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WALKING AWAY FROM CELEBRITY

David LaChapelle left a star-studded life behind to return to a vision he began 20 years ago

Words Xu Ci En

PHOTOS COURTESY DE SARTHE FINE ARTS/DAVID LACHAPELLE

Everyone wants a piece of David LaChapelle. I know, because during my chat with him at Art Stage Singapore, the Singapore-based international contemporary art fair where he was showing, we were interrupted several times by gallery owners, art dealers and fans – the bold ones who came by to introduce themselves and fawn over him with many more waiting in the wings.

To his credit, the tall and casually dressed LaChapelle graciously talked to each and every one of them while I sat by and quietly studied the effect of celebrity – in this case, one who has made a career taking iconic and ironic

portraits of other celebrities from Lady Gaga to the late Michael Jackson.

When he finally returned to me, I asked if he ever got tired of people perpetually clamouring for his attention. Earnestly, he said, "No, this isn't normal. I'm very low-key at this point in my life. My studio is in Los Angeles, but I live in Hawaii now, so this just keeps things interesting and I like meeting people. The opposite is being ignored as an artist, and that's worse. I've had that too."

The 48-year-old American started his career in New York City in the early 1980s as a struggling artist exhibiting work in galleries that he describes as "figurative colour

photography installation" in a pop art style that has become unmistakably LaChapelle – surrealist, bizarre and often pushing the boundaries of good taste.

"People weren't used to seeing that style of work. I remember being destroyed, because nobody came to the shows. I struggled in New York City for a solid 10 years, worried about electricity bills, worried about how I was going to pay my photo bills, doing weddings. When I couldn't survive with the galleries I turned to magazines and that turned into a 20-year career."

It was none other than Andy Warhol who invited the then-young LaChapelle to shoot >

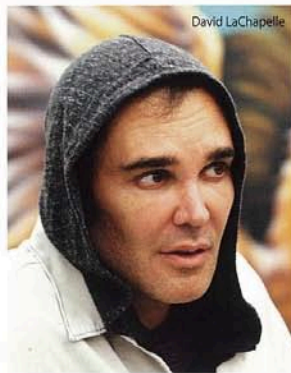
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527 W 29TH ST, NEW YORK, NY 10001 T212.244.5074 F212.244.5075 FREDTORRES.COM

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“Now that I’ve quit magazine work I have to say that I’ve come full circle. Not only am I showing in galleries where I first started, I’m also becoming a better person and I’m becoming more conscious. It’s a whole different chapter. I’m going to let the young kids photograph the next Britney”



and then a year later they’re dropped from the record label... I never took it for granted and it always kept me humble.”

To the disappointment of budding starlets everywhere, LaChapelle decided to leave the magazine and celebrity world behind in 2005 to focus on his personal photography installations. Presently, he only accepts requests from close friends such as Lady Gaga – whom he refers to simply as “Gaga” – Kanye West and Mariah Carey, the latter whom he describes as “a wonderful person and a diva, but in a funny way”.

One of his works exhibited at Art Stage Singapore that’s part of his new vision was *Deluge: Museum*. It shows a classic museum hall half-submerged in floodwaters with historical art on the walls as tattered exhibition catalogues float by.

“*Museum* speaks about prices in the art market and the idea of ‘pricelessness’. I was making commentary about price versus value and at the end of times when the flood comes, you have to question if these things

> for *Interview* in 1984, the much-celebrated pop culture magazine that publishes intimate portraits and conversations with celebrities, musicians and artists. It would eventually lead him to become one of the most sought-after photographers in the world.

A documenter of celebrities at the feverish height of their careers, LaChapelle has shot many starlets brimming with sexual audacity: a Lolita-like Britney Spears in nothing more than bra and undies on a hot pink bed peering coquettishly from the cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine; or Gisele Bündchen for the 20th anniversary cover of the now-defunct *The Face* magazine. In it, Bündchen’s breasts and nether regions are concealed by slips of masking tape and her only adornments are a pair of crimson red heels and a transparent shower curtain for a cape.

LaChapelle is ever mindful of the rise and fall of celebrity and it’s this consciousness that he said keeps his ego in check. “My success happened gradually, and thank god it was gradual. I’ve seen so many people’s careers come and go, whether they’re pop stars or artists. Part of me knew that what I was doing was good, but when you see someone who’s going to be this big star and you’ve photographed them for magazines,

are of value any more. Unless you can use it as a raft, it’s worthless. I believe in the very socialist idea of artwork. There’s no such thing as ownership, because if you stand in front of painting for that time, it’s yours. We’re only renting everything anyway.”

It’s LaChapelle at his ironic best when you consider that the 18 works he showed at Art Stage Singapore were all sold by the end of the three-day fair, with the highest fetching USD180,000. This along with several published books and a slew of solo international museum shows serve as sweet vindication for an artist who couldn’t even afford to pay his electricity bills 20 years ago.

Now, however, LaChapelle is simply glad to get some rest from the frenetic pace of a celebrity-focused life.

“I used to get so unbalanced with work, because I couldn’t say no out of insecurity. I took every job and I was a workaholic. Now that I’ve quit magazine work I have to say that I’ve come full circle. Not only am I showing in galleries where I first started, I’m also becoming a better person and I’m becoming more conscious. It’s a whole different chapter. I’m going to let the young kids photograph the next Britney.”