

2  
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# The man who hung up on Madonna

In the studio with David  
LaChapelle, the world's  
hippest photographer

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times2

# 'I think Leo is still pissed off about

## Elton loves him, Madonna and DiCaprio don't. David LaChapelle tells Helena de Bertodano why he turned his back on celebrity and got serious

It is 4am in the photographer David LaChapelle's Hollywood studio. A bright pink nearly naked "alien" in silver boots is creeping down the steps of a spaceship to plant a kiss on the mouth of the Irish/British artist and model Daphne Guinness. She is reclining, eyes shut, on a chaise longue wearing a sculptural gold metallic minidress. LaChapelle's artistic team are clustered round the monitor, studying the footage. "It doesn't make sense," says someone in agitation. "She was wearing white when the alien carried her into the spaceship."

"It makes sense in space," LaChapelle whispers raspily: he has lost his voice after three days directing a music video and photoshoot to accompany Guinness's forthcoming single, *An Evening in Space*. Making sense is not a top priority in LaChapelle's work. Bizarre, surreal, sensual: yes. Gritty reportage: no. "Of all the photographers inventing surreal images, it is Mr LaChapelle who has the potential to be the genre's Magritte," said the photographer Richard Avedon.

LaChapelle, 51 — although he looks much younger — is best known for his photographs of celebrities in arresting contexts: Kanye West as Christ with a crown of thorns; Michael Jackson as a winged archangel; Angelina Jolie with her breast being nuzzled by a horse; Tupac Shakur as a slave in a cotton field; Leonardo DiCaprio reclining on a pile of exotic fruit holding a bunch of bananas.

Eight years ago, however, he abruptly quit the celebrity fashion scene, moving to a remote farm in Maui. "I felt I'd said all I wanted to say within the context of celebrity and fashion." He is sometimes coaxed out of his self-imposed exile to do gallery shows, such as his current *Land Landscape* exhibition at the Robilant + Voena gallery in London. It's a series of deceptively glamorous photographs of oil refineries that are revealed on closer inspection to be handcrafted models made of recycled materials, such as fly swatters and hair curlers.

Much of LaChapelle's work these days has political and sociological connotations. Recent themes include consumerism, the plight of Africa, and ecology. The refineries are a witty and disturbing commentary on our petroleum-dependent culture. "They are like the witch's castle," he says, drinking iced Yerba Mate tea from a glass goblet. "They look beautiful glowing at night, but they're bad."

There is something very endearing about LaChapelle. He is incredibly warm and welcoming, not just to me but to the dozens of people he interacts with during the two days I spend with him. Almost childlike in his guilelessness, he happily discusses the most personal of topics. He seems to bring out the best in people, even those with a reputation for being tricky: "Kanye is great. I don't know what happens on award shows but he's



so nice to work with; very respectful of artists and soft-spoken." But he has a sense of mischief, too, introducing members of his team to me as so and so "who had coitus with Courtney Love when she was a teenager" and so and so who "was in jail for cocaine dealing. I don't judge, I give everyone a second chance here."

Madonna was the only celebrity he found impossible. In 2005 he started work with her on a music video but the project quickly became a nightmare and he quit. "She was screaming at me on the phone and I'm not going to spend two weeks being tortured. Her brother said that Sean Penn and I were the only people who had ever hung up on her. In a sense I've got to thank her because it really freed me. It was the first time I had said 'no', because I was such a workaholic."

These days his work in the fashion and music industry is minimal. He makes only the occasional exception for friends such as Lady Gaga and Daphne Guinness. "She is sweet and kind and makes everything fun," says LaChapelle of Guinness, who returns the compliment, saying: "We are twins, separated at birth." His images are designed to flatter: "I never want to do anything to hurt or exploit somebody." Most of the people he photographs love the results. "Elton John sends me a bouquet of red orchids every year for my birthday." Occasionally his images prove to be too outrageous. Mira Sorvino was furious when he portrayed her as Joan Crawford. "And I think Leo is still pissed off about posing with the bananas — although he looked so beautiful. I didn't make him look gay. It was about freshness."

We talk in a loft-like lair at the top of his studio warehouse, all beamed ceilings, stuffed bookcases and

Right, Leonardo DiCaprio photographed in 1996. Below right, David LaChapelle with Andy Warhol, and far right, Daphne Guinness "in space". Above, an oil refinery made of recycled materials, from LaChapelle's new *Land Landscape* exhibition

battered leather sofas and armchairs. A cloudy antique mirror dominates the room and is scrawled with the words: "Love as much as you can. Laugh like a child. Ride your bike." It is a tribute to Luis, his studio manager who died of a heart defect at 36. "Luis" is also inscribed on the knuckles of LaChapelle's hand. Underneath the mirror is an altar with candles and photographs. Many of LaChapelle's friends and celebrity subjects are dead: Whitney Houston, Amy Winehouse, Michael Jackson (whose umbrella is crooked over the mirror). Not to mention Isabella Blow and Alexander McQueen, immortalised in *Burning Down the House*, his flamboyant image of them together, which is displayed at the National Portrait Gallery in London.

Aids picked off several more of LaChapelle's friends, including his first boyfriend, a dancer, who died at 24. Years later, when the photographer finally summoned the courage to get tested, he could not believe he was negative. "Suddenly my pictures exploded in colour."

LaChapelle credits his mother, who lives in Florida and is battling a rare blood cancer, with inspiring his love of photography; a Lithuanian refugee named Helga, her name is tattooed on his arm. LaChapelle says she was tireless in her pursuit of the perfect picture. "There are no candid shots of our family at all. It was always set up and composed — in country clubs that we didn't belong to or with dogs or cars that weren't ours. It was fantasy, aspirational, as beautiful as things could be."

Born in Connecticut, LaChapelle always knew he was gay. "I was really hypersexual as a kid. I would fantasise a lot. [At first] I didn't want people to know, but when I was 14 I stopped

“I have no problem with Rihanna. Suing her was purely business



caring." He started to dress outrageously and became such a target for bullies that at one stage he contemplated suicide. "I had it all planned but I thought it would end my parents' lives, so I didn't do it." Instead he dropped out of school and went to New York, where his good looks and charisma earned him a pass into the famous nightclub Studio 54.

Eventually his father talked him into enrolling at art college in North Carolina, where he took pictures of his friends naked. When he returned to New York in 1981 he showed the pictures to Andy Warhol, who declared the images "great" and invited him to work for him. LaChapelle supplemented his income by working as a rent boy — or so the legend goes. I ask him whether it is true. "Yeah," he says a little bashfully. "Just for a season or two. It was a different time then: pre-Aids." He goes on to tell me unprintable details about life as a rent boy.

At some point he pitched up in London and found himself married to the singer Marilyn's publicist. "I don't know what the hell I got married for. We were on ecstasy..." He went to live

# posing with those bananas'

FRONT COVER: DON ARNOLD/WIREIMAGE BELOW: LEONARDO DICAPRIO: UNSPOILED, 1996 © DAVID LACHAPPELLE STUDIO



three days and I was naked in my front yard and smashing stuff in the house. It wasn't violent — I put on this beautiful music and smashed it happily because I was on my break with materialism — but I did throw a television through a plate-glass window." Now he has the condition in order and says it is five years since his last manic episode. "I got a really good doctor. So long as I exercise really hard and get eight hours' sleep a night, I'm good."

He lives in Hancock Park, near his studio, and is in a relationship with "Abiram, who does music". They spend most of their time together at LaChapelle's home. "I have a crazy garden with a pool and a giant swing set. We both cook, not intensive foodie stuff, but healthy." He's vegetarian and doesn't drink much these days. "I'm really vain and if I drink anything, my face swells up."

Even though he has moved away from the celebrity work, controversy still surrounds him. In 2011, he successfully sued Rihanna for copyright infringement after she used his concepts in a music video. "I have no problem with Rihanna, it was purely business," he says, adding that he donated the money to his former college. Recently he did posters for the Life Ball, the annual HIV/Aids charity event, which takes place this weekend in Vienna. Featuring a naked transgender model, Carmen Carrera, the images caused such a reaction that Austria's far right Freedom Party is threatening to sue the organisers for "pornography". LaChapelle sighs: "The photograph is very beautiful and sensitive. In the history of art it makes no sense. Are they mad at the penis? Are they mad at the breasts? Are they mad that one person has both?"

LaChapelle still escapes for much of the year to his farm in Hawaii, where he is preparing a "paradise" series that will keep him busy, he says, "until I croak". He shows me an early image of a waterfall, a naked woman in a fantastic head-dress sitting in a boat of leaves and a man in a top hat, waist-deep in water, holding a flaming torch. "It's my idea of what heaven looks like." Something about his images — and his personality — makes you feel you are near the rawest of edges: death, beauty, craziness. When I ask him whom he would most like to photograph, he replies: "Oscar Wilde. I don't feel just because someone's dead you can't still photograph them."

Back at the Daphne shoot, it has been a long and lurid night. At one point Guinness acted out a sex scene with the alien, with LaChapelle directing proceedings. "Harder. Arch. Orgasm now. Big orgasm. Shake." LaChapelle and the choreographer, an ex-boyfriend of his, helpfully mime it all out.

Now dawn is breaking and LaChapelle collapses on the floor, water bottles spilling around him, bright-pink paint from the alien's dissolving make-up smeared over his shirt. "That was one of the kookiest shoots ever," he says happily. "A real whack-a-doodle ding-dong."

**David LaChapelle: Land Scape is at Robilant + Voena, London W1, until June 18. [www.robilantvoena.com](http://www.robilantvoena.com)**



with his wife's family in Forest Hill, where his mother-in-law took an instant dislike to him. "She didn't want me in her fridge. She had this Ribena concentrate and marked the bottle. I see pictures of myself in London that year and I looked like a f\*\*\*ing famine victim — but in the trendiest clothes imaginable."

Eventually he was thrown out (after he was blamed for letting one of the family's rescue dogs escape), but when he tried to divorce his wife, he couldn't locate her. "If you can't find the person, you have to go through this whole process of putting ads in newspapers. In the end I got divorced without her."

Back in New York, his subversive, meticulously crafted images started appearing on the covers of *Rolling Stone* and *Vanity Fair*, and he was hailed as a visionary, "the Fellini of photography". Looking back at some of the images, he says: "Only a crazy person who's manic could have created them." Indeed, he was subsequently diagnosed with bipolar disorder, including mania. "I was put in a psych ward a few times. Once my friends called the police: I hadn't slept for