



When so much art seems to be about bitching and moaning, a picture that proclaims itself as just a picture is extremely appealing

IN FEBRUARY OF THIS YEAR, David LaChapelle's photograph of Kanye West appeared on the cover of *Rolling Stone*. It showed the singer done up as Jesus Christ, complete with crown of thorns and some fake blood. Amid some fairly predictable controversy, at least one Catholic pundit appeared to come up with an original, spirited response. William Donohue, described by the *New York Daily News* as a 'Catholic League gadfly' and in general a man you wouldn't want to be in agreement with, said, 'This kind of thing has become commonplace. It's one thing to rip off Catholic iconography. It's quite another to exploit a poor soul like Kanye West. Anyone who is this morally and mentally challenged deserves our sympathy not our derision.' I admit it; I laughed like a drain.

Donohue's response was impressively disingenuous. Firstly, it appeared to be short-circuiting the controversy while still stoking it. Secondly, it managed to deride Kanye West while advising against derision. And thirdly, it managed not to mention David LaChapelle at all: surely the final calculated insult to a photographer.

However, Donohue's response ultimately falls flat because he evidently doesn't understand the nature of iconography. An icon isn't something you can 'rip off'. It doesn't 'belong' to anyone, and certainly not to a single religious group. Icons are there for anyone who wants to use them: they're in the public domain. LaChapelle is well aware of that.

God knows, we've seen enough supposedly subversive images of Jesus in recent times: we've seen Christs who are female or naked, as well as black; and sometimes all three at once. LaChapelle must have known, and surely hoped, that his picture of West would provoke some controversy, but he's a savvy enough operator also to know it would be of a rather safe, mainstream kind - controversy-lite - that gets you in the papers but doesn't result in death threats. LaChapelle won't be making images of Mohammed any time soon. And, frankly, why should he?

For what's it worth, I'd always assumed there was some potent, if lapsed, religious element in LaChapelle's background. The world of his photographs is infused with a sort of heavenly, or at least unearthly, light. And if there's some computer enhancement at work there, well, didn't we always suspect that the afterlife would be heavily retouched? LaChapelle manages to make all his subjects look iconic: everyone's a sort of saint, sometimes a saviour, sometimes a martyr. Kanye West wasn't even the first to be anointed with fake gore: LaChapelle's

portraits of Sylvester Stallone and Jerry Springer also showed them roughed up and bloody. Some of his photographs of Courtney Love manage to make her look as though she's been involved in human sacrifice.

David LaChapelle began his professional photography career working for that other great Catholic controversialist, Andy Warhol, who gave him a job on *Interview* magazine. Since Warhol died in 1987, and since, according to his website, LaChapelle was born in 1969, this would have made him quite the *wunderkind*. It has to be said that other sources offer different, earlier, dates of birth.

Warhol apparently told LaChapelle, 'Do whatever you want. Just make sure everybody looks good'. It's not a bad strategy for a portraitist and a society photographer. Some people claim to see LaChapelle's creatures as grotesque, but I don't think he sees them that way. He says: 'My whole philosophy is to like more than to not like, so I try to like everything.' This may sound like an attempt at a blank, Warholesque utterance, but I can't see that there's anything ironic about it. You don't get hired to take pictures of Angelina Jolie, Leonardo DiCaprio or Naomi Campbell, to make videos for Christina Aguilera, Britney Spears or Gwen Stefani, by having negative opinions about them, nor, of course, if you make them look bad.

Above
Sylvester Stallone,
for *Arena*, June 2000
ALL IMAGES COURTESY DAVID
LACHAPELLE STUDIO INC., NEW YORK

Facing page
David Bowie, for *Details*,
June 1995

Previous spread
George Clinton, for *Vanity*
Fair, July 2000

LaChapelle

LaChapelle may have had 'creative differences' with Madonna, which prevented him from directing the video of her song 'Hung Up'. And his differences with Jessica and Ashlee Simpson seem to have been on a more monumental scale: having been hired to photograph the girls for *Rolling Stone*, the shoot ended in disarray with LaChapelle saying, 'They're everything wrong with culture, everything wrong with art.' Ah, *that's* what's wrong with culture and art.

He protests too much, of course. For better or worse, the likes of Jessica and Ashlee are his stock in trade. He works with, and for, the A-list, and that's a list that's never quite stable. Some of the people on it are going to be around for a good long time, but some of them aren't. Sure, he takes pictures of David Bowie and Elton John and Philip Johnson; but he also takes pictures of Lara Flynn Boyle, Justin Timberlake and Justin Hawkins. We aren't dealing with eternal values here. Perhaps, not very far in the future, we'll need footnotes and lengthy annotations to understand who some of these people are, and that's surely going to affect how we view LaChapelle's work. But for now his subjects have in common a specific, high level of celebrity and star power. I wonder if he's the only photographer to have shot George Clinton *and* Hillary Clinton. Both, I imagine, were well satisfied with the results.

Again, there are those who claim to find something subversive in LaChapelle's

images of celebrities, but I'm not sure what's being subverted by images that depict, for example, Lil' Kim as a sex doll or Eminem as having a stick of dynamite for a penis. Sure, they're jokey and sort of fun, and not to be taken literally or very seriously, but I don't detect any critique there, let alone any iconoclasm. His portraits promote his subjects just as surely as his advertising work promotes bebe, Lexus cars or Skyy Vodka. The subjects keep their 'image' thoroughly intact. When in doubt, print the legend.

If you're going to have a problem with David LaChapelle as a 'serious artist' it's going to be here. So much of his work doesn't look like art at all: it looks like commerce, or, worse still, fashion. This is even true, perhaps especially true, of the sexual elements in his work. A few of his images may be 'shocking' or 'controversial' – the transsexual Amanda Lepore being given a 'silicone injection', Pamela Anderson being spread wide by a spaceman – but this is tame stuff indeed to anyone who's seen much recent art photography. LaChapelle did get a thumbs-up from Helmut Newton, but his work is a whole world away from Newton's. Sure, there's a kind of fetishism

at play – high heels, false nails, burnished flesh, items of rubber or leather clothing – but with LaChapelle you get the sense that it's nothing personal. It's not *his* fetish. He's not gratifying himself; he's just using the vocabulary. There's not a lot there that looks like self-expression.

This mightn't be much of an issue if his work stayed in the glossy pages of *Playboy* or *The Face*, *i-D* or Italian *Vogue*. It's when it starts appearing on the walls of the Barbican, the Shafrazi Gallery or the KunstHaus in Vienna that a few alarms start to go off.

If LaChapelle needs defending, it might be precisely on the grounds that in an era when any damn thing can look like art, his work still doesn't quite. Let's assume it's deliberate. The high gloss – the absence of high seriousness and of lofty aesthetic concerns – can therefore be construed as his particular form of subversion. He's not interested in 'exposing' his subjects, in showing the 'real' them, and who can blame him? What would that even mean? What would the 'real' Pamela Anderson look like at this point? And who would want to see it? When

his photographs don't pretend to offer a glimpse of any 'truth' behind the glamour, they are the glamour, and, they suggest, there's nothing much behind it at all





Above
Pamela Anderson, for
Delicæ Vitæ, August 2001

Facing page
Angelina Jolie, for *Rolling
Stone*, March 2001

he photographs Madonna he's there to help with her reinvention. If she wants to look spiritual this season he can make her look spiritual, that being just another visual style, no more, or less, genuine than any other.

The whole notion of authenticity becomes absurd. His photographs don't pretend to be offering a glimpse of any 'truth' behind the glamour. They are the glamour, and they suggest that there's nothing much behind it at all. They acknowledge that there is no 'real' person there, that modern celebrity and modern culture are only surface phenomena. They don't even reveal the mask behind the mask.

This, unfortunately, might make him sound like the disease as well as the symptom, but maybe that's our problem, not his. Maybe this is the right way for art to look right now. It's not concerned with depth, let alone profundity; it's about saturated colour, bad jokes, uncontroversial controversy, profound shallowness. It's like television, only better.

The absence of personal revelation, the lack of angst and inner torment, is a welcome part of the package. When so much art seems to be about bitching and moaning, a picture that proclaims itself as just a picture is extremely appealing.

And yet, and yet, here is David LaChapelle talking about his motives for making his documentary movie *Rize* (2005): 'I wasn't necessarily looking to do a documentary,' he

says. 'I wanted to make a film because I knew I was capable and I wanted to do something that had more depth than the things I was given. The jobs I was doing at the time I felt [were] shallow and superficial and very commercial... I needed more.'

All of which sounds as though he was as worried about his work's lack of substance as the rest of us are. In fact, *Rize* does look like a substantial piece of work. It records the lives of the 'clown dancers' and 'krumpers' of Los Angeles, who've invented or discovered (or possibly recovered some racial memory of) a particularly brash and aggressive kind of dancing where the performers appear to go into violent, aggressive, self-harming spasms, all flapping legs and flailing arms – a bizarre blend of sex and street fighting.

There are parts of the film that do look a bit like a rock video, but in general it's a rather rough, yet very warm and affecting, piece of work. The dancing is scary; the dancers are infinitely lovable. Even the use of extant Leni Riefenstahl footage of the Nuba, which in a movie mostly about African Americans seems dangerously dodgy, actually comes over as surprisingly persuasive. One of the LA dancers suggests that krumping is somehow genetically programmed into his body, and certainly at a visual level there does indeed seem to be some resemblance between the movements of the krumpers and the Nuba. The film even has some 'self-help' overtones, suggesting that krumping might be a

passport out of the ghetto.

For all the film's grittiness, there's no suggestion that LaChapelle will be abandoning the slick worlds of fashion and glamour, or throwing off the demands of the entertainment-industrial complex any time soon. I tried to interview him for this article, but he was in Hawaii, shooting a major-budget campaign for Motorola.

And now LaChapelle has been given the Taschen giant-book treatment. This May sees the publication of a collection of his work, called *Artists & Prostitutes*, and there's great fun to be had deciding which of these categories his various subjects fall into. In fact, publisher Benedikt Taschen himself appears in the book as one of LaChapelle's willing victims, buttocks bared, his wife (now ex-wife, actually) naked beside him poised to give him a good thrashing. You just don't get that with Thames & Hudson. The book has 698 large-format pages, limited, signed, numbered, 1200 quid a pop. This is hardly an absolute seal of cultural respectability (although, amusingly, Helmut Newton was the first photographer to get Taschen's 'sumo' treatment), but it does suggest that LaChapelle has reached some sort of critical mass, become part of a different kind of A-list, joining the ranks of others who've also done big Taschen books: Newton, Araki, Riefenstahl. The book is terrific. His work has never looked bigger or better, and has certainly never been glossier. ●

LaChapelle, Artists & Prostitutes, published by Taschen, is now available. Visit www.taschen.com for details

