

THE BIG PICTURE

'His view of the iconic celebrity portraits he takes is that good taste is the death of art'

THE PHOTOGRAPH:

Heaven to Hell © Image courtesy David LaChapelle studio. Courtney Love cradling an actor playing the role of her late husband, Kurt Cobain

THE PHOTOGRAPHER:

David LaChapelle

A self-described 'white, rich, gay photographer', LaChapelle was born (1969) in the US city of Fairfield. Also an accomplished director, he has published four books and won numerous awards. According to his [myspace.com](#) profile, he lives in Maui and lists his religious persuasion as 'other'

DAVID LaChapelle is a poet of the gutter. However, unlike the 19th-century French poet Charles Baudelaire, his "garret view" is loftier and more luxurious, less concerned with "the odd and charming refuse of humanity". LaChapelle is a celebrity portraitist.

This last statement no doubt fails to convey the vibrant excess of his staged photographs. Typically LaChapelle, once described as "the Fellini of photography", will present his subjects as glowing fetish objects, often using religious iconography to stress his point.

This portrait of serial celebrity Courtney Love is a good example. Appearing in LaChapelle's new book, *Heaven to Hell*, the picture shows Love cradling an actor playing the role of her late husband, singer Kurt Cobain.

Although highly original, the work directly references Michelangelo's famous *Pietà* sculpture in St Peter's Basilica, Rome, which portrays Mary holding the body of Jesus in her arms.

The overtly kitsch effect in this and numerous other portraits has made LaChapelle internationally famous, and also occasionally landed him in the dog box. In April 1999, *Vanity Fair* magazine ran a portrait he took of comic actor Mike Myers dressed as the Hindu deity Kali. It caused a storm, LaChapelle finally having to recant.

"The photographs were meant as a humorous take on the trend of appropriating religious imagery as a fashion statement," he wrote in his apology. "It's the horror of having a cellphone go off in the middle of yoga class."

In case you missed it, LaChapelle holds a fairly jaundiced view of his clients.

"You work with people who are obsessive about shopping, obsessive about owning things and buying things, like this purchase is going to make them happy," he told *The Guardian* last year, also describing Hollywood's celebrity mansions as "giant stage sets for divorce".

Despite his caustic views, LaChapelle has the famous queuing at his front door, a luxury that now allows him to pick and choose who he wants to shoot and where he wants to go — he dropped out of speaking at this year's Design Indaba. As brazen and contradictory as the people he shoots, LaChapelle offers the final word: "Good taste is the death of art." — *Sean O'Toole*

● This photo appears in a boxed edition of LaChapelle's work titled *David LaChapelle*, Taschen, R819.95

