



Hawaii retreat saved my life, says LaChapelle

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Tucked away in Maui, on an eco-friendly farm, photographer David LaChapelle is recharging his batteries and going back to his roots.

Celebrated for his high-octane, color-saturated portraits of stars including Madonna, Elton John, Britney Spears and Courtney Love among others, LaChapelle is synonymous with contemporary pop culture.

But after two decades of photographing the brightest stars in entertainment and fashion, LaChapelle was burnt out, so he made the decision to retreat to a remote part of Maui, in Hawaii.

"I was pretty much working myself like crazy and wasn't taking care of myself, so (coming) here has really sort of saved my life in a way," he told CNN.



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"When I read about people that I have photographed that have died with drugs and things -- I know that could have been me," he said.

That was nearly five years ago, and the work he has made since is, fittingly, based around the theme of salvation, melding religious symbolism and Renaissance art motifs.

This time, too, it's bound for galleries across the world, rather than the magazines he is normally associated with. He says he's come full circle, having started his career in the early 1980s showing work in galleries and loft spaces in New York.

Magazine work came more readily to him, though, and he began a commercial photography career with a job at "Interview" magazine, the celebrity and style magazine founded by Andy Warhol.

"Andy said, 'Whatever you do ... do whatever you want. Just make everyone look good,'" LaChapelle remembers. It's advice that has clearly stayed with him: His lens is always kind and his subjects are perennially young looking.

His early days as a photographer were a heady whirl of partying, at legendary New York club Studio 54 and later on the London club scene. All the while, his commercial photography career was gathering steam, and before long he was shooting for the likes of Rolling Stone, Vanity Fair and Italian Vogue.

Later, he moved into advertising, stage production and directing music videos, creating some of the most notorious videos of the last ten years, including the video for Christina Aguilera's single "Dirrty."

He even expanded into feature film directing, with 2005's critically acclaimed documentary "Rize," about the culture of krumping -- a street dance craze in South Central, Los Angeles.

These days, though, LaChapelle's work is fed by the natural environment, reflecting his spiritual regeneration. Many of his images are based around the theme of paradise regained with Maui's lush rainforest recast as an Edenic landscape where lost souls can find redemption.

"This idea of Paradise Regained or Paradise Found -- I think we all had enough of Paradise Lost," he said.

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Religious symbolism and art historical references ranging from Botticelli to Michelangelo abound in this new work, but don't be fooled, he hasn't lost his taste for celebrity, gloss or controversy.

Recent images show a beatific and smooth-skinned Michael Jackson (played by an impersonator) cast variously as a martyr or an archangel.

Some critics have taken offence at his imagery, labeling it by turns kitsch, garish and over-sexualized. To LaChapelle, though, it is beautiful -- and, he says, beauty can be a useful tool for communication.

"Beauty draws people in whereas (ugliness) repels them, and aggressive imagery repels them, and to document things straight on the nose -- that's the job of a photojournalist. That's not my job," he said.

Serious themes such as America's dangerous obsession with consumerism and the plundering of Africa are explored in his recent work, but interpreted in a signature style that doesn't shy away from bright colors or well-known faces.

"I may be talking about the same subjects (as photojournalists)," he said, "But I want to talk about it in a different language.

"What I try to do is get (people) to see it with beauty," he continued.