



David LaChapelle

**Art can be a prism which transcends and transforms.**

LANDSCAPE, a new exhibition of David LaChapelle's work, is showing at the Robilant+Voena Gallery in Milan. Marco Voena is with Jacqueline and I in the Armani Hotel. We just met Sophia Loren, here having lunch with a friend. It's a good moment, an Italian moment, and David LaChapelle says it would be a dream to photograph Sophia; perhaps later this year in LA.



Sophia Loren in *Two Women*, 1961

*David, why do you want to photograph Sophia?*

*Two Women* alone would be reason enough. She is one of the greatest beauties of the time. She is incredible, her face... I met her before, but that would be a dream – there is only one Sophia Loren.

*Do you still believe that the camera is the most powerful weapon on the planet? And a tool that can help to save our planet?*

Well, I always thought that art can change the world and I think a lot of the information we get today, 24 hour news cycles, so many images with everyone taking images with a phone, it is like people are seeing images 24 hours a day. It can almost make people apathetic, people become desensitised to seeing all the news channels – one conflict here, another conflict arises there, all the conflicts on the news, Ukraine, Syria, Ebola, Hong Kong; and people are watching it like entertainment. News has to be taken, but it is not entertainment. Henry David Thoreau, the

American poet, said 150 years ago that when you read in the newspaper about a murder and another murder you are just engaging in gossip. Unless one is doing something with the images that they are seeing, then it is merely a form of entertainment; in America they call it infotainment.

*What is the difference between these images and yours?*

I believe in the importance of journalism, but I don't believe in this selling the news to make money. When they established the Federal Broadcasting System in America they said you must show the public the news, so for one hour a day they had the news. But now they are selling fear and making money all over the world. If in Roman times you had showed a video of every death and catastrophe you would have had an anxiety attack then too.



*What is your work about?*

It's trying to transcend those things, to give the viewer a break, not just information. I respect journalism and photography, I am not in competition with them or putting them down. I am talking about the way the powers sell the 24 hour news channels. Recently when I got off the plane from Hawaii and I saw the images of Korea without the sound, I thought we were at war. We need to know what is going on, but I have a problem with how information is sold.

*Is that why you live in Hawaii most of the time?*

The reason for Hawaii is to get away. But I don't have cable TV in LA either. I am there for the peace of nature.

*What do you do there?*

We farm, we make pictures, video.

*What are you fighting for?*

In my very first interview ever I said, "Art can change the world." I still have this ideal. So then I showed in galleries. I take photographs, but what I do in galleries is I put a lot of effort into making pictures that will inspire people, that will transcend, give them a moment of beauty. I want to move people and say something with my images. For me, at this time on the planet, the key is personal enlightenment. We are dealing with the same issues the Greeks dealt with. Greed is ruining the planet, now it is like in the Dark Ages.



*What is your work today?*

Models of refineries are monuments to the Industrial Revolution. The Industrial Revolution is the single most impactful event that has happened to mankind since the last Ice Age, since the last extinction. And for us to believe that there cannot be another extinction is folly, and unless we can change the minds of men we are going to see some big changes in our lives. Of course there will be a new extinction.

With greed running the planet we cannot change, the only salvation is in personal enlightenment. We cannot control what they are doing in China, in Washington, what Putin's doing, we can only play our role, believing in it. My role is making pictures that are going to move people, pictures that have something to say. I am tired of contemporary art that has nothing to say, that is impossible to decipher and just some sort of clever astonishment. "Oh it's so giant, how could they make that teddy bear so big." It's a 'Giant Teddy Bear', but it has nothing to say. I don't understand what it has to do with the time we live in. But of course, it is about everything to do with the time that we live in. Andy predicted this with his 'Dollar Signs'. It has to do of course with the nature of the world. It is only about money and I reject this idea of a few billionaires flying around in private planes.

I was an outsider in the fashion world and now I am an outsider in the art world. I never depended on one world, like a fashion world, so I am free and I have no problem to say to a collector that he is an asshole. I don't go to art fairs, I have nothing to do with it. Once when I was with these people and I had to go home and take a shower. I felt dirty the way they talked about art, like racehorses. You are talking about the fact that there are no more dealers like Leo Castelli or Bruno Bischofberger, who nurtured artists over a very long time. Those dealers no longer exist, now they are like stockbrokers, treating art as an investment. This is going backwards. So I have burnt many bridges and so my path is fairly well lit!!

*With the fashion pictures that you shot, did you really change something?*

No one in the world is doing what I am doing in the art world today either. Technically they cannot do what I am doing, we invented a way to make the pictures this big and with so much clarity. We are working in a way that they can't copy, because they don't know how we do it. These things are real, these images, these sets we build, and we spend so much time. I can devote a lot of time to my work and I do. No one would think I devote that much time to a piece or a series of pieces.



*Basquiat and Warhol were your friends. Were they like you?*

No, I love them but we are different. Keith Haring was different. Those guys were the geniuses of our time.

*Were they in the stockbroker art system?*

Towards the end of Jean Michel's and Andy's life they were has-beens, they were written off by collectors and people on the street. In New York City they were considered over, finished, by critics and people. The New York Times, they wrote about Basquiat when he was 25 that he was finished, his career was done, over, and at 27 he was dead. He didn't know that that would pass. They told him that the paintings he and Andy did together were horrible. Now people make fortunes out of it, they never met him and they make millions out of it. Andy and Jean Michel had a real friendship and when they made paintings together it ruined their friendship. They were embarrassed to be seen together after such harsh criticism. It was so brutal. They wrote so horribly about them in the New York Times it was like they had committed a crime.

*All that you are talking about, did it not happen before in Art? Caravaggio? Now he is a genius. Is this not the story of an artist?*

Jean Michel for me is the new van Gogh. They have romanticised his life. These billionaires are so horny for Jean Michel because his life story has become almost as looked at as the work itself. They identify with his suffering. But some people suffer, just not so obviously. Everyone suffers.

*Do you suffer?*

Sensitive people suffer more than others. Of course I suffer, I am a human being. When I work, when I am creating, that alleviates having your mind play with you, bringing you down and getting caught up. When you are in the flow of life it is easier to battle your demons, the dark side that comes to everybody. But the suffering is inescapable, unless you are completely cold blooded.

*Have you showed your dark side in your art, in your pictures?*

For me they were never dark. I would comment on materialism or greed, and play with the social issues that were interesting at the time, but they were always balanced with beauty.

*When you are in the islands of Hawaii do you have a lot of time to think?*

I am actually really busy, I swim, I take care of things – if you don't watch the news you are inspired. The pictures I show now in Milan, I saw these images in my head and as I started working on them I understood why they were important. I was inspired. They are monuments to the Industrial Revolution.



*Are you against the Industrial Revolution?*

I am neither against or for. It is the biggest and most impactful event. We would not even be here without it. Without the Industrial Revolution we would be in a completely different world and the population would be probably 15% of what is today. So it has affected absolutely every aspect of our lives. It is neither good nor bad; as the Buddha says, "It is what it is." It is what changed the trajectory of human existence, the planet's existence, the atmosphere, the seas. Every challenge is related back to the Industrial Revolution. It is what changed the planet and human existence.

*How do you show this?*

These photographs are monuments to the event of the Industrial Revolution. They are made with the by-products of the Industrial Revolution and the fact that we, you and I, are even here is because of the Industrial Revolution. The population has climbed steeply and has not stopped. This is the way we inherited this world. We have to do everything we can in our lifetime, the best we can, in whatever role we play; in whatever role we need to do the best we can.

*Have you left the world of fashion?*

Yes, in 2006, but I still do things that interest me and if there is time.

*Is fashion art or not?*

I think it can be, of course. Sometimes it is just showing merchandise, but fashion can transcend and become an artistic experience.

*Who are the artists that you admire in the world of fashion?*

Yves St. Laurent and Alexander McQueen are the two designers who spoke to me the most. Of photographers: Guy Bourdin, Richard Avedon and Helmut Newton. They were the first I was exposed to as a child. My first fashion photo book was Avedon: Photographs 1947-1977, and I love this book and still have it.

*And who are the artists you value today? Do you think that there are still some good artists?*

Yes, I do think so. For me, right now it's Pharell Williams, Luca Pizzaroni and Christian Rosa who are my favourite contemporary artists. Their art touches people, they move people and that's what I like.



*What are you working on now?*

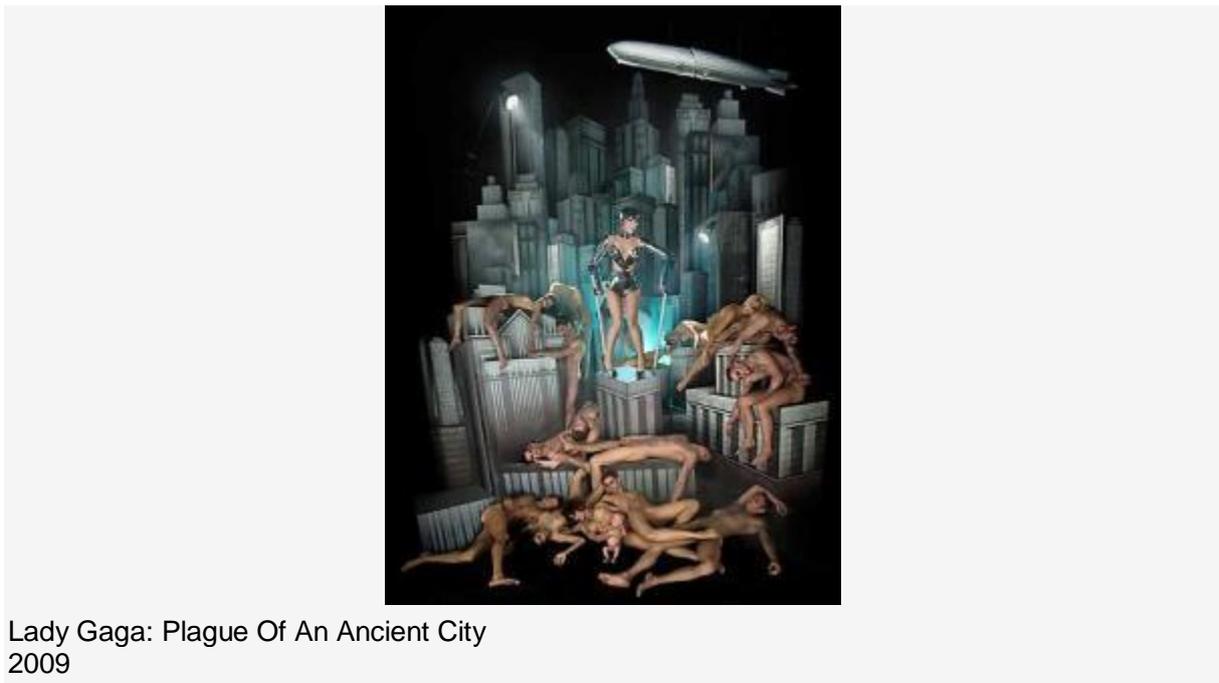
I am working on a new series and just finished this video, a new video for Michael Jackson and Freddie Mercury of Queen. They made this music in 1982 and I shot it in Hawaii, I think it has a very strong message.

*Do you consider portraits important in your work?*

I still like to photograph portraits. I was shooting everyone in the world, now I am more particular who I photograph as I don't have the time to photograph everyone in the world of popular culture. Now I do work more for galleries, so I have to feel very much that someone inspires me and has some history to make a portrait.

*In your personal memory, who did you really love photographing?*

I loved photographing Mohammed Ali and Tupac Shakur. I always enjoyed photographing Pamela Anderson, I thought she was a pop art idea of America. Amanda Lepore and Angelina Jolie was great to work with. I worked with Leonardo De Caprio when he was young and I have really fond memories of the time.



Lady Gaga: Plague Of An Ancient City  
2009

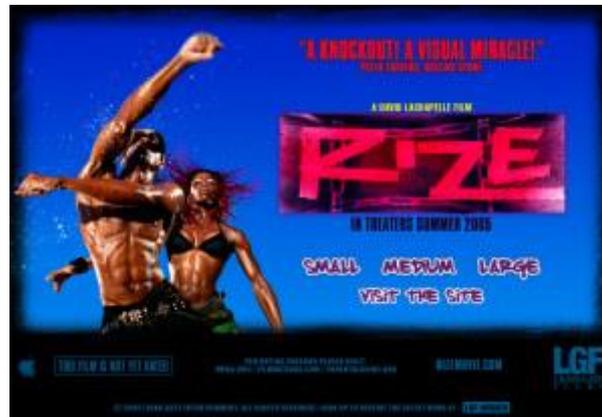
*Did you invent Lady Gaga?*

No, she invented herself, I just took some pictures of her in Hawaii and LA. She is a friend. I photograph Daphne Guinness, she is interesting, I like the way she dresses.

David LaChapelle shows us some of the video he made for 'There Must be More to Life than This', the music Michael Jackson and Freddie Mercury made together in 1982, which is only now being released.

*What about making movies?*

Maybe a documentary, a dance film. I love dance with Sergei Polunov, he was with the Royal Ballet. They are calling him the best male dancer in 40 years, they say he is the new Nureyev. They want me to do a documentary but we are talking about it, I would like to make it more a dance film, like I did with 'Rize' – a dance film that is entertaining but with a social commentary, that has a feeling and touches you.



*You are not an artist who is against others?*

No, I am inspired by the bad work of others to do better. We are in the Dark Ages. When violence is the pornography, like videogames and movies like 'The Hunger Games', all the serial killer films, all the torture and brutality as entertainment. Watching people suffer, real crime shows and crime dramas, we are no different from the Romans in the Colosseum. The definition of the Dark Ages is when brutality rules, when greed rules.

*In other words, the world has not changed?*

We have grown with technology but we are not yet evolved spiritually or morally since Greek times. Now that there are so many more of us, in the Age of Information we see much more, to the point that it becomes benign – we are using peoples' suffering as entertainment. In America you can't show a woman's body and a man's body today, but the Pope supported Michelangelo and to see all those nudes in a church was shocking at the time. The Renaissance freed the body. The Renaissance was enlightenment, looking at the beauty of mankind. A world without beauty is a lost world.

*What do you think of the world of Kiefer for instance?*

I love the work of Anselm Kiefer. It has meaning, and the beauty of his canvases and his sculptures. It is about a horrific subject, but it transcends that and there is a beauty in his work. His work means something, it's not just done by some foundry. I went three times to see his work when I was a kid. I think his work is incredible.

*What's next?*

We are working on this 'Paradise' series. The video can be considered one of them.

Milan,

October 2nd, 2014

Images used with the kind permission of Robilant+Voena / ©David LaChapelle.