

## Art Review

David LaChapelle, Land-Scapes, ROBILANT + VOENA



## David LaChapelle: Modern Temples Of Consumerist Worship An Ominous Vision

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In the first of our Artist to Artist series Michal Cole talks to and reviews the American photographer David LaChapelle's latest London exhibition Land-Scapes at ROBILANT + VOENA.

David LaChapelle's Land-Scapes exhibition at ROBILANT + VOENA is a celebration of colours and textures presented in large format photographs. His work is magnetic; you can not help be attracted to its glitter and vibrancy. Standing in-front of what first seems to be a selection of oil refineries, magically glowing against a vast open space or infinite sky, you are riveted. The architecture manifests like beautiful shrines - modern temples of consumerist worship. The seduction is overwhelmingly compelling, like a child standing for the first time at the gates of Disneyland- blissfully unaware of the financial systems such a place comprises.

A second glance unveils the inconvenient truth, that the "refineries" are all made of disposable everyday items. These products are factory manufactured and marketed to sustain modern culture, with its vast wastage and collectivity of cheap plastic which includes bottles, straws, beer cans, plastic cups, hair rollers exercise balls, phones and spray-cans. All are presented in a precise yet child-like way. The constructions representing the oil refineries and gas stations are also an ominous representation of what has been created, that can and will destroy our future: LaChapelle in his unique and ingenious way has managed to present these images as both the gates of Disneyland- and the gates of Hell.

This disparity between form and content and the relationship between the images and what they represent is perhaps the most challenging incongruity of LaChapelle's work. Yet, beyond the initial shock derived from the explosive colour, the large pop images challenge the structures that dominate our urban environs.

LaChapelle admits using beauty as a powerful tool, to seduce his viewers and pass on his message. It is a message that he is deeply passionate about. Underneath it all, LaChapelle is a sharp political advocate for environmental issues. He is passionate about life, social justice, beauty, art, and human rights. "You need to live life preciously" he proclaims, and so he does- frantically creating and spreading his passion worldwide, trying to make a difference.

Like his Land-Scape photographs, LaChapelle is not always what he seems to be - the more you get to know him the more layers you unwrap. LaChapelle's urgency and passion derives from a darker place. Surviving the NY Aids epidemic in the 80's he witnessed his inner circle die one by one and this has left its mark. His energetic creativeness and the sheer volume of his work is a response to his life's experiences. David describes his process as "having an urgency to make photos like it's your last day". His refineries and gas stations in Land Scapes like most of his work are filled with undertones of death and apocalyptic warnings. Yet, despite the shadows, LaChapelle retains glorious optimism, as though he is able to embrace the world and life on earth with all its defects, accepting it for what it is. Much of his judgment is tongue in cheek and his point of view is as always ambivalent and humorous. Once lifted, the threat of death boomeranged into an appetite for life, for passion, for love.

His current work not only offers thought provoking ideas, but also offers hope. Hope which transpires through his constructed objects, exploring, building, blissfully unaware of the long term effects that they represent. The innocence of his refinery models sends a message of longing for a better world, one of hope for the future. Maybe it is his faith (LaChapelle is a believer) which guides his work and personal life. This is a core element that makes him a Peter Pan, forever child, hopeful, creative, searching for love, trusting, centered and hungry for life.

David LaChapelle's Land-Scapes is a must see exhibition. It offers a vibrant thought provoking visual experience. It embeds all the ingredients of a great body of work: a strong concept with a critical outtake, sugarcoated with a beautiful visual execution. This is maybe LaChapelle's most rounded and compelling body of work to date- concluding all of his archetypal components in an unrestrained fashion.

Words: Michal Cole Photo: P C Robinson © Artlyst 2014

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