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KARL LAGERFELD – DAVID LACHAPELLE – JOHN CHAMBERLAIN – PETER BRANT

*DAVID LACHAPELLE:
RENAISSANCE*

MAN

BY SARAH KESSLER

When I visited David LaChapelle's Hollywood studio this April, one of his assistants showed me to a wall of paintings. All gifts from LaChapelle's friends and admirers, the works on view included a canvas by the young neoclassical artist Kehinde Wiley — a portrait of a youthful black man in contemporary street gear posed before an ornate backdrop. Given LaChapelle's predilection for the baroque and his love of hip-hop culture, the painting seemed an appropriate piece for his collection. Upon closer inspection, I realized that the subject of Wiley's portrait was LaChapelle himself, his unmistakable face and build rendered African-American. I laughed out loud, startling the assistant. It was just too perfect.

LaChapelle's renowned celebrity portraits often perform a similar trick, heightening certain of their subjects' most recognizable characteristics to the point of parody. Simultaneously adoring and critical, this tactic has earned him commercial success as well as his own brand of celebrity status. Below, the artist discusses his relatively recent decision to shift his work in a new, epic direction. The following conversation took place via Skype in July 2009.



David LaChapelle
Pieta with Courtney Love
2006

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST
AND THEY FORBES SYGMA LABORATORY

WHITEWALL: *Where have you been traveling recently?*

DAVID LACHAPPELLE: I was in Israel just now.

WW: *And what were you up to there?*

DL: I had a meeting at the contemporary art museum in Tel Aviv.

WW: *Will you be doing a show there?*

DL: That's up to the curators. It's a great museum with a beautiful collection. [The show has since been confirmed at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art for July 2010.]

WW: *Will the exhibition be similar to the shows you've done in Paris, et cetera?*

DL: I'm still deciding. Most likely it will be the same show that's traveling right now, which is mostly newer work that I've made in the last three years since I stopped working for publications. But it also includes some older work commissioned for magazines. The new work informs the older pieces; it exposes certain themes that were just below the surface when I was working in fashion. It was never just about selling a dress or a celebrity. It was always about creating some sort of commentary. With the new work, which is much more pointed, it's very clear that I'm not selling anything, just communicating ideas that are important to me.

I'm very interested in the populist notion of making art for everyone, not just for intellectuals or academics or the art world itself. The majority of my audience is people who don't always go to museums. It's exciting to see these people connect to the work; for me, that communication is crucial. I believe in the power of the visual to articulate just as effectively as the written word.

My pictures tend to polarize people, as some think they are commercial. But one of my points is that the worlds of commerce and art have become intertwined at this moment in time — so the subject matter I am dealing with is just the reality of now.

I want to communicate and have an impact on people. In the distracted world we live in, I want to grab people's attention and hold it, in order to tell them a story in the same way their attention is grabbed by video games, billboards, and magazines. But with my work there are details and subliminal messages that you would not find in those places. My newer work is much more layered.

WW: *In a way, you're doing something similar to the magazine work you used to do, but you're moving in the opposite direction. When you were working on commission, you'd get an assignment and subvert that assignment — you'd make work for commercial circulation, but the ideas animating that work would be more profound or substantial than those animating your typical advertisement. Now, you're bringing more legible images into the museum and gallery context.*

DL: I admire muralists like Diego Rivera and Keith Haring — they made art that people could decipher without an advanced degree. People could understand their narratives and the importance of communicating them.

Recently, I've found it important to try to rescue the figure. Right now, the figure in color photography is automatically equated with pornography and commodification of the body; whenever you see color photographs of nudes, they're either beefcake schmaltsy stuff or straight-up porn. One of my goals is to have people look at

my images and not even be aware that they're looking at nudes. I want to photograph the nude in a way that leads people to consider its content, not just its aesthetic appearance.

WW: *You're trying to reclaim the body from pornography?*

DL: Absolutely. To reclaim it from the dark ages so that it's not just an item for financial or erotic gratification. We're still in the dark ages, only in reverse, in the sense that the nude figure is again viewed as sinful, as dirty because of the association to porno. With Internet access, the body is immediately objectified. It's a form of commodification and for commercial purposes. In photography, the nude is incredibly stigmatized. Automatically, people think that it's one thing and one thing only, and also it's very difficult not to make it look like some sort of perfume ad . . .

With *Deluge* (2007), I was doing the modern flood, the flood of the future, the flood everyone fears. We didn't have panic attacks when I was a kid, but now there's so much of this doom and gloom . . . The deluge panel was the only panel in the Sistine Chapel that Michelangelo felt was unsuccessful; he felt that the figures he'd painted were too small. I wanted to represent the flood using Michelangelo's idea that the beauty of the body is proof that God exists. But casting here in Los Angeles, a very basic problem arose — all the people I cast had perfect bodies. When I looked at the casting, they looked like a Calvin Klein perfume ad. So I had to add real bodies to the image. Heavy people, older people. It was such a fine balance. So photography, in that respect, changes profoundly the implication the figure represents.

WW: *When you were working for magazines, you must have had less control over the kinds of bodies you were able to photograph . . .*

DL: Well, I always photographed marginalized people too. I worked with my friend Amanda Lepore, a transsexual who had numerous cosmetic procedures. Amanda has a particularly modern face. Supposedly, each of our faces fits into one of 12 categories of facial structure. In reality, people like Amanda and Michael Jackson form a thirteenth category, because they've been able to alter their faces in such dramatic ways.

I've found beauty in marginalized bodies — I've never photographed them to pass judgment. Even the film I did, *Rize* [2005], focused on a disadvantaged group of kids in South Central Los Angeles. So I've not only been interested in the most celebrated and famous people on the planet, but also on the most peripheral. I never bought into the supermodel idea that there are only 12 beautiful girls . . .

I do love glamour and beauty, and there's nothing wrong with that. There's been adornment of the human figure since the beginning of civilization. The attraction of that is an important part of the work that I do. I fight the idea that serious art has to have a certain edge, or ugliness. I feel that "edge" is very phony if it's applied. It's something that either exists or doesn't exist within your concept. To set out to make something shocking — it's always transparent when you see that kind of work being produced.

I want to find beauty in things, but I also want to answer questions, whether they're questions of faith, or enlightenment, or life after death . . . One way for me to take on these big ideas and try to figure them out is to take pictures. In fact, it's the only thing I can do. I'm really incapable of doing anything else. If I weren't doing this, I don't know what good I'd be to society at all. I didn't finish high school, and my mom always told me, "You're going to wind up homeless." That still sits with me. So I get a team



Portrait of David LaChapelle by Kehinde Wiley.

together and build something.

WW: *The new work seems highly collaborative.*

DL: It's very collaborative; it always has been. Photography is collaborative by nature. I enjoy the familial aspect of getting people together to create an image. It replaces those feelings of being a misfit and a loner as a kid . . .

WW: *You've been shooting most of the new work on Maui?*

DL: A lot has been shot on Maui, but I've also been shooting here in Los Angeles. The difference, now, is that I get to spend much more time with each image. Not having to rush to meet a deadline — as a journalist, you know what that's like. Now the work can just be ready when it's ready. That's real freedom, and I've earned it after years of commercial work.

I started at galleries and I wasn't ready. I was 18 years old in New York, and I wasn't mature enough to be making work for exhibitions. Luckily, I started working for magazines, which led me into a 20-year career. Now I feel ready to go back, and I have the tools and techniques to say exactly what I want to say.

WW: *Are you still working commercially at all?*

DL: There are artists I'll work with because I want to work with them, but I left the contract with *Vanity Fair* and I don't shoot for the *Italian Vogues* or other magazines anymore. I recently did a cover of a friend of mine for *Rolling Stone*, because I believe in her as a musician.

WW: *Yes, I did hear Lady Gaga was out on Maui . . .*

DL: Yeah, she's a good friend. Kanye West, too. We were making pictures together. There are artists I'm friends with whose work I really respect. Working with them keeps everything fresh — it keeps the studio buzzing and the ideas flowing. But I'm no longer working three jobs a day. That was insane. It was really a 20-year period of insanity. Sometimes I look at my books and think, "What kind of crazy person did that?" And it was me!

WW: *So your life has slowed down a bit, then?*

DL: It's changed. I mean, I can't sit idle. I enjoy working immensely, and I've always known that about myself. For me, being idle is torture. Just sitting at a party, and benign conversation, and things like that — it's just not for me.

WW: *Well, you've certainly been moving around a lot.*

DL: Much less than when I was taking pictures for magazines . . .

WW: *Are you going back to Maui soon, and are you going to get to relax a little bit?*

DL: I always go back to Maui. It's about balance. There was a long period in my life when I'd lost equilibrium, but now I have it back. It's the most coherent way for me to create, to make work that actually means something. When my life is balanced I can think and communicate clearly, and communication is my goal.

I just don't believe in a lot of the work I see these days. It kind of pisses me off when I walk through art fairs and can't even sense the authorship of most of the work. One installation looks like the next. I'm not talking about everybody; of course, there are great artists out there. I'm just talking about the majority.

WW: *Did you make it to Venice over the summer?*

DL: No, I didn't go to the Biennale, but I'm speaking more generally. Neon, for instance. Everyone's writing in neon and it's like, come on! It's the trendy thing to do, but what are you saying? Because

people are walking by and they're barely stopping. If you're making work for people to invest in, great. But that's just not what I'm about. Are we still discussing appropriation 30 years later? Are we still referencing some art-world gesture from the eighties? Why put your energy into fooling the art world when the real world's got some greater issues going on? People are hungry; they're starving for someone to communicate with. Especially young people. They want to understand, they want to get in on it, and most contemporary art is very difficult for people to decipher. They walk through the art and they leave unmoved; they leave the same way they came in. Nothing has touched them.

WW: *It seems like there's a conversation going on that they're not invited into.*

DL: Yeah, and intelligent people, too!

WW: *Right; it has nothing to do with intelligence. It's just this internal art world dynamic.*

DL: Right. I have a friend who's an award-winning journalist — she writes for *Rolling Stone*, *Vanity Fair*, and *New York Magazine*. And I ask her, "What do you think when you walk through these art shows?" And she says, "Well, I just feel, I don't know . . ." Think about that! She's really intelligent and sophisticated, grew up in New York, went to Brown and Columbia. What does that tell you about the art world, if she doesn't understand what she's looking at? I don't want to make work like that.

There's really not much that looks like what I'm doing. There are people who will never accept it, and that's fine. I spent 15 years documenting American obsessions and American pop culture and attempting to photograph every single person that mattered. I stand by that work, and now I can't say anything more with magazines. It's become impossible, because my themes have gotten heavier.

The last fashion story I ever did featured a woman standing in couture in front of houses that had been blown up by a hurricane. I snuck onto Steven Spielberg's *War of the Worlds* [2005] set, and we shot images that looked like the aftermath of 28 dozen hurricanes. These images were on newsstands when Katrina hit. People got mad and wrote letters saying I was exploiting Hurricane Katrina, but if you know publishing you know that for those photographs to have been on the stands during Katrina they would have had to be shot in advance. So the editor goes, "Well, you know, they think it's about hurricanes." It IS about hurricanes and climate change! And here we are obsessing about insignificant things . . .

I'm all for glamour and beauty, but those things can become total distractions from everything in the world that matters. When life turns into *Sex and the City*, you're hiding from what's really important. That's what the pictures were about. And that was the last fashion shoot I ever did. They said, "You have to tone it down," and that's when I knew I was finished with fashion and celebrity magazines as a medium. I could not go any further.

When I quit and moved to Hawaii, I didn't know what I was going to do. I thought photography might be over for me: "Well, I guess I'll be a farmer now." I didn't think about showing in galleries — I didn't know that would be an option for me, because I had such a big name in the commercial world. Back in 1987, when I left galleries to start exclusively working for magazines, you didn't do commercial work and have shows at the same time — people believed that you weren't serious. And, in some ways, I felt that it wasn't serious either: it seemed to me that my work was a novelty to get people into the show, some of whom just wanted to see photos of celebrities. Then, exactly three years ago, which was twenty years after the last time I showed my work, I got a call. They said, "Would you do a gallery show of new work?" And I said, "Really?" It surprised me that people were interested in what I had to say outside of my magazine experience. And I knew I still had pictures in me. I became so excited by that call. I felt like a kid again. It was a rebirth.