

La Chapelle Land

By David La Chapelle

My mom once showed me a pictorial of Ursula Andress under a waterfall and said that this is what a woman's body should look like. And I have to say my mom's did. She ate health food and worked out religiously in the family room way before it was fashionable. Men would hound her on the street or at the mall. She would laugh and think it was funny. Sexiness with humor: those things are normal for me.

I took my very first photograph in Puerto Rico on vacation with my parents. My mother made a bikini out of a Frederick's of Hollywood bra top and gold belt buckles. We were in this brand-new 1970s hotel. She set up the shot. She put an ashtray on the carpet to mark the spot where I should stand. She posed; I pushed the button. I still love that photo. I think I was around six or seven.

Family photos were a huge production. My mom would direct the scenarios and meticulously style all the outfits. For my baby photographs, she posed me as an angel. She made paper angel wings – really detailed ones with individual paper feathers. As I got older, the photo sessions got more ambitious. My mom would style outfits for the entire family so we looked like something out of *The Sound of Music*. And we would go to old estates and country clubs around Connecticut posing with other people's cars and sheep dogs. She has thousands of photos in albums, all of them totally art-directed and composed. She would do all this and take one click of the camera and they came out great. I think of all the film I go through and I feel a little amateurish by comparison.

Then we moved to North Carolina. It was a shock: subdivisions and fast-food places went up overnight. There were wild divorcees with bubble bouffants and long lashes. Nothing like Connecticut. Once we were playing kickball in the apartment complex parking lot when this woman came downstairs with a giant hairdo, halter top, hot pants, cork platform wedgies, and started smashing her husband's new Lincoln with a hammer. We were mesmerized. Seeing her on all fours, screaming, crawling on that car and bashing it, with that outfit, that hair, those fingernails...well, it was a little bit of heaven. I'll never forget it. I love drama and outrageousness. I love crazy scenes. Always have.

In North Carolina it was harder for my mom to find all the beautiful places to shoot: it's all about strip malls there. No more ye olde New England backdrops; she hated it. So she got more creative. She shot pictures of my brother and me that look like we are still in Connecticut at some Mystic Seaport setting with weathered planks, docks, and pillars. Actually, we were at a Long John Silver's, a fast-food restaurant, at the shopping

center in the middle of a parking lot, but because of the cropping, no one would ever know. We were a middle-class suburban family living in a hideous North Carolina apartment complex; I was a teenage disaster. In the family albums we look like Vanderbilts. My mom remade her reality through snapshots. Maybe that's where I got the idea to make up fantasies in photographs.

There were moments of fun, but for the most part I was tormented in school because I was a freak, I would daydream all day about being in New York. I was sure that I would be a painter or an illustrator, but the moment I picked up a camera and found out that my friends would do anything to be in a photo, I knew what I'd spend my life doing. By the end of my first roll of film, all my misfit friends were in my room, posing like mad.

I left home in 1978, when I was 15, and came to New York City. I liked at the 23rd Street YMCA, and then with a friend in the East Village. I tried to get a job at Fiorucci, but I was too young. I started working as a busboy at Studio 54. Halston, Gucci, Fiorucci...clams on the half-shell and roller skates...that time had a big influence on my pictures. All that pop imagery. At Studio, a moon would come down from the ceiling, with a spoon that went to its nose, and then it would start snowing. A giant heart plugged into a giant socket would swing down on special nights...and everyone seemed beautiful, and people got dressed up, and women wore makeup, and the music then was happy, happy, happy.

I had fun but I decided to finish high school. I somehow got accepted by North Carolina School of the Arts. When I came back to New York I was 18 and I wanted to just start working. The first place I went was *Interview* magazine because I'd met Andy Warhol at a Psychedelic Furs concert at The Ritz. I was in a ridiculous New Romantic outfit: pirate pants, a sash on my head. He'd said, "Oh, come by, show me your photographs." I went there with photos of my high school friends and he said they were great. I was thrilled. (Later I learned that he could look at a cookie and say, "It's great.") So *Interview* was the first magazine to publish my work. It was Marc Balet, the art director, who eventually hired me. I worked for them consistently over the next several years.

I learned a lot at *Interview*: it was like art school for me. I would go to the offices almost every day to eat the leftovers from the extravagant buffet lunches. They were very good to me. Being in that environment you would always hear Andy's philosophy about the magazine. Everyone had to look beautiful in *Interview*, and that really made an impression on me. No matter whom I photograph – I may get them doing the wildest thing, but I want them to look beautiful.

My first assignment was a disaster. It was a Country-Western star. She was expecting a glamorous New York photo shoot, but ended up on the roof of my East Village hotel instead. We had to climb out the window to get to the fire escape to get on to the roof. The reflector boards made her eyes tear – which I thought was great, because the title

of her album was “When I Cry.” ...The hairdresser sculpted a huge, hideous palm tree nightmare. I was too intimidated to object. So I just cropped it out later. Her silver Stephen Sprouse thigh-high boots sank into the hot tar. She was stuck. We had to pull her out. Then she had a real breakdown. The boots were ruined; I thought I was too.

I also worked at Pucci Manikins painting mannequin faces with oil paint. Training took three months. Every day we would get blank cast heads of the big models of the day; Iman, Sarah Capp, Kelly Emberg. I painted those models’ faces every day, all day, over and over: eyebrows, eyeballs, lips. Everyone who worked there painting faces and doing mannequin hairdos was a fashion casualty. They had all worked in the business....One hairstylist left the business because she cut a model’s earlobe off when she was high during a shoot. She preferred mannequins: they don’t complain or bleed.

I never expected to make money when I started taking pictures, I remember really well praying to make just enough to pay my bills. I don’t take anything for granted, either. Being in New York meant going to nightclubs, galleries, and darkrooms. I spent a lot of time on my own printing, looking at pictures, reading Andy Warhol books, and stuff like that. I’ve always loved magazine and movie stars and pop art and fashion. That’s what I come from.

For me, taking photographs, planning them and working on them, is a big escape. Just as what the pictures depict is an escape from what’s really going on in the world. I’m thankful to be able to do this really creative thing – to think of some wild fantasy and make it happen and get it published.

When I first started doing these photographs, I wanted to see color, and glamour – I want my pictures to be a break from reality, because I know that living in this time is really difficult. There are so many things going on that are sad, so that when you are flipping through a magazine I’d like my pictures to be a small intermission, a break of beauty. I think that anyone can be beautiful in some way. Or they can be funny. Funny is beautiful. John Belushi was beautiful because he was so funny.

I lived in the East Village on and off since I was 15. I lived in an apartment with no electricity or telephone for too long. I envied the squatters next door: at least they didn’t pay rent for the hellholes. I certainly don’t want to go there again, even for a photo. I’ve had so many friends OD on heroine, die of AIDS, commit suicide, and have myself dealt with so much stuff, that I don’t want to see a bunch of depressed 18-year-olds sitting around in expensive clothes looking like they’re about to drop. In the mid-Eighties everyone started wearing black...and they kept on wearing black. It’s like we’ve been in mourning for ten years. And in a way, we have been.

I’ve been really fortunate with the magazines I’ve been working for: *Details*, *Paris Vogue*, *The Face*, *Vanity Fair*. *Details* was the first magazine that gave me the chance to

take the kind of pictures I had always dreamed of taking. Lately, the magazines have allowed me to go completely crazy, to do whatever I want to do.

A lot of people think it's all done on the computer, but it's not. I'm a photographer, not a computer person. In fact, it's sort of important to me that these scenarios existed somewhere, for some period of time, even if it was only for an hour. It's more fun to photograph something real than to do it on a computer. Tom Jones hanging off a truck in a pink cat suit alongside a highway in Detroit: he was really there, hanging off that truck. That girl in balloons was really in Times Square. She was freezing cold and we didn't have a permit and we blocked traffic, but it was much more fun to shoot than if it had been a composite, which a lot of people thought it was. Lili Taylor really sat on a giant mushroom and drank a milkshake. That's the great part: at the end of the day, when everyone's laughing and we can't believe that we got this picture. And we can't believe that this is our job, this is what we actually get *paid* to do.

I get maniacal about the details. The night before the Lili Taylor shoot I was looking for a milkshake container. I actually had a bag full of them, but I knew that I didn't have the right one. After all the stores closed, at 1 A.M., I started digging through garbage cans on Avenue A in the pouring rain. Then I saw somebody that I sort of know, and as he walked by I was about to say hi and explain what I was doing, but he pretended not to see me and from the look on his face I imagined him thinking, "Oh, last week he's a photographer doing really well, and this week he's digging through garbage cans, looking for a tidbit to nibble on," which is totally possible in New York. I ended up finding the perfect red-and-white striped cup at the Gem Spa.

People say I should make movies because my pictures remind them of film stills. I like to think of them like that. Or as stories. Someone told me that my pictures are like pressing the pause button on the VCR. It bores me to photograph in a studio against white paper. I like to invent scenes. I have a hard time looking at new photos that are copies of old ones. To me, it's lazy to open an Avedon book and copy what's in it. Why not come up with new ideas?

When someone comes in to be photographed, I'm not so interested in capturing their soul through their eyes. I'm more interested in what they're wearing, how they have their hair done. I think you can learn more about a person from the way they've pulled their outfit together than by looking at a black-and-white photograph of their eyeballs staring at the camera. There is a tradition of celebrity portraiture that attempts to uncover the "real person" behind the trappings of their celebrity; I'm more interested in those trappings.

I think people look intelligent when they have a sense of humor about themselves and their images, so I try to bring that out. Tori Spelling, for instance, sitting in a

limousine with garbage on the floor. I wanted to play on the idea a lot of people had of her at the time. And because she went along with it, she wound up looking like she had a sense of humor about herself. But I also tried to make her look as sexy as possible.

The "American trash culture" pictures came out of a time when I was getting really depressed, because I love nature and it was getting hard to find. When I go on vacation, I want to go to the woods. But it got to the point where anywhere I'd go, all I'd ever see were fast-food joints, strip malls, industrial parks. So I just decided to start finding things to like about them. And now I'm not bothered by looking at places like McDonald's. I see them and think, "Oh, I could do a photo here." They're colorful, and bright...Truman Capote said that "good taste is the death of art." Fashion and advertising photography has always been about good taste, and picturing the good life. I want to see what's been cut out, I want to feature those things. It's about photographing what's on the way to the beautiful location, on the drive there.

Photographers are always running away to exotic places to do fashion photographs in nature, but they're always artificial – staged to look natural. You take a bus to the jungle, and you get off at the tour spot and have a snack and buy camera batteries and get on the monorail and look through Plexiglas. I'd rather celebrate the artificial. Why not just go into the middle of what's all around us and try to find the beauty there. In fact, not just *find* the beauty, but *make* it beautiful. Enhance it. Change the way you look at it. When you take a picture of something, you change the way it's seen. We get excited now when we see Golden Arches and parking lots that stretch to the horizon. In Brazil, the Far East, wherever you go you see the same things. I don't endorse them. I don't even eat at them. But they're everywhere, they've replaced the forest.

When I was a kid, my parents said I was going to be a bum. I worked at Burger Kings, and Kentucky Fried Chickens; and I would get fired from all those places. Now I take pictures of them.

I have to find something I like about a person in order to photograph them. I heard a hooker say once on a talk show, "Well, I just focus on something I like about them, even if it's their shoes. I think to myself, 'Oh, they have really nice shoes.' And then I can have sex with them." You know what I mean? Even if somebody's not very nice, I'll try to find something about them that I like, even if it's only their nail polish.

I'm not trying to trick or make fun of anybody. I respect the people I photograph. When I first talked to Faye Dunaway, she said "I'm not familiar with your work. Tell me what the *ideas* are." I said I wanted her in a ripped negligee looking at the camera in a trashed apartment. She loved it. Then I told her, "The first shot is going to be *of* you and the second is going to be *about* you." The one about her is on top a limousine, like in *The Day of the Locust*, surrounded by rioting fans. She's the last Hollywood legend, the last big

star. Faye loved this shoot because she was not only able to look beautiful but was able to put some emotion into the picture. She's an actress; she was allowed to act. At one point she said, "Do you want tears?" so I offered to get the makeup artist and Faye said, "No, darling, I'm an actress. I have my own tears." She threw back her head...she was weeping.

Exhibitionists make the best models. Someone who will give anything for the camera, do anything that you ask. I love models who are hungry for fame or food or whatever. Shoots can be hard. Those people in the Plexiglas box: they were *there* in a Plexiglas box, piled on top of each other. They weren't comfortable, but the look comfortable. And that's what matters in the end. My pictures are about getting people to go along with me on a ride, a trip. Getting a celebrity or a model to take off all their clothes, to wear a chicken suit, be wild, to go against what their publicist recommends. There's something great about it.

I try to make pictures I've never seen before. I read somewhere that a photographer, I think it was Hiro, said to an assistant, "If you look through the camera and you've seen it before, don't take the picture." The French hate Disney World, so the first place I wanted to shoot in France for *Paris Vogue* was Euro Disney. Using what people think is ugly and making it beautiful, to me that's the kick. Inspiration can come from so many places, but my main source is my friends, hanging out with them, talking and laughing, saying "What if we did – ?" Then coming up with the wildest thing we can think of, maybe even the most hideous thing we can think of, and reclaiming it, redeeming it as something beautiful. From then on it will be seen differently. And it isn't about depicting violence and bloodshed and murder. Those things aren't extreme anymore. They're banal as photographs, and too much like reality. I think it's better to make beauty these days than to represent the ugly.

When I was a kid, I spent a lot of time alone (not by choice); I always wanted a group of friends. I wanted it to be like *Our Gang* – you know, putting on a show in the backyard. Now I have that. I have a group of people I work with. They're really talented, and we're friends. I work with them again and again.

It's not like work. It's fun. When someone comes in for the day to be photographed, they feel it too. I put a ton of energy into the concept for each shot, so whether I'm shooting Faye Dunaway, or an unknown cable star like Kitty G, they can sense that I'm sincere about trying to take a great photo. You can take a picture of a TV host that people will remember. That's my goal: to get the pictures torn out of the magazine and up on the refrigerator. I've always thought of the magazine as the gallery and the refrigerator as the museum. If my picture makes it to someone's fridge, I'm really happy.

– David LaChapelle