

Art for the age of petroleum

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Nicholas Cranfield on powerhouses of the throwaway society

DAVID LACHAPELLE



Green concerns: Green Fields by David LaChapelle, in his current exhibition, "Land Scape", at Robilant + Voena, in London

GIUSEPPE ARCIMBOLDO (1526-93) may not exactly be a household name, but he is the witty and bizarre Italian painter best known for painting portrait heads from a mix of fruit and veg., flowers, and all manner of things. Nothing is ever quite as it seems, and there is a degree of mischief as well as brilliance in all his allegorical work (although he undertook more conventional commissions that have fallen into oblivion).

Surprisingly, he became the imperial court painter to the Habsburgs, serving Ferdinand I in Vienna and his son Rudolf II in Prague. Their cousin Philip II in Spain might have felt relieved that he had called Titian to work for him in Spain had he seen the Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf II depicted as the Roman God of Spring Vertumnus (c 1590).

From a distance, the portrait is at once recognisable, albeit allegorical. Close up, it comes as a shock to find that it has been contrived with a gourd for the emperor's chest and courgettes supporting his Adam's apple. Pea pods serve as eyebrows and two ripe cherries form his lips falling over a couple of lychees that make a goatee and so on.

Seemingly random objects take on a life of their own as Arcimboldo avoids caricature; animal tails that might be used as dusters wittily serve a dusty old librarian as a beard. Some scholars worried that they were being mocked, but the artist was passing judgement on the attitudes of others. Like Hamlet, he knew a hawk from a handsaw. It would be for others to judge whether he was mad or not.

David LaChapelle (b. 1963) is definitely not mad, but his most recent series of eight large C-print photographs is equally challenging and witty, even though it fills the first and second floor of this gallery so exuberantly with wall after wall of saturated colour. It is his fourth international show in the thriving West End of London.

From a distance, we are presented with sharply lit (often night shots) oil refineries, presented as if they are latter-day temples in a culture of energy production and ecological waste. But all is not quite as it seems.

"Anaheim", "Emerald City", "Greenfields", "Luna Park", "Castle Rock" - their very names are deceptive. As in Britain, so in the United States, incongruous and often innocent-seeming names conceal industrial plants and brown field housing developments much as Victorian terraced housing had happier names "Sunnyview" and "El Dorado".

The city of Anaheim, as part of the Los Angeles metropolitan area, is mightily proud of its first grid-connected photovoltaic power-generation system. At the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport, Emerald City "connects the evergreen ethic of the Pacific Northwest with the sense of possibility and wonder associated with travel", where green LED fixtures will illuminate towers of vine to convey the concept of the "green city" by night. Green crystalline photovoltaic panels on the south side of the tower will provide renewable energy.

LaChapelle comments provocatively on all this self-justifying rhetoric in our petroleum-dependent age, forcing us to ask questions about what constitutes real energy and where the source of power is by making us look closer into his deeply crafted photographs that turn out not to be what they first suggest.

Each of these large pictures, whether of refinery towers belching smoke into the night, giant cooling towers, or poisonous reflections cast into the industrial waste waters of a nuclear power plant, is a carefully realised studio production.

This nightmare world of corporate greed and energy debates is contrived from the equally nightmarish world of our own "throwaway" society: drinking straws, Starbucks' Styrofoam cups, recycled beer cans, hair curlers, corrugated paper, and ordinary Duracell batteries are among the hundreds of everyday objects of our wasteful society used in building each photographic installation.

In Greenfields (182 x 189cm), the complex machinery in the foreground turns out to comprise plastic measuring jugs, stuck together mouth to mouth and linked to VTech mobile phones. Luna Park contains upturned jelly moulds and egg boxes as well as tubs of Similac infant formula. Riverside is built on the caffeine waste of Rockstar energy drinks and the like.

Alongside these large-scale indictments of our energy-crazed world, LaChapelle sets three almost idyllic scenes of disused petrol stations photographed by night with the expressive power of Edward Hopper's 1942 evocative painting of a cheap diner at night. But, whereas in Nighthawks, the artist had peopled the scene of despair, the photographs suggest abandonment and emptiness. On closer inspection, we come to see that the photographer has pulled off yet another brilliant coup de folie.

On the showing of these works. I do not imagine for a moment that he has invested his own millions in utility stocks, whether of renewable energies or not, or that he would be welcome at any AGM, but his critical voice and his quirky photography have a deceptively powerful vision.

"David La Chapelle: Land Scape" is at Robilant +Voena, 38 Dover Street, London W1, until 18 June.
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