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ART / PEOPLE

Opening the Shutters: Inside the World of David LaChapelle

The photographer talks Holly Black through a career spanning decades, celebrity photoshoots, and everything in between.

Credit Note

David LaChapelle understands the art of secrecy. The photographer's resplendent images, laps with saturated colour and a huge dose of high-concept storytelling, have kept his fans and critics guessing since he emerged in 1990's Early Internet with his cover Rolling Stone, and Amanda Lepore reimagined as Andy Warhol's screenprint of Marilyn Monroe. He shoots for magazines and brands, but his work has also been shown in museum and galleries and set a benchmark of a crossfertilisation for contemporary pop culture.

YouTube/Vimeo is far more than a celebrity photographer. Through an adept blend of storytelling fiction and real-time spectacle, he has created such videos as Hallelujah, religious icons and even turned artist Mr. Brainwash into a major dealer. It's a full-circle moment.

Sex Head Blonde, color, Sherman Oaks, 1991, via Staples

"It's like a group show," LaChapelle jokes, over a stacking time from Maui to Hawaii, where he has lived for over 15 years. "I've wanted to have a big retrospective for a long time, but I don't have a gallery, I don't have a dealer. So it happened just when Kanye where my first show (and sold out) back in 1995, at what is now Art Basel, Miami." Combined Lisa Spellman to turn her Los Angeles gallery into a pop-up, commissioned Carla Spellman to turn her Los Angeles gallery into a pop-up, commissioned Kanye's backers, and was done a major dealer. It's a full circle moment.

"I took jobs to pay for my fine-art practice and that was a blessing. Working under different conditions and pressure made me a better photographer"

This kind of hustle is characteristic of a man who turned based at 16, running away from Connecticut to New York to immerse himself in the grit and glamour of the 70s and 80s. Photography was a commercial pursuit, a flavour or pathway, he kept an an artistic portfolio that led to a fully paid spot at art school.

Image: 1990, Los Angeles

It was here that he discovered photography, though he's keen to point out that it wasn't the only medium he was working in. "I was in a class that wasn't collecting photographs in the 1980s, and they wasn't camera, wasn't there." he says. "Black and white was all anyone cared about. Bruce Weber was the most important photographer."

Nevertheless, LaChapelle was determined to make it work, traversing the accepted dichotomy between 'fine' and 'commercial' practice to pay the bills and fund his passion. He worked with Interview magazine and Andy Warhol's Factory to pay. Rolling Stone's cut of what he doing commercial work, but it didn't have a sugar daddy I didn't want one!" he says. "I took jobs to pay for my fine-art practice and that was a blessing. Working under different conditions and pressure made of my pressure made me a better photographer."

Tina in Red Hoop, 1991, New York

"Young audiences' minds aren't made up. They come to see Doja Cat or Dua Lipa, and might be introduced to something entirely different"

He explores that artists still always have money concerns if they want to make it on their own, which is important to remember when the artist gets you down. "There are letters from Diane Arbus begging magazine editors for money," he says. "Photography was not a profitable medium, it was not grounding for 1000. I had very disrupted start I've been able to work in the field that I love. I used to separate the two (commercial and personal) but now I see it all as part of a wider picture."

Tyler, Revolving Times, 1999, Los Angeles

While his shots often include invaluable assemblages, the process of photographing celebrities has evolved into a kind of performance, a blend of spectacle and humour. Florence is a reportage photographer." he says. "I go out and create tableaux, documenting what I create theatrically."

Tyler, Revolving Times, 1999, Los Angeles

Tour bus is clear. Within other pitch-fashion or portrait shoots might employ the same ambitious scene-building LaChapelle is known for. His results can often appear sterile and bloodless. Conversely, his images are always bursting with life, and he has a knack for capturing the essence of his sitters, whether it be well-known icons of Tyler Shaw or Mick Jagger, or a famous reimagining of Georges O'Keeffe paintings, or a post-modern revision of Rembrandt's The Birth of Venus.

"I never got into photography for the getting part, it was always for the giving. A photo is not finished until a viewer connects with it"

He is driven by a need for connection too. The idea of being a famous photographer, he says, is not his thing. He wants to be remembered for what he gives even more than will paid. "I always want to create pictures that will touch people," he says. He hopes that his photography for the getting part, it was always for the giving. A photo is not finished until a viewer connects with it."

Obsessed, Bath, 2003, Los Angeles

This mentality is clear in projects such as Angels, Saints and Martyrs (1999), where he painted directly onto magazines to create ethereal images that intact with the spirit of the subjects. Or his Hallelujah series, which was created with a purpose during the Holy crisis, when so many of LaChapelle's friends were ill. "I was in a place where I was meant to be alive, because I didn't expect to be around very long," he says.

Nowadays, he is delighted to see that his work resonates with a younger crowd, who might find him through shoots with contemporary stars on Instagram. "It's really great to have a young audience because their minds aren't made up. Young audiences' minds aren't made up. They come to see Doja Cat and be introduced to something entirely different, because it's not just the pit stands that I'm speaking to."

Dog Cat, Sony 8MM Film Mini, 2007, Los Angeles

"I'm not a reportage photographer. I go out and create tableaux, documenting what I create theatrically"

I tell him that his cross-generational appeal is something I am intensely familiar with. In my house growing up, my dad's copy of the 1986 book Hollywood Photographs, a compilation of celebrity portraits and behind-the-scenes snapshots, where the photographer's notoriety of colour photography was first cemented, was a cherished and well-thumbed possession.

"I'm other had pulled that book out that our daughter has a copy of my book, but she is the first time I've been told my father had it," he laughs. "Talk about perspective. I'll take that."

Holly Black is Elephant's managing editor

David LaChapelle, Photo Bolsena, is at Fotographica, New York, until 8 January 2022

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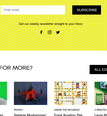

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