

TEMPLON

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DAVID LACHAPPELLE

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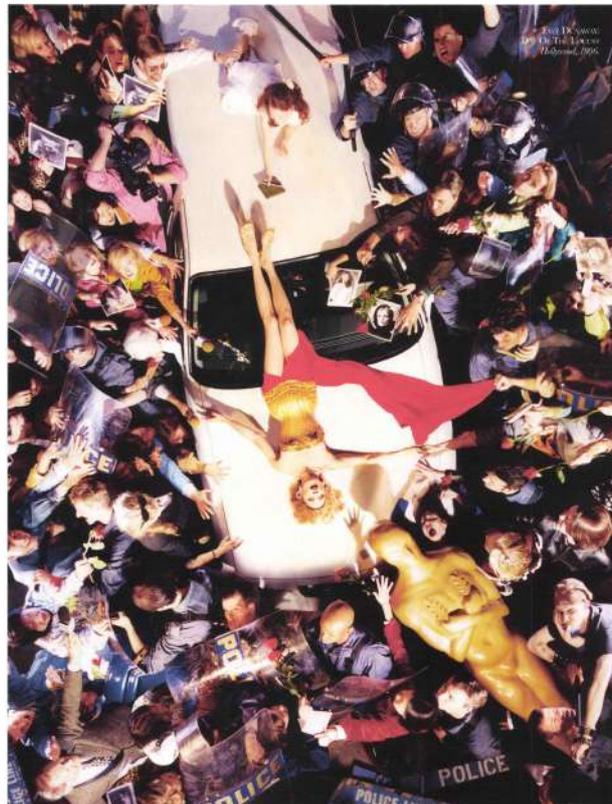
SEDUCTION AND SALVATION:

FROM SPECTACLE

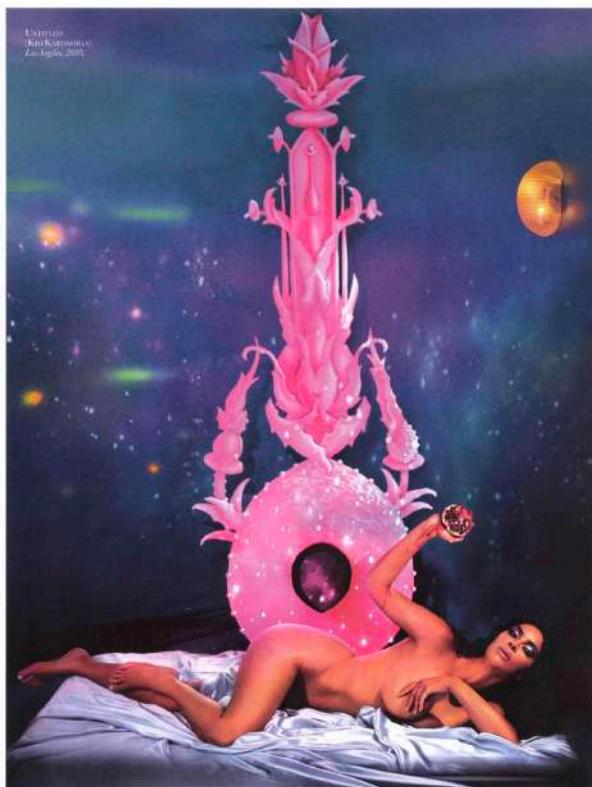
TO SPIRITUALITY, ICONIC ARTIST
DAVID LACHAPPELLE HAS NEVER
STOPPED ASKING

WHAT *IMAGES* ARE FOR.

Interview by LÉA LAURENT



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He is one of the most influential photographers of the past four decades, a defining figure whose hyperreal, saturated images have reshaped contemporary visual culture. Born in 1963, David LaChapelle began working in New York at a time when images still carried a sense of rarity and aura, quickly becoming a sought-after contributor to *Interview*, *Rolling Stone* or *Vanity Fair*. Moving fluidly between art, fashion and celebrity portraiture, he has developed a language that draws equally from Renaissance painting, pop culture and spiritual symbolism. Today, while his work is shown internationally and represented in Paris by Galerie **Templon**, his practice has increasingly shifted toward questions of faith, nature and transcendence.

In 2026, as his largest museum retrospective in the United States opens at the Orlando Museum of Art, David LaChapelle's work is being reconsidered in its full scope, from early editorial excess to more contemplative and spiritual bodies of work. This conversation traces that evolution, from a world where images were precious to an era of visual overabundance, and explores how beauty, spectacle, silence and belief continue to shape his vision of the world.

You began photographing at a time when images felt rare, almost sacred. How has today's visual overabundance changed your relationship to photography?

There is a great difference between taking a picture and making a picture. My process has always been multi-layered. It involves the visualization of a scene or a narrative or a specific composition. Oftentimes I make drawings and studies. There is planning involved. It is similar to a theatrical production. There is usually a rehearsal with a collaboration of artists from the stylist to set builders, hair and makeup stand-ins and the subjects.

Your work is often described as spectacular, even overwhelming. Is excess a strategy, a language, or simply a reflection of the world we live in?

I have always studied Italian masters. From the Renaissance to the Romantic periods. The story is in the details and I incorporate many details. I also like to play with scales which also come from techniques of the Renaissance. The scale, the composition, the details, the choreography of the models - especially the gaze and hands... all work together to create the image. But I also make works that are more simple that involve just a single figure in natural light.

You once said that beauty can be dangerous. What kind of danger does beauty carry for you?

Beauty disarms the viewer. We are drawn to large eyes and sympathetic faces. I often use beauty as a tool to draw the viewer in when I am addressing various subjects that are dark or light or melancholy or humorous. I also love to find beauty in places that others find ugliness. There are many ways to use beauty and many ways to create beauty or shift the viewer's opinion of what is beautiful. This keeps me challenged and allows my work to evolve.

Your work often balances seduction and discomfort. Is that tension intentional?

No. I don't seek to be a provocateur. But I also don't hold back. Many images that once seemed radical to an audience now seem tame. I have celebrated many body types, gender roles and sexual identities for over three decades. The collaboration I did in 1995 with Diesel was the first global advertising campaign to feature a same-sex kiss. It was an idea I had to honor gays in the military. The idea didn't come from a place of trying to make the viewer uncomfortable. Again touching on the previous subject, I use beauty to celebrate my ideas and give the subject matter integrity. I was celebrating this moment, not for shock value but because I knew it was an important story to tell.

After photographing some of the most famous faces of our time, what fascinates you more today: fame itself, or what it conceals?

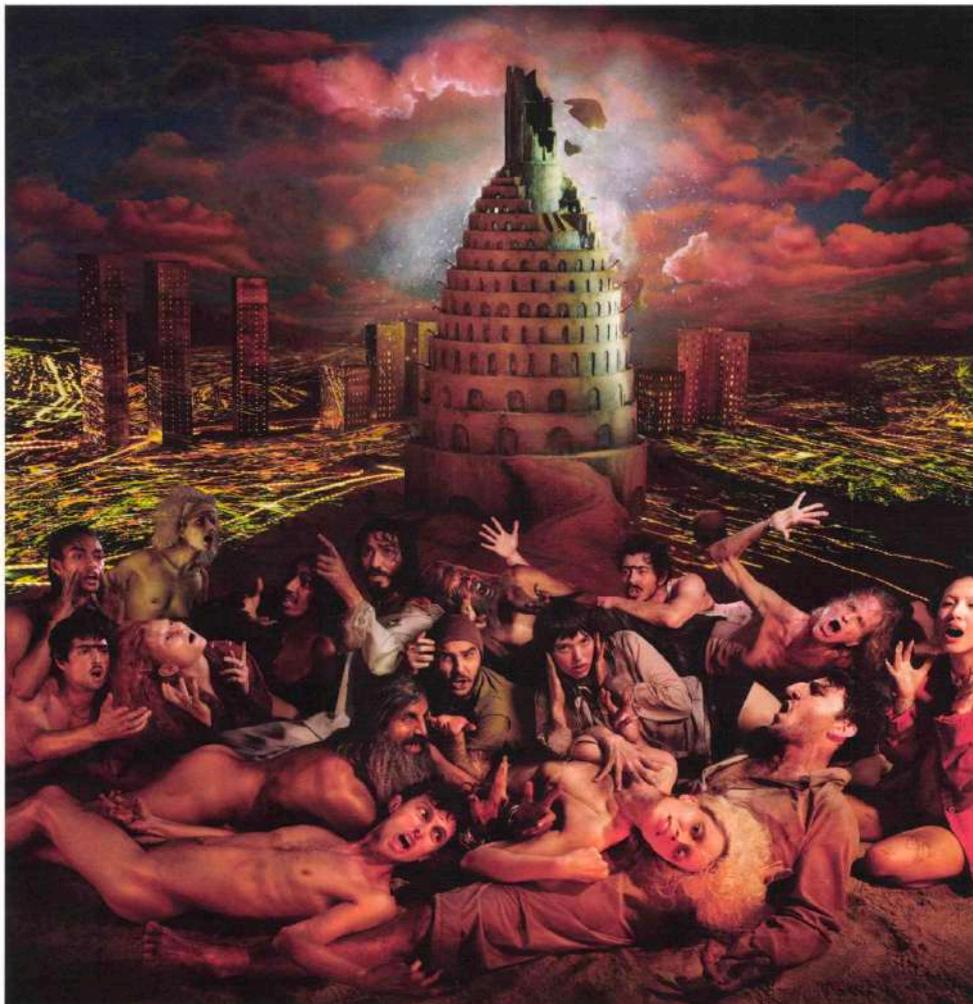
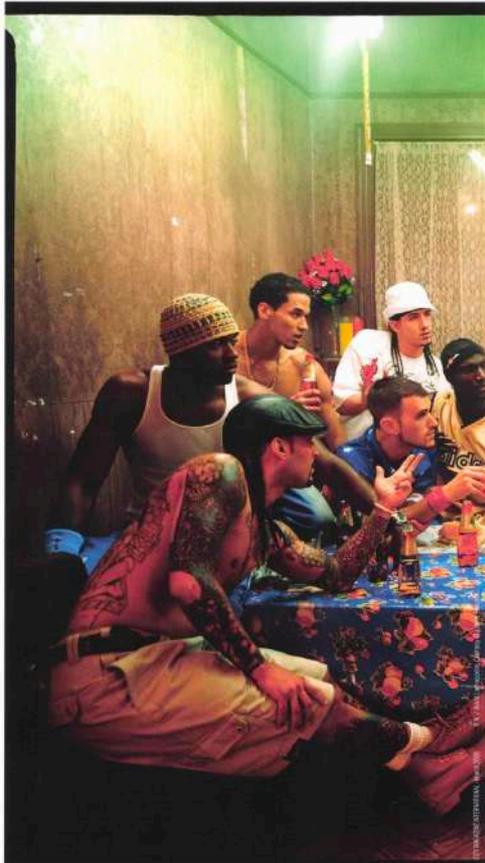
I have returned to topics outside of celebrity, back to themes of spirituality. I have almost exhausted the topic of fame, and in my museum shows I have a work called *Vox Populi* that rotates hundreds of portraits from my career in an installation that replicates posters on a city street. In America the concept of fame is less interesting than it used to be as social media and the internet has really watered down the mystery that once made fame so interesting. Also there is a sense of anti-elitism that came from the pandemic when many people realized that we were worshipping the wrong things. I do still make portraits but I am more selective on the assignments I take and yes I still enjoy it.

When you photograph celebrities, do you approach them as symbols, characters, or human beings first?

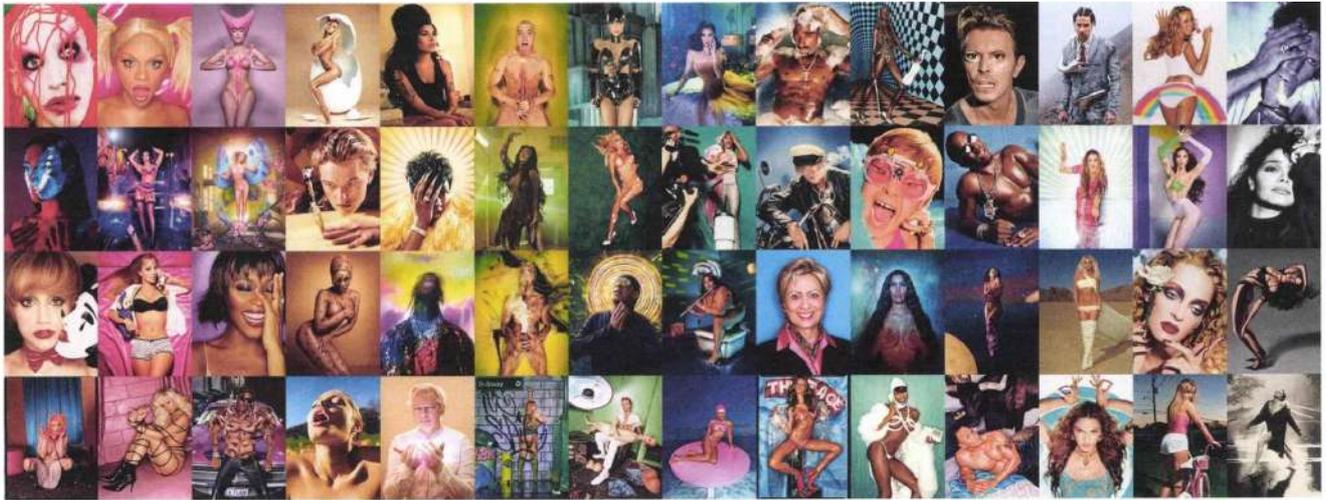
I think about the photograph and what I want to say about this person. I try to learn as much as I can about who they are and what they mean to the world. Rather than making an image that celebrates them, I am capturing what they mean to the world.

How has your perception of celebrity changed in the age of social media?

The accessibility to presenting oneself as a singer, a painter, an actor, a dancer has become much more democratic with the advent of social media. And so we don't have stars like we did from the golden age. One of my favorite portraits is *Faye Dunaway: Day of the Locust*. It captures the height of our obsession with celebrity, the worship of this actress floating above a limo surrounded by an army of paparazzi as she crowd surfs towards a giant life size Oscar award. I think the public is disenchanted with celebrity now with the awards system and the worship of celebrity. We are in a new time and people are suffering all over the world. Our priorities have evolved.



TOWER OF BABEL
Los Angeles, 2024.



Religion, faith, and apocalypse recur throughout your work. When did spirituality shift from a subject to a necessity?

I think of my career as a continuous circle. If you look at my earliest work from 1984, I started with themes of spirituality. I was questioning what the soul looks like as many of my friends were dying of AIDS. I used photography as a way to deal with this sudden and extreme sense of loss and confusion. Although I went on to have a career working in popular culture, I have always stayed close to God and most recently really returned to addressing these spiritual subjects again.

Your images often resemble contemporary religious paintings. Do you see yourself as a moral observer of the world?

I am reacting to what I see and being true to myself. I am expressing how it feels to be here. I don't feel morally superior to anybody. I spend a lot of time in nature and get distance from the busy world. And this is where the ideas come from.

Is art, for you, a form of prayer, or a form of resistance?

I use prayer to get to the images. It's part of my routine and helps to keep me grounded. I pray for guidance and have always listened to my intuition to guide me to the right projects and processes for making my work.

You once stepped away from the commercial art world to live in Hawaii. How did silence and distance reshape your relationship to images and to time?

There was a synchronicity that happened. When I traveled to Hawaii, I thought I had said all I needed to say and I would become a farmer. But soon after I was invited by a gallery to show and make new work - with carte blanche. This started a new chapter of creation - of continuous creation that I am still on.

Do you feel freer today than at the height of your commercial success?

Yes and no. I have always been true to

myself and very deliberate on my choices, but I also enjoy collaboration. There is an art to working with others towards a common goal. The gift of being established now is that presenters and commissioners understand what I do and give me a certain level of freedom. However, there is always a pressure that I put upon myself because I want to live up to my own expectations and of course, the expectation of others. There is a level of expectation that comes with my name.

Looking back, do you feel your work has been misunderstood, or perhaps understood too literally?

For every viewer there is a different understanding of each piece. I have found that over time my work begins to be better understood.

What do you hope remains when spectacle fades?

My work is my life and I don't see it as a spectacle.

In a world marked by climate anxiety and acceleration, do artists have a responsibility today?

I do feel my own obligation to make work that brings light to the world.

Cities like Los Angeles, New York, and Paris have shaped your work. What role do they play in your imagination?

So many of my works are shot on location so I have enjoyed playing with these very American settings. In the 90's when many photographic stories strived for a sense of aspiration, I took my pictures out in front of fast foods restaurants, landfills, and suburbia. I found beauty in Americana. Travel is always very inspiring and brings others inspiration to different kinds of pictures. New cities and new places bring new inspirations.

Has one city nourished you creatively more than the others?

Nature for me has been the greatest backdrop.

How do you perceive cities today, as so many people dream of leaving them?

I love to work in my studio in Los Angeles because I have all of my team there. I have the costume houses and the prop houses and so many great creatives in this city. But I do my best thinking and planning in nature and love working all over the world.

If you were to create a single image capturing the spirit of a city today, what would it look like?

One of my recent works is *Tower of Babel*. Although it portrays Babylon, it feels timely now in a moment when I feel everyone is talking but not listening. ■

David LaChapelle: *As the World Turns*, until May 3 at Orlando Museum of Art
Oma.org
Templon.com