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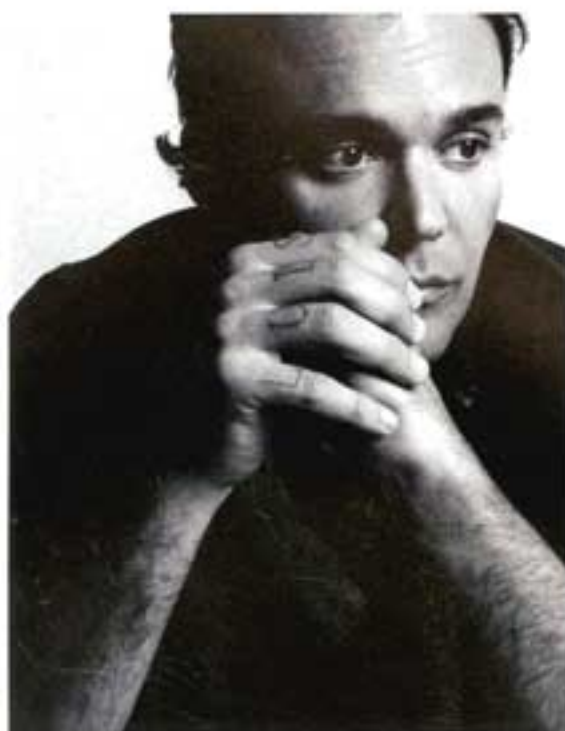
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COLLAPSE IN A GARDEN, C-PRINT, 1995

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EXTREME BEAUTY

DAVID LACHAPELLE, known internationally for his acerbic wit and lysergic imagery, talks to MATHEW SCOTT about his career from the Village to Vogue and beyond

THE CROWD INSIDE the cavernous exhibition hall has been gathering its anticipation for more than half an hour when David LaChapelle appears behind the sound deck, stage right, and begins chatting with the volunteers working at Art Stage Singapore 2011.

Dressed casually and comfortably in a grey hoody, loose denims and retro Puma high-tops, it's only when he climbs up to take his seat that any nerves begin to show, and at first the photographer - the artist - seems unsure of where exactly he should start.

Little wonder really, when you consider LaChapelle is here on this Saturday afternoon to talk about his life and about his work.

Since first discovered - famously, it was inside New York's Studio 54 - and put to work by Andy Warhol in the 1980s, LaChapelle has challenged the very notion of the captured image, how it is framed, its meaning and, in the end, its actual purpose.

From Warhol's *Interview* magazine and then on to the likes of *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair*, LaChapelle repackaged both the fashion

industry and the celebrity that surrounds it by training his eye on everyone from Paris Hilton to Muhammad Ali.

If that sounds like praise that reaches too high, try arguing the point with the few hundred people here today, leaning forward from their straight-backed chairs, ready to hang on the American's every word.

So it's fitting that when the now 47-year-old LaChapelle begins, he does so with a few stories about the days when he, too, was somewhat star-struck, surrounded in New York's East Village by Warhol and his crew, by the brilliance of Jean-Michel Basquiat and others who were at the time turning the art world on its ear.

The mystery to LaChapelle, starting out then on his own artistic journey, was that the world didn't seem to see exactly what was going on.

"I moved to New York at 15 and I got to hang out with all these cool-looking artists," begins LaChapelle, who had been raised in Connecticut. "There was just an incredible energy in New York at that time. But at that time in New York, in the '80s, Andy was considered a has-been, a relic of the '60s. People thought

he was a joke. At the last show he ever did - Dollars - he didn't sell a piece. Really. Think about that and then think about how potent the dollar sign is in art today. Everything in art today is about the market. He was a prophet."

But, importantly, Warhol had learned how to deal with fame and the falls that often follow when it disappears. Not so Basquiat, who was just 25 when he and Warhol staged their one and only exhibition of collaborative works - an effort that was condemned in the press and failed to sell a single piece when staged.

"Their friendship deteriorated after that," recalls LaChapelle. "They were embarrassed to be seen together. It was like they'd committed a crime. And in the paper Jean-Michel was called Andy's lapdog."

"For an African-American artist I think that was a real blow. But for a 25-year-old I think it was a lethal blow. He was 25 and he was told his career was over. And by 27, he was dead."

"Jean-Michel didn't have the tools to deal with that criticism and his drug abuse increased and he died. Also, Andy died shortly thereafter. And they never really resolved."

The point LaChapelle wants to make is

ARCHANGEL MICHAEL: AND NO
MESSAGE COULD HAVE BEEN
CLEARER, C-PRINT, 2009







STERIODS SHRINK BALLS, C-PRINT, 2004

this: "When people say, 'What did you learn from those days in New York?' I learned from watching these friends of mine that as an artist, as anyone, you have to have your own self worth. Because if you let the outside world, the opinions of the outside world, dictate your self worth, then you're lost."

What has helped LaChapelle along his own path is the fact that he was apparently born with the knowledge of exactly where and who he wanted to be.

"Art has this incredible power to reach people," he says. "Ever since I was a little boy I wanted to be an artist. I wanted to be a painter, first, and I never paid attention at school. During math and things like that I would say, 'Huh, I don't need that. I'm an artist.'"

And while LaChapelle would find fame and fortune with a camera rather than a brush, those artistic leanings never really disappeared. They can be seen quite plainly in the drama that frames his fashion photos and his portraits, which he runs through as a slide show during a talk that's nothing ever less than impassioned. There are also on display the photographer's re-imagining of famous works of art and of famous scenes from history and from religion - Kanye West as Jesus, Courtney Love as the Virgin Mary, and an utterly disappointed looking Naomi Campbell as the post-coital Venus in his take on Botticelli's *Venus and Mars*.

Of course they all brought controversy - but it was never specially courted, LaChapelle claims. "Photography is a collaboration. You have to start with an idea, with a concept, and it grows from there. I've never set out to take a shocking photograph, and that's the God's honest truth."

From the beginning of his career, he says, the idea was to make a connection with the audience, to make them feel. He later recounts a story of when, as a young man, he happened upon Picasso's *Guernica* in a museum, and for 20 minutes or so he had the famous work all to himself. "It was mine," he says.

"The moment that you behold a piece of art, it's yours," he continues. "You carry that piece of art in your head, or that piece of music, or that message you got from that theatre piece or that poem. That's yours. You own it."

It was that kind of thinking that eventually led LaChapelle away from fashion and towards larger, more challenging installation pieces.

"As I grew older I wanted the pictures to say more," he explains. "Not a lot is expected from pictures in fashion magazines and it became increasingly difficult to get my photos published because they were always questioning my concepts."

The last magazine fashion shoot LaChapelle did was for Italian *Vogue* in 2005 - shot in June and setting models around houses destroyed by a hurricane.



RAPE OF AFRICA, C-PRINT, 2009



"What I wanted to highlight was how obsessed we had become with shopping," he says. "Beauty is a created thing - colour, costumes, make-up, I love these things. But when things get out of balance, your whole life becomes like an episode of *Sex and the City*, and where does it end?"

"It's very possible to care about how you look, to dress well, and to care about other things, to be conscious. That's the point I was trying to make. Photographs to me are about questioning values - my own included."

But when Hurricane Katrina hit the United States in August of that year - just as the magazine hit the newsstands - LaChapelle found his work under considerable fire. It was, he says, a sign that it was time to walk away.

"People were saying, 'How could you exploit this tragedy?' But if you know publishing, the photos were taken months before, so I just knew it was time to move on," he says.

But LaChapelle has never exactly left the limelight. Series such as "Jesus is my Homeboy" have ensured that.

"I'm not a Jesus freak," he explains about the Jesus series and others that take scenes from the New Testament as their foundation. "But his teachings are beautiful. I thought about who might be the people Jesus would hang with today."

These days, LaChapelle lives a long way from New York and the Los Angeles he once called home; he's taken up residency in what was once a nudist colony in Hawaii.

"I'd had 20 years of insanity," he says. "Fashion shoots, music videos, corporate work and so - I just wanted to drop off the map."

LaChapelle has turned the property into a retreat, for friends and fellow artists: "Clean air, good food, clean water - the true luxuries in life," he says.

And while there he's had the time and space to work on the art that has become the focus of his career. "I give a lot of lectures at schools and one of the big questions is where do you get your inspiration. I say it comes from inside. But you can't hear your inner voice or whatever you want to call it if you're on the cell phone, on the computer, the television on. You're never going to hear the big questions in life.

"You need quiet, total solitude. Then I can hear myself, get inspiration for a new set of pictures or whatever it may be. You can't get that peace in a room in your apartment."

Which brings him back to the strength he believes can only come from inside. "I think in the end what I'm trying to say is that an artist has to find strength within," he concludes. "I guess all of us do." ■

David LaChapelle will be appearing in Hong Kong on May 27 for an IQ2 Asia debate:
intelligencesquared.asia



WHEN THE WORLD IS THROUGH, C-PRINT, 2005, AS FEATURED IN ITALIAN VOGUE

