

David LaChapelle, *Decadence: The Insufficiency of All Things Attainable* (2008).

PHOTO COURTESY OF MOCA, TAIPEI

Fetishes on parade

Love them or loath them, David LaChapelle's photographs adeptly depict the obsessions of American society using a highly accessible visual language

BY **NOAH BUCHAN**
STAFF REPORTER

American fashion and fine art photographer David LaChapelle stands in front of *Deluge* (2007), currently on display at MOCA, Taipei.

PHOTO: NOAH BUCHAN, TAIPEI TIMES

David LaChapelle, *Archangel Michael* (2009).

PHOTO COURTESY OF MOCA, TAIPEI

David LaChapelle, *Jesus Is My Homeboy: Last Supper* (2003).

PHOTO COURTESY OF MOCA, TAIPEI

The photographer David LaChapelle appeared to be something of an anomaly among the suited art folk and trendy hangers-on who packed the Museum of Contemporary Art, Taipei's (MOCA, Taipei) Yamaguchi Room when he opened his eponymously titled show of 250 works there last month. Dressed in a hooded navy sweat top and dark jeans, he looked more like a street punk than one of America's top fashion and art photographers of flashy and flamboyant set images.

Speaking in a barely audible voice that trailed off into non sequiturs, LaChapelle, 47, profusely thanked the museum for mounting Asia's first retrospective of his work, covering a career that began in 1985 as a fashion photographer up to his most recent gallery work.

LaChapelle's attire and muted speech belie a photographer who has his finger on America's pulse. His obsession with celebrity and consumerism, God and war are America's obsessions — all depicted in a visual style that is part Hollywood glamour, part Las Vegas flash and rendered in an in-your-face New York attitude.

LaChapelle broke into New York's art scene as a photographer for Andy Warhol's *Interview* magazine at the age of 17 and soon established a reputation for photographing celebrities in set pieces that were conceptually related to his subjects' personal lives or careers.

One image on display, for example, depicts a naked Li'l Kim emblazoned with Louis Vuitton logos to illustrate the rap music industry's rampant materialism and attitude towards sex.

LaChapelle has photographed an astonishing array of personalities over his 20-year career, including Tupac Shakur, Madonna, Lance Armstrong, Pamela Anderson, David Beckham, Paris Hilton, Jeff Koons, Leonardo DiCaprio, Hillary Clinton, Muhammad Ali and Lady Gaga.

EXHIBITION NOTES:

WHAT: David LaChapelle

WHERE: Museum of Contemporary Art, Taipei (MOCA, Taipei), 39 Changan W Rd, Taipei City (台北市長安西路39號)

WHEN: Until May 30. Open Tuesdays to Sundays from 10am to 6pm. Tel: (02) 2552-3720

ADMISSION: NT\$50

ON THE NET: www.mocataipei.org.tw

Many of the results are on display in this show (a comprehensive selection of his photographs can be found at www.lachapellestudio.com).

But the images that LaChapelle created following his decision to give up magazine photography and return to gallery work (he had exhibited at gallery shows in New York in the 1980s), for which he focused his lens on American cultural and imperial power, are what make this a fascinating show.

His *Deluge* (2007) marked a return to the art world. It's an explicit (some might say vulgar) portrait of American excess that practically hammers the viewer over the head with its themes of gluttony, greed and lust — subtlety has never been LaChapelle's metier.

Inspired by Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel fresco,

which depicts God's creation of the world according to the book of Genesis, the work is set in Las Vegas, a city that the artist dubs the modern day Sodom and Gomorrah because of its profligacy and artificiality. The figures, some partially dressed and others naked, attempt to survive a scene of devastation. Though apocalyptic in tone, the male and female characters are optimistically presented as giving each other a helping hand.

In *Archangel Michael*, created before Michael Jackson's death, an angelic Jackson conquers a red demon, a symbol for all the pressures associated with and allure of fame. LaChapelle sees the former King of Pop as a misunderstood hero.

Religious themes underlie *Holy War*, a work that questions the very idea of how a war could be holy. With its title written over the top in big block letters in a similar style to the Hollywood sign overlooking Los Angeles, the photograph recalls advertising displays as seen in movie theaters and examines the way the popular media in the US depict war as entertainment.

LaChapelle brings many of these themes — war, religion and fame — together in his series of images called *Recollections of America*, for which he manipulated found photos from the 1970s, adding objects like guns and flags that symbolize the country's obsessions. For LaChapelle, the 1970s were the twilight of the American dream, which he sees as being then eclipsed by nationalism, patriotism and interventionism.

Critics have poked fun at LaChapelle the celebrity and fashion photographer for becoming the critic of the very obsessions and excesses that his pictures help to perpetuate. Regardless, this exhibition reveals (though it could have effectively done so with half as many photographs) an artist keenly aware of the visual language required to speak to his American audience. Meanwhile, the rest of are left to admire an artist who understands America's obsessions, an endlessly fascinating topic.