhibition openings to live on a remote organic farm in Hawaii.

"I still love fashion," he said in an exclusive interview with the Telegraph last night in New York. He was in town to celebrate the opening of his exhibition, *From Darkness To Light*, at Lever House. "I still use fashion in a lot of photography that I do today, even for galleries. For me, it is fun; I don't want my pictures to look like 'art' photographs."

"Fashion is something we are attracted to, it's something that marks society. Going way back to the Incas, the Egyptians, the Indians and their tribal-wear: feathers would make distinctions amongst people. The adornment of the body is a human need. I don't see anything superficial about it unless your life becomes very materialistic."

He has delved into the world of transgender role models, S&M, and the relationship between art, commerce and consumerism. His colourful, pop-art aesthetic has made his images instantly recognisable, and like no others in the fashion and art world. They are infused with dark messages and humour all in one sitting; for an advertising campaign for Harvey Nichols, he pictured the lower half of a model enacting childbirth with her manicured feet wearing gold stilettos held aloft in the obstetrician's stirrups.

Rarely seen at public appearances now, he spends his time on his 18-acre jungle estate on the coast of Maui, where goats are used for milk and fertiliser, and his old pink Mercedes runs on left-over

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cooking oil. The house is solar-powered and built from local eucalyptus wood and reclaimed timber from a nearby abandoned estate.

"I spent my early childhood surrounded by nature," he said. "My mother taught me a lot about respect for all living things - for plants and animals. I am a vegetarian. I was brought up that way."

"I moved to New York when I was 15, but my parents lived nearby in Connecticut, so I could go be in this incredible countryside when I needed it. And that was missing from my life. I turned into a workaholic and things got crazy. Six years ago, I found this property in Maui. Well, it found me, actually."

Two years ago he told the Wall Street Journal : "I always used to pray for a cabin in the woods with vegetarian food and a place to make my art." And that's what he got.

His farm is teeming with edible ferns, 10 different types of chili peppers, six different varieties of spinach and a "dessert orchard" full of cocoa beans, vanilla pods and "gooey ice-cream beans". Daphne Guinness; his friend, muse and frequent model, is a regular visitor and Courtney Love had a pair of huge stone gates flown over from the mainland as a gift to him.

I asked him who in the fashion industry inspires him now. "Just Daphne Guinness," he said.

Guinness was there, of course, to support her friend, whom she describes as her brother. She was wearing a floor-length black, slashed jersey dress by Gareth Pugh, vintage Cartier dress pins, silver gloves, a net veil and she had painted her ears silver.

"He has the vision of someone like Michelangelo," she said. "He controls every part of [his photography]. He will do the hair, the make-up, the art direction. I have seen him change a hundred extras and re-do their make-up. Frankly, I don't care if I get made to stand for seven hours [on set]. I don't care if he puts me in water for 11 hours. It's more of a friendship than anything else," she says. "And that's the case with all of the people he works with; he is very, very loyal. It's art, but it comes from a loving and authentic place, and I completely trust him."

Amanda Lepore, the transgender model, was standing by a huge installation of collaged pictures of nude models fleeing from a storm-driven shipwreck. She appears in the photograph - albeit without her trademark heavy make-up and blonde Marilyn Monroe hair - naked and unadorned. The two have worked together for 10 years.

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Dressed in little more than a thong, accessorised with Christian Louboutin heels and a navy fur stole for the party, Lepore said: "His work is always highly conceptual. He will design the look and the sets, everything is drawn out. It is always beyond my imagination, dealing with such creative energy."

"This particular shoot was gruelling. They took off all my make-up; the last time I shot with him, I was really made up with a tan - with my armour on. But I trusted him. To me, I couldn't look any worse, but he was right, because it doesn't get any better than David LaChapelle."