

David LaChapelle, after the Deluge

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The rich production of pictures, which LaChapelle has accustomed to, cherishes the euphoric dream of photographing the decade at the turn of the new millennium. For doing this, the artist introduces a narrative streak into photography, where, apart from surrealistic and abstract experimentations, the starting point had nearly always been observing and representing reality. From 1995 to 2005, he portrays a great number of film, music and underground stars, popular faces and rising stars, political personalities and fashion testimonials. He simultaneously conceives of astonishing settings, often on the edge of absurdity. His post-pop dreams are built by a setting that recalls theatre; however, the impact of the final work causes the feeling of being a cinematographic stop-motion. This is a fake dream for the “real” reality. As he also asserted, «although they were exaggerated fantasies, that was what happened in the world».

Like a polyhedric mirror, the scenes which La Chapelle has got us used to reflect a variety of innovative combinations, which are not subject to the linearity of logical and temporal sequences, and are marked by a plot of narrative pieces that often result in a conflict of senses and a visual double take. Engaged in creating reality patterns that face up to a society which is more and more penetrated with images, a real overdrive consequent on the telematic revolution, the artist makes the boundaries between dream and reality indistinguishable, thus putting back into perspective the concept itself of perceived reality and unreality, within the cultural context of the modern society. In the nineties, he was amongst the protagonists of an artistic trend that took the dissolution of reality as a reference point for a social analysis, which had already turned philosophy’s and sociology’s attention. This has brought him to demolish the postulates of fashion and promotional photography, with a new slant that has broadened Andy Warhol’s lesson. In other words, he has carried to extremes that global aesthetic deviation of modern society, the seed of which had been grasped by Warhol himself in the United States of the seventies. Since then, the society’s tendency to spectacularization (clearly outlined by Guy Debord in 1967) has evolved into an inclination to complete fiction, which has undermined, in the “image society” created by the mass media, the distinction between real and unreal.

LaChapelle, who looks at the news relevant to the way of living and social issues, draws on the history of images for understanding the trends of people’s culture. One should read from this viewpoint the several references to classic iconography that emerge from his photographic works, which, on the one hand, are full of quotations functional to building the image, on the other hand, seem to come out of a mechanism that moves in the scar of the surrealistic poetics, or, rather, that uses the background of surrealism.

However, with a crucial difference: surrealism aimed at representing the marvel by fantastic visions, unrelated to daily life, whereas in post-modern times ghosts do not emerge anymore from the depths of the ego, but they come from outside, being created by the end of utopias and the crisis of faith and rational solutions.

The surrealist ones were poetic lies, originated from the will to get free of the chains of reality; now those chains give place to an endless combination of interpretative patterns; reality has dissolved in a media flow, it has become “abstract”, so creating, in the scattered order and confusion of the kinds, a super-reality. LaChapelle’s pictures are *incredibly* real images which, as for several artists of his generation, express the truth by means of paradox and with a surreal impact.

The solipsistical mechanisms have been replaced by the collective dimension of what may be defined a mass subjectivity. The external world, no more projection screen (of inner anxiety) but of *transmission*, follows the narrative structures of the show business, whilst modern man is more and more characterised as a *vacuum*.

In the artist’s photographic series, topics as catastrophe, decay, vanity, illness, death, sympathy are greatly emphasized and mixed with those of consumerism and obsessive-compulsive neurosis, fetishism and narcissistic obsessions. By these, the reinterpretation of art history represents a powerful means of reflection as it combines the ecstasy of vision, typical of the great works of the past, with the lucid recording of the present, of the drama of mankind searching the reason of his existence. In such a poetic practice, a turning point in LaChapelle’s artistic career is *The Deluge* cycle.

The artist planned what probably is the most paradigmatic work of his poetic path in 2006. By carrying out the *Deluge*, inspired by the great fresco of Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel, LaChapelle goes back to conceive of a work for the sole purpose of exposing it in an art gallery, namely, a work that is not commissioned and destined to the pages of a fashion magazine or an advertising campaign: this has not happened to him since the eighties. He especially tackles a topic which, although always present under the surface in all his previous photographic series, is now outlined as a story wherein past and present definitely vanish. *The Deluge* is a reflection on the eschatological subjects that aims at displaying the sublime, and achieves it – it may appear a contradiction in terms – by transposing it to a material dimension, to the concreteness of flesh. «Since I was a child Michelangelo has fascinated me», he says. «Looking at his work, one looks at the world. It is not the world of art, it is just the “world”, it is humankind»: this is an empathy that brings LaChapelle to recognise in the *divine* Michelangelo the attribute of pop artist. After all, this connotation well fits the Renaissance religious painting, which, in order to popularise spiritual subjects and messages, and make them understandable for everyone, adopted the mass codes of visual communication *ante litteram*.

LaChapelle gives tangibility to the story of the end and rebirth by fixing it in a “frozen” scene that tells of wreck and salvation. He builds up an imposing and complex scenery worthy of a master of the classic Mannerism, a real setting for an epic film, where men and women, young and old people, kids catch hold of the wrecks of a world sinking amidst its own symbols, forming a chain of perfectly-outlined plastic knots, as they were carved. Around them, the emblems of the international establishment collapse like temples dedicated to the void; behind them, the background reproduces a dense and livid sky, whose artificial effect recalls the tricks used in the photographic studios of the late nineteenth century, when canvases displaying imaginary and absurd landscapes were placed behind the subject for making the portraits more suggestive. In order to accomplish such a huge work, LaChapelle has divided the scene into three parts, photographing by several shots a small group of actors at a time; he has then recreated the complete view of the subject as in a single frame of the camera. In this way, the artist gives back to photography not only the painting’s historic function, but also the method, which he reinterprets: specifically, that approach which required to divide the composition of the parts into *working days*, that is, into areas which one could paint in a day.

One may be tempted to think that LaChapelle has largely drawn upon techniques of digital manipulation, but the process, as he himself specifies, is rather “handmade”, namely, the

photographer builds up the image. He does it by using means and experts in the style of Fellini, as he is convinced that photography is the result of a large collaboration, and so he has the set flooded when he wants to put up a deluge, or burnt for displaying hell.

The Deluge is a turning point and the work of the American photographer from that moment on turns to other aesthetic and conceptual directions. The clearest sign of this change is the disappearance of human figures: the living models, who in all his previous works (with the sole exception of *The Electric Chair* of 2001, a personal interpretation of Andy Warhol's famous work) have had a central part in framing the set and in the message embodied by the image, vanish. The series of *Car Crash*, *Negative Currency*, *Earth Laughs in Flowers*, *Gas Stations*, *Land Scapes*, until the more recent *Aristocracy*, follow such a new formal choice: LaChapelle resoundingly removes flesh, a characteristic element of his art. He eliminates what was the reference point around which his subjects revolved, the most objective one, to which he desperately stuck, that is, body. A plastic body, used to the most exaggerated aesthetic and consumeristic practices, metaphor of a crumbled identity, no more subject, but object of analysis, which anyway still stuck to the real.

One can only find a horrifying simulacrum of it amongst the wax fragments of the series *Still Life* (2009-2012). As early as in *After the Deluge: Museum*, a work immediately after *The Deluge*, the image displays an empty hall of a flooded museum: nobody has remained to contemplate the masterpieces of art, that heritage that suddenly loses any material value and slowly sinks in a stretch of water, which reflects a double uncertain and overturned image of it. Also the characters of *Awakened*, still connected with the series *Deluge*, are men and women that float underwater, hanging and holding their breath, as they were on the edge of a transition, which requires them to abandon the body and awaken in another dimension. For LaChapelle, *The Deluge* is the time of the end and that of the beginning, in a poetic sense, too.

The *Still Life* cycle, with its symbolic title, does not portray the star system anymore, but its inanimate images. The wax reproductions of Ronald Reagan, Cameron Diaz, Michael Jackson, Princess Diana, Theodore Roosevelt, Bono Vox and many other, living or not, celebrities, lie broken down into several pieces put together somehow or other on packaging cardboard, after that a serious act of vandalism has disfigured what in and of itself already was a grim simulacrum for a wax museum. A disturbing and hyperreal representation of the decay and corruption of bodies, which also concerns the icons and their celebration; all the more disturbing if one considers that most of the personalities, whom the series refers to, were photographed by LaChapelle in the past. Once the mediation role of the human body in the experience between the id and the world is demolished, the individual (and his body) is replaced by a simulacrum.

However, nihilism never prevails in LaChapelle and the cult of beauty, together with the love for its greatest expression in art, finds even in these sinister artefacts a similarity to the greatness of the paintings, to the fragmentary nature of preparatory cartoons, sketches and anatomical studies of the Renaissance masters. History has handed down masterpieces that are not perfectly preserved, still with their intact aura: in the *Last Supper*, LaChapelle reinterprets the renown fresco of Leonardo by arraying a sequence of thirteen photos that display the evangelical characters gathered for the rite of the last supper. Each of them has previously been reproduced in wax and, as is the case with the characters of *Still Life*, is a "fragment" composed of head and hands placed on the bottom of a cardboard box. However, this is enough for reconstructing the dynamic composition of the scene by Leonardo, which is an assemblage of gestures, an extraordinary modulation of psychological states.

Among the most recent productions of David LaChapelle the series *Land Scapes* and *Gas Stations* stand out.

Land Scapes shows industrial plants that tower like bright mirages on the background of desertic horizons characterized by pale skies of colourful dawns. These plants, with their shiny steel complexes, labyrinthine pipelinenetworks, aircraft boarding ramps, silos, towers and glowing chimney stacks are glittering and gorgeous complexes, which recall the thrilling and mesmerising dream of a futuristic metropolis. Some framings render from a distance the show of a stretch of oily and shimmering water, cut through by laser reflections, against which emerald and out of reach islands stand, deserted and with oxyhydric colours; others, for their merry shapes and vivid plastic colours, resemble amusement parks.

Looking at the subjects, one may think of full-scale views, whereas these industrial towns are the result of an incredible reconstruction work carried out together with a team of film pattern makers, by putting together smallsize reused materials such as plastic cups, curlers, cardboard for egg boxes, battery chargers, straws, cans and containers of different kind: these objects have been photographed by LaChapelle against the ground of real landscapes such like the Californian desert. The microworld and the full-size environment are two real contexts confronting each other, which intertwined give shape to an "increased" reality: by merging two levels of reality into a single image, reality turns out to be abstraction. On the other hand, it establishes a close interconnection with the forms of the world.

LaChapelle's ecological warning about the exploitation of natural resources by man does not seem to be a moral denunciation, it simply describes a present projected into the future, where imagination and ancient hallucinations take on attractive forms. This clearly emerges from the formal and colour vivaciousness of *Earth Laughs in Flowers*, an array of floral still lives overtly inspired by the Flemish and Baroque traditions, the title of which, quoting a poem of Ralph Waldo Emerson², emphasised, even furiously, the subject of flowers meant as scornful gesture of nature towards mankind and his arrogance.

That warning also admonishes that nature will take revenge on him, a revenge which, as occurred in every work of LaChapelle, does not have anything cruel; quite the contrary, it shows surrealist colours that capture the onlooker: the series *Gas Stations* play with the alienating effect of particular landscape foreshortenings, displaying petrol stations that rise up amidst a thick tropical vegetation. These temples of what was a new, very American, "religion" (the myth of car) keep on emitting energy by their neon signs, fluorescent distribution columns, and illuminated interiors; however, they seem to be survived buildings on an abandoned planet. Like in a never-never land described by Ballard, in the post-production era, the exploitation of planet's resources, along with the impacts of energy policies, has brought about the extinction of civilisation, evidence of which can be found in these glittering remains: the pop dream has turned into hallucination. In this case, too, the models are placed amidst a natural undergrowth: here the "forest", struck by fluorescent colourful beams of light, is not the inner forest of Max Ernst, but rather a reference to «the aesthetics of ruins». What determines the passage, in LaChapelle's works until today after *The Deluge*, is the assumption that "the way of truth" is the one shown by reason and not by senses. If one reads the image through his senses, one has a dreamlike vision, which is moreover built up by the methods typical of surrealism (decontextualisation and recontextualisation of details); if it is read by filtering it through reason, one gets a picture that charges of "reporting" reality.

² Ralph Waldo Emerson (Boston, 25 May 1803 - Concord, 27 April 1882), central figure of the so-called Transcendalist trend, which included American philosophers, writers and poets.