

Time Out

Hong Kong

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**THE
WOMEN
WHO
RULE ART**
MEET THE
QUEENS OF
THE SCENE

PLUS
SEBASTIÃO SALGADO
SIR PETER BLAKE
& 'MR TATTOO'



**SPECIAL
ART ISSUE**
Who to See - What to Buy - Where to View

**DRAGON
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A QUICK DIP GUIDE

EXCLUSIVE The
Passion
of
**DAVID
LaChapelle**

The High Priest of Photography
Shoots & Guest Edits **TIME OUT**

‘I want to look at the horror and tragedy of the world by using beauty’

David LaChapelle was the High Priest of celebrity photography for almost two decades. So why has he turned his back on fame and fashion to explore death, disaster and the end of times?

Words **JAKE HAMILTON** Photography **DAVID LACHAPELLE**

If you show anyone interested in photography a picture of your work, they will

immediately say ‘LaChapelle’.

Why are you so distinctive?

Because I didn't think about it too much. I went intuitively. I blew up colour at the same time grunge took over; all this black and white, people looking depressed, whereas I just exploded with colour. I loved grunge, but I just wanted to be different. Sometimes I wanted to be funny and put celebrities in strange situations; other times there was something inside my head that I wanted to put in my work.

You only show in galleries now.

The Raft is currently exhibiting in Hong Kong, but is there a direct link between this and your earlier work, *Deluge*?

Yes, *The Raft* is chapter two in the narrative. It's an idea from *Deluge*, the apocalypse of the future, but only in a metaphorical sense, a sort of feeling of the end, that we're all going to suffer.

***Deluge* is inspired by Michelangelo's *The Flood*, and *The Raft* clearly echoes Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa*. But I also hear there's a third installment you're working on called *Paradise Regained*. What is that inspired by?**

Well, in *Deluge* the people are quite clearly helping each other. *The Raft* represents the journey of the storm before these people cobble together a raft to refuge themselves from the deluge, but in a very simple narrative; it's like a storybook narrative. I thought of Géricault and tried consciously not to do an obvious take on

Blood of a Poet LaChapelle shoots for TOHK, April 2011



that, but the connotations are there. My raft is much more of a storm. In *Paradise Regained* you'll see some of the same people reaching enlightenment – but that's just in my head. People will interpret it their own way. I've shot a bunch for that series, but I've yet to work on it.

Your photography is saturated with colour and surrealistic humour, but you're becoming increasingly apocalyptic as you get older...

Well, 'the raft' was a terrible true event that turned into a nightmare. They cut these people from the boat, the lower classes, the sailors and slaves, to perish without provisions, and they resorted to cannibalism and all kinds of horrible things. It was a specific incident. *The Raft* is not referring to that. It's about the struggle with the storms in all our lives. We have to suffer. Life is suffering. But through suffering one can gain enlightenment.

I heard you were initially against exhibiting in a gallery. Is it true you once said: "Nobody wants to see me, they want to see Britney Spears"?

Well, before I started my career in photography in the 1980s I showed in galleries. Are you aware of that?

Yes. Your first boss was Andy Warhol.

No, even prior to Andy, who gave me that first job for *Interview* magazine, I was showing in galleries. I was using a darkroom with a girl who had this beautiful loft on Park Avenue which I rented; she was from a well-to-do family. My first show was in 1984, called *Good News for*

Modern Man [at 303, New York] and then I did another immediately after called *Angels, Saints and Martyrs*. We were so naïve back then. We don't know you had to wait a year to show again. We just did it. So around 1984 I was invited to work for *Interview*. I was selling photographs, all black and white, for \$300 or \$400 a time, and I was trying to make a living while I was still living in a squat on the Lower East Side.

Is it true that you started shooting in colour at exactly the same time you discovered you didn't have HIV?

Yes, but that's not 100 percent accurate.

But you did burst into colour when you realised you didn't have AIDS?

I was doing colour already, but I was painting on the negatives with these very vibrant colours in the darkroom. It was before Photoshop. A lot ▶



His name means 'the church'
LaChapelle at his Los Angeles studio

of people were dying of AIDS. I was questioning ideas of whether there was life after death. I really felt there was something after death; I really do believe that. I was diagnosed negative but I waited a very long time to get tested because I was certain I was positive.

Why were you certain?

Because my first boyfriend died of AIDS in 1984. I was 21 and he was 24. We were living together for more than two years already and he died very quickly. He was a dancer, very healthy, and in a matter of weeks he was... dead.

My God.

Literally. I was shocked. I just thought that I had to be positive too, because it was before the term 'safe sex' or the promotion of condoms. But we didn't know anything in those early days of 1982, 1983. We knew nothing. We didn't care about it. I just assumed I was going to die too. It weighed very, very heavily on me and affected my early years, though I did always work very hard because I wanted to leave something behind, my work, you know? I didn't think I would live that long. But finally, through Act Up and reading medical journals, well, the doctors back then didn't know anything either, so I refused to get tested for many years because the medicine was more caustic. I went holistic and vegan, running six miles a day, but every cough or bruise I got I just thought, that's it, you're positive. Anyway, there was no question in my mind I was positive.

What made you finally get tested?

I was in a relationship, and I wanted to know. I was in Cuba and didn't feel well and thought I was definitely positive then. It was just causing me a lot of problems. I should just know once and for all. And when the results came back I asked to get re-tested because I didn't believe it. Do it again! But it was a weight off my shoulders. Suddenly my levity lifted and my pictures became very funny. I started employing beauty.

You had no formal training at all, so where on earth did you find your eye? Where did you find your concepts?

Well, actually, I left school at 15. I was bullied and hassled because I was wearing strange clothes. I didn't want to be normal. I didn't want to fit in. I wanted to be different. I was always drawing at the back of class. All my life I wanted to be an artist. I still have some of those early drawings and they really changed my life. I moved to New York when I was 15; then at 17 my father came and got me. I loved my parents, they were great, but I was having problems in my own life. It was truancy for two years, basically. Then I got into this incredible art school programme with these amazingly engaging teachers and in the second semester we did photography. I just knew then I loved photography. So I did have some training, but I always did what I wanted. I thought photography was going to be very mathematical but I learned it was like the eye, the way you see.

Did you have a strict Catholic upbringing?

No, I wouldn't say strict. I was the third child, the baby. My brother and sister had a stricter upbringing. I was murder compared to them!



Past Masters Pamela Anderson: *Over Easy* (1998); Leonardo DiCaprio: *Nostalgic Styling* (1996); Lil' Kim: *Luxury Item* (1999)

Just how wild were you?

I was pretty wild as a kid. I loved nightclubs since I was 14. I sneaked out the house every night to dance. Every single night. Just dancing! I loved disco music. Then later New Wave in New York. I loved the creative club scene in New York. The art world and the club scene were very tightly connected back then. Keith Haring was working the door in the Mud Club. It was incredible! East Village was the place to be. Nowadays it's very commercial, the club scene. But I'm not looking for clubs anymore [laughs].

New York was pretty decadent back then.

That depends on how you define decadent. I find it more decadent today. Uptown and Downtown had a very hard division back then. We never went Uptown at all. I thought Downtown was completely creative. Of course people were having sex and things like that, but it was free; it wasn't the Uptown money explosion. I was shooting society weddings to survive back then. These really crazy weddings.



People call me to do Justin Bieber, and there's no way! I'm a grown man. I'm not interested in Justin Bieber

Whose weddings?

Vera Wang. She had an extravagant wedding and I was hired to shoot these beautiful black and white images for her. I could survive for a year off one of those society weddings.

May I ask, when you shoot celebrities in these hyper-surreal situations, do you enjoy it thoroughly, or do you anguish and bleed?

Look at me, I've just shot all weekend, hear how hoarse my voice is! Three days solid! But to answer your question, I would say... I've done it both ways [hoarse laughter]. As I've gotten older I'm less influenced by outside pressure, by that I mean really obnoxious publicists. Hollywood can be very nasty. It can be a terrible experience. It's not the celebrity, it's usually the people around the celebrity. Of course that can be indicative of the kind of person they actually are, but sometimes they honestly don't know how to face the people who are close to them. I know that scene, for sure. It was tough and brutal, but we'd always laugh and have lots of fun, yet it was still a crazy difficult time. That went on for a while and then I quit magazines for good in 2006. Now I only show in galleries.

But how crazy did it get?

I had so much energy. I'm really healthy now but back then I had tons of energy. But I loved it. When *La Chapelle Land* [David's acclaimed book] started happening it was a dream come true, but then later on, when it really blew up, it kind of... changed things. By the time of *Heaven To Hell*, and then my film *Rize*, and also the big ▶



The Raft of Illusion: Raging Toward Truth II; part of an ongoing narrative series that began with the Michelangelo-inspired Deluge in 2006 (bottom panel)



This is the End These two images, entitled Can you Help Us? (left) and When The World is Through, were part of a 2005 Vogue spread that marked the symbolic end of LaChapelle's career in fashion editorials



fashion retrospectives and anthologies [*Artists and Prostitutes*], well, that all happened at once around 2006...

...and you didn't want to do it anymore.

I really didn't want to do it. I loved photography but I didn't want to shoot the next Britney Spears. In fashion, it was such a paradox, because as I was getting older I was making commentaries within my photography. I was doing these intense layers.

Such as in *The House at the End of the World* series for *Italian Vogue*?

Yes. It was a thing I was trying to say. Look at it. Destroyed houses and these young women in couture. That was the last editorial I ever did. It looked like a hurricane had hit the house while these women are standing around wearing insanely beautiful couture gowns, and it was on the newsstands exactly the same time as Hurricane Katrina hit. It was getting all these complaints saying I had exploited a tragedy, but I shot it months before Katrina.

But the timing...

The timing, yes, was very strange, because I was thinking about hurricanes at that time. My mother lived in Hurricane Alley in Florida. Global warming was on everybody's mind and I was reflecting that. But there is nothing wrong with fashion design. It's a beautiful thing. It's adornment. Adornment has been around since there has been civilization. The Incas, the Egyptians... they made distinguishing oneself with adornment into an art form.

And yet you were beginning to question the art of fashion photography?

I was burned out. I just couldn't work in that world anymore. First of all, I was growing up; my thoughts were changing and growing, just like everybody else's, of course, but... I didn't want to be in this celebrity service industry anymore, even though I was using it creatively. It turned into a nightmare, and I let it turn into nightmare because I couldn't say no. I was a complete workaholic.



Take the horror with the beauty. Beauty sustains longer. We've seen enough footage of Daniel Pearl being beheaded. I refuse to watch it. I don't want that in my head

Psychologically, why were you a workaholic?

Partially, I believe, because I never finished high school and I always... well, my mom warned me, in a loving way, that I was going to be a bum if I didn't graduate. It's a reasonable fear for her to have, right? But she didn't have a crystal ball. And I didn't have a crystal ball. I mean, what if she was right? So I said yes to *everything*.

And it's true that manic phases can produce amazing bursts of creativity.

[*Knowing laugh*] Yeah, they do... up to a point. And then you can get psychotic. You can go delusional. It's a type of psychosis. You become delusional to the point where you're in danger. People call it 'the gift' and it is, I suppose; I wouldn't change anything in my life. But it bothers me when people in Los Angeles say, 'I'm bipolar, I'm OCD, I'm ADD.' I'm, like, 'you're not bipolar, you're moody.' Bipolar is a real thing; it's not a mood swing. Yet being depressed is a real thing, a human thing. If you lose your job then you should feel depressed. Anyone can suffer depression. Lincoln had melancholy. His depression informed his Presidency and how he made those incredible decisions. Through those dark sufferings he gained empathy for humanity.

So what attracts you to religious ecstasy?

[*Another laugh*]... Well, my last name means

'the church'. I've been to all kinds of churches. I've studied all religions. I love philosophy and theology. Right now I'm reading a lot about Daoism, Confucianism and Buddhism. There is so much in the Dao that is easily akin to early Christianity, as in the teachings of Jesus, not the religious incorporation of the last two thousand years. 'The kingdom of heaven is within you' - that can be found in Daoism. Jesus used nature analogies, just as the Dao uses harmony and flow. I'm fascinated by this.

Do you believe in a personal immortality?

[*Pause*] Who knows? I feel there is something after death; I'm thoroughly convinced of that. It's not just a physical plain we live on. That's my belief. What exactly happens afterwards? No one knows. That's what faith is. Nobody has come back to tell us. But I think it would be very strange if we did know all the answers, like if somebody from CNN was reporting live from Hell, you know? The mystery is the key.

Are you less afraid of death as you get older?

I'm not afraid of death at all. I've outlived so many of my friends. Remember, I never thought I'd see 24. When I was 34 I finally saw that I was going to be here a little while longer.

Are you a materialist?

I'm not an anti-materialist. I have respect for material things, but I don't have any 'want'. I don't over-value objects either. I think my perspective is balanced. But it was a real shock when I started making real money. One of the first things I did, from advice, was to put money into stocks, and it was just numbers. What the hell is this? I called my broker, take my money out, it was a couple of hundred thousand dollars, and instead I bought three Andy Warhols and started collecting Keith Haring. Money brought me the freedom not to worry about myself or my staff. I know what it feels like to worry about every bill. I've been through that. I've traded debt for photographs. I keep money simple. I also knew that art was better than stocks but, luckily, I've never had to sell anything. And anyway, art is more beautiful than a car. Art transcends.



Botticelli meets genocide The Rape of Africa (2009), featuring Naomi Campbell; "Take the horror with the beauty," warns LaChapelle. "Beauty sustains longer. I want to attract, not repel."

You won't go back to Vanity Fair again?

Oh god, no. That part of my life is done. I did shoot Lady Gaga for her first cover of *Rolling Stone* because we've been friends, but I've quit. I don't have the time to do it anymore. Time is the most valuable commodity to me now. We don't have infinity. If I was asked to do something creative and fun, and if I had time, then yes, I'd do it, but I don't do editorials for *Vogue* or *Vanity Fair* anymore. It's all done. I don't live by those rules anymore.



King David: LaChapelle now refuses to shoot celebrity portraits

Do you know where you're going?

You have to be open and let life lead you. I've been pretty intuitive for most of my life.

And you're happy to get off the merry-go-round?

Well, it wasn't a struggle for me to leave. I didn't have a choice. But I could never imagine doing now what I was doing back in 2005. It was great times, don't get me wrong, and I stand by my work, well, most of it [laughs], but my God, I just knew in my heart I had to stop.

I bet the magazines still call you for work.

People call me to do Justin Bieber! And there's no way! I'm a grown man. I'm not interested in Justin Bieber. A 22-year old photographer will be excited about that, and so they should be, but not for me. I don't want to take those jobs if my heart isn't in it. Why take a job when I'm not excited about it? I would be lying to myself.

Young photographers are mimicking you now.

That's great. I'm not talking about them or myself here, but appropriation does bother me. In the art world, appropriation, an idea, often spills over into fashion and editorial creation. The art world always moves on, but the fashion world has become standard. You open *Vogue* and you see people just knocking it off. I have some issues with magazines using unknown photographers' work and appropriating them for fashion spreads. In America, the written word is so protected against plagiarism, but imagery and visuals have no value at all. Yet there is value in originality.

Yes, but appropriation of visual style is more difficult to pin down than the written word.

No, let me tell you, appropriation is now the normal thing. Nobody questions it. But it's just stealing. What the fuck does that say to young talent coming through? That you can just steal Helmut Newton? Is that the message?

Do you watch the news?

Whenever I come back to the States, I see the

news channels at the airport. It's more graphics, more flashes, they're selling fear, selling anxiety... It's not doing anyone any good, all this horror entertainment, with all these opinions feeding off information. I'm not saying one should be ignorant and not know what's going on in the world, but there is an addiction with the news to become passive and do nothing. Give CNN to someone in the Middle Ages – tortures, tsunamis, hurricanes, wars, genocide – and that Middle Ages farmer

would have an anxiety attack too. There's never been more or less hell than there is now. There are more people in the world, but there's never been more or less suffering. There's just more access to see it. I see a massive globally anxiety attack at the moment.

So why did you make *The Rape of Africa*?

[Pause] People were offended by that. I said 'look at it longer'. It's layered. Take the horror with the beauty. Beauty sustains longer. We've all seen enough footage of Daniel Pearl being beheaded. I refuse to watch it. I don't want that in my head. If you see that then nothing will ever shock you again. I could have shown the real tragedy of what's happening now in Africa, the real photojournalism, with flies and death and terror and blood diamonds, but that's not what I do, and that's not my role, and it's already on TV and online anyway. I want to look at the horror and tragedy of the world by using beauty. I want to attract, not repel.

There was a rumour that you turned your back on photography to become a farmer.

Well, totally, yes, in some ways. I moved to Maui to renovate a farmhouse. That's my home now. After Hong Kong I'll be going back to the farm. It's off the grid. We have goats and honeybees. We grow fruit and vegetables.

Sounds amazing. Is it an artist's commune?

It's more of a nature's commune. It's pretty big, 25 acres, and very quiet and private. It's in the middle of the jungle. A lot of struggling artists come out. Musicians come out. People who need to get away come out. It's where I go to get my head on and keep the balance in my life. Now I need some peace and quiet, and some balance. And I just love working for galleries.

The Raft Exhibiting May 25 - July 2, de Sarthe Fine Art, 8/F, Club Lusitano Building, 16 Ice House Street, Central.

David LaChapelle, Andy Warhol & JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT

LaChapelle knew the two artists near the start of his life (and near the end of theirs)

What was your relationship with Warhol like?

Andy was very kind to me. He never mentored me but I hung on every word he said. He told me to make everything beautiful. Just a few weeks before he died we did a formal sitting with two bibles behind him [see image below]. He was very generous to me, not in a monetary way, but in spirit.

Was he still active?

He was out of fashion just prior to his death. He did that big show with Jean Michel Basquiat and it was *crushed* by the art critics. Everybody savaged it. Jean Michel was called Andy's lapdog. It was a 'from hip to hype' thing. Robert Hughes [the art critic] called him Jean Michel Basketcase. He couldn't handle it and died. I remember those reviews. They couldn't be friends anymore after that collaboration. It was like they had committed a fucking crime. They were embarrassed to be seen in public together. The reviews were *horrible* and yet now they're considered masterpieces worth millions of dollars.

Do you think the criticism was partly responsible for Basquiat's early death?

Without a fucking question. You cannot be 25 and think your career is over. They told him, 'Your career is done. It's over.'

And you adore Warhol, don't you?

Andy's work has aged incredibly well. I even watched him paint when he made *The Last Supper*. I was so strange that it was the last thing he painted. It was the only time I actually saw him paint. And he went to church every Sunday... Andy could handle those reviews, but the reviews killed Jean Michel.

What changed after Warhol died?

The biggest one man show you've ever seen at the Museum of Modern Art! That taught me everything. People are fickle. They came and go. Art criticism is very important, but all things must be taken for what they are. The same people who savaged him are now walking around saying he's a genius. So that's what I learned from critics and galleries.

