

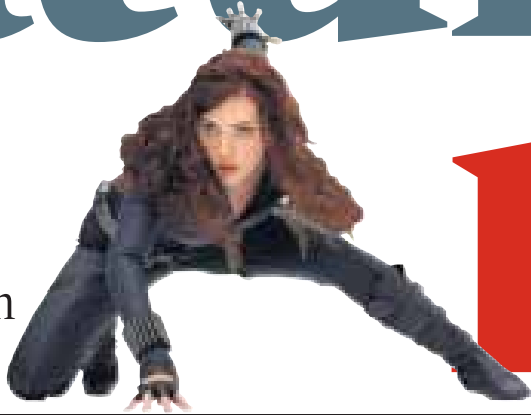
saturday

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Exposed: the man who shot fame

Photographer David LaChapelle tells *Tim Teeman* about a crazy life of sex, drugs and celebrity – and why he won't talk to Madonna (but loves Mariah)

In less than 12 hours, Mariah Carey will arrive at David LaChapelle's Los Angeles studio to be photographed for her Christmas album. LaChapelle chastises himself for telling me ("it's meant to be a secret"), then shrugs: "Well, I've told you everything else." We've been together all day at his home, by his pool, in his bedroom and now at his cacophonous, warrenous workspace, ricocheting this way and that around a life of sex, death, celebrity, drugs, depression, art, disco and — he insists — miracles.

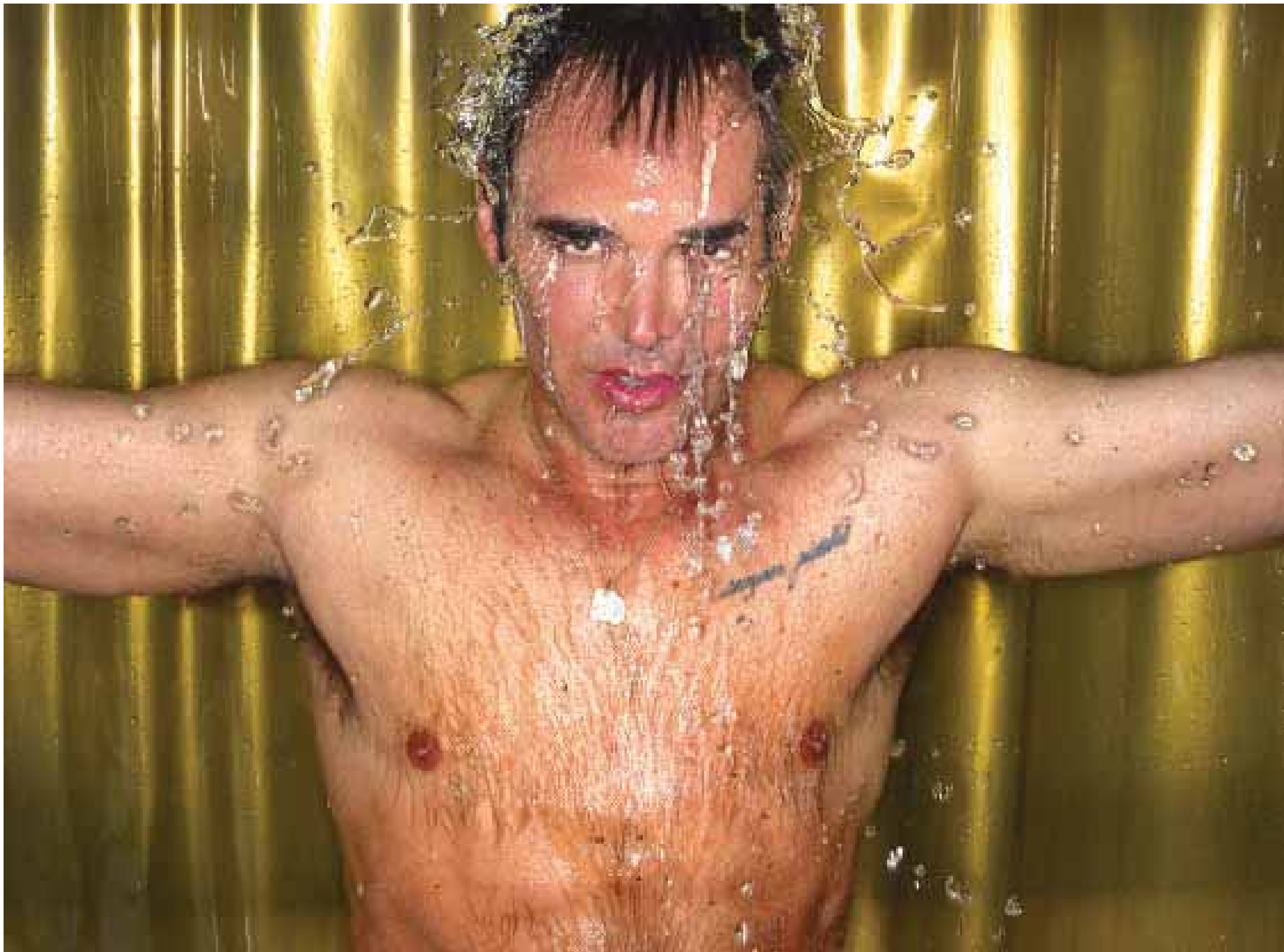
On a series of stage sets, as his friend Michael Jackson's songs pound from the music system, LaChapelle's team are garlanding fake windows with lights and arranging presents under a hideous silver tree. LaChapelle's close friend Sharon Gault, Madonna's former make-up artist (and his "unofficial wife"), is organising food. Carey, says LaChapelle, "isn't a diva. She never pisses on the little people." There is a graffiti city backdrop of night-time blues and sulphurous yellows. Fake snow is in bags. "That's pretty," I say, looking at wooden cutout reindeer. "Mariah wanted real ones," LaChapelle says, rolling his eyes. The boyish 47-year-old photographer is in jeans, scrappy T-shirt and hoody and speaks in a spacey Californian drawl. "Flown from Nebraska. Can you imagine, real reindeer?"

Well, yes, we can imagine. LaChapelle is famed for his gaudy, extravagant, some have claimed grotesque and empty, celebrity portraits; although he says he has mostly given them up, and now takes pictures only of favourites such as Carey and Lady Gaga. His photographs are now iconic. More mischievous than Annie Leibovitz's staged tableaux and less in thrall to his subjects than Sam Taylor-Wood's. In his hands — his work has appeared in *Interview*, *i-D*, *The Face*, *Details*, *Vanity Fair*, *Rolling Stone*, *GQ* and *Vogue* — the portrait becomes a circus, a playground, an explosion of glamour, body worship and sexual innuendo in saturated colour. He has captured Eminem with lighted fireworks covering his genitals, Isabella Blow and Alexander McQueen in period dress in front of a burning castle, Kanye West sporting a Christ-like crown of thorns, David Beckham oiled

and glistening in tube socks, and his good buddies Pamela Anderson and the outré transsexual Amanda Lepore, "who's a woman to the nth extreme". He's directed pop videos (including Christina Aguilera's *Dirty*) and an Elton John stage show in Las Vegas that featured enormous inflatable phallic fruit, lipsticks and hot dogs.

"I am interested in paradoxes: celebrity, our response to it, excess, disasters, glamour, beauty," he says. "Yes, my images are outrageous, but I never set out to shock. When one of the most downloaded videos on the internet is [the former hostage] Daniel Pearl's beheading, there's nothing you can do to out-shock that. I want people to be stunned. I don't want it to look like contemporary 'art', which often people don't understand. I'm trying to speak a visual language as powerful as the written or verbal that people understand."

Critics have long been split over his artistic worth. He has been variously called "the Fellini of photography", exposing celebrity



ALL THAT GLITTERS David LaChapelle, shot exclusively for The Times. Below, from left to right, American Jesus, a tribute to Michael Jackson, and portraits of Elton John, Lady Gaga and Elizabeth Taylor

and the ridiculous pantomime it is, and "the loud child in the living room", luxuriating at its altar.

In 2006, LaChapelle had said "all I could" about celebrity and bought a 20-acre organic farm in Hawaii. Courtney Love bought the entry gates for him as a housewarming gift. "I'm a farmer," he says, enthusing about his honey bees. Gaga has written songs at the property, "walking around in a dress made of vine leaves. She made pasta on my birthday. She's gifted, really intelligent." LaChapelle hasn't hung up his camera. He's photographed a series of pictures of people underwater and next exhibits — as part of a London show — an image that "took me a year to plan and drove me mental". *The Rape of Africa*, which goes on show in London this week, is inspired by Botticelli's *Venus and Mars* and features a breast-revealing Naomi Campbell (who has already been photographed nude by the photographer) and a young man as Mars. "It's the god of war versus the

goddess of beauty," LaChapelle says. "Then there is the idea that the pursuit of gold in Africa is rooted in greed and has led to incalculable suffering. Gold and bricks and money buy the illusion of security. In trying to stave off our own deaths we're killing Africa, the cradle of civilisation."

To many, though, it will be seen as a jokey, lurid picture featuring yet another supermodel mate with her boobs out, but LaChapelle is inured to the now-familiar charge. "People find it offensive because it's a serious message dressed up in make-up

and heels. It looks pretty. It doesn't mean it hasn't got something to say. My photographs in magazines were illustrations of the guiding principles behind popular culture at that time — glamour, plastic surgery. This isn't so different. I haven't changed what I do. One critic said he'd rather my pictures were grittier, but would you look at my images for that long if the black woman was covered in scabs? That's photojournalism. That's not what I do."

LaChapelle's home, where we first meet, is modest by Hollywood standards and decorated almost drably. "That's because of my mother; she's about to move in," he says, laughing. He is fresh off a flight from Arizona. "I've got this family stuff going on," he says wearily. His mother, Helga, the first person he photographed, when he was 6, has cancer. "She's had chemotherapy and she's too ill to move. She's coming here, I've had a lift installed. It's such a shock. She's been healthy her whole life. She met my dad on the third day she arrived on Ellis

Island from Lithuania. He was poor but smart and made his money in tobacco. When people ask me how I can do advertising campaigns for tobacco firms I tell them, 'I wouldn't be here without tobacco'. She was a vegetarian, a hippy, but on her terms. My dad was a Catholic. After he died, I saw Warren Beatty hit on her when she was 65 at the Chateau Marmont pool. But she's not a cougar. She was very flattered but she turned him down."

Why was LaChapelle in Arizona? He looks winded. "My older sister Sonja just tried to kill herself in Florida. She was always happy, she always took care of other people. She was a nurse, then she worked in housing and for victims of human trafficking, and last year she was let go. She's unmarried and in her fifties. She took an overdose of pills and was in a coma. The nurses gave us no hope. If she had permanent brain damage I planned for her to live with me. I'm praying to my dad, God, Michael Jack-

'When my mum was 65 I saw Warren Beatty hit on her. She's not a cougar. She turned him down'

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David LaChapelle: the man who shot fame

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son" — he laughs — "and the next day she came out of it a bit. It was a bad decision taken in a dark moment. Now she's in this rehab facility in Arizona. I'm not sure what we'll do next." Her sudden recovery was, for him, a miracle. "To think we just live on this plane cuts off so many possibilities. Living with magic and the possibility of miracles makes life so much more bearable."

As a boy growing up in Connecticut, he was "a mess". He says that at the age of 5: "I told my mother not to buy me a car when I turned 16 because I'd have an accident and kill myself. I was shoplifting, a truant, I joy-rode and caused a few accidents. I don't know why. I ask myself now, 'What did you have to be so upset about?' You had these great parents, a stable home."

Much of it may have been down to homophobic bullying at school. "I'd wear this fitted cowboy shirt and they'd shout, 'Where's your horse, faggot boy?' Gangs of boys would beat me up. I hated them, but I didn't want to be like them." At 14, LaChapelle contemplated suicide. "I was going to slit my wrists in the bath, but I didn't want to punish my parents. One day, I thought, 'Why are you torturing yourself?' I was suppressing being gay and at that moment I stopped suppressing it."

He dropped out of school "and ran off to New York — my salvation". He remembers his first visit to Studio 54, at 14. "I saw Andy [Warhol, his eventual employer at *Interview* magazine]. It was a party for the Village People's *Can't Stop the Music* and everybody was there: Bianca Jagger, Liza Minnelli, Margaux and Mariel Hemingway, Halston [the fashion designer], Steve Rubell [one of the club's founders], Calvin Klein. I got into the VIP area, probably because of my youth, and I was kind of good-looking so got a lot of attention. I didn't talk to anyone. I loved disco, the glamour, celebrity, sure, but they were artists doing stuff. There'd be Jean-Michel Basquiat, Grace Jones, Keith Haring would doodle something for you. I woke up sing-

ing I was so happy. My idea of success was only ever to have enough money to create what I wanted." He snuck into some life-drawing classes in a grand old building. At 17, after a gentle intervention by his father, LaChapelle went to art school in North Carolina. As soon as he started taking pictures there — of his fellow students' nude bodies, male and female, many of them dancers — his passion for photography took root. "It changed my life," he says.

LaChapelle returned to New York in 1981 and saw Warhol at a Psychedelic Furs concert. "I told him I wanted to be a photographer for *Interview*. I showed him my pic-

tures of my naked friends and he said they were great, but I later found out everything to him was 'great'. I finally got my first photograph published — of the Beastie Boys in Times Square — in 1984." LaChapelle worked as a busboy at a nightclub, tried snorting heroin — "but I hated it. Any opiate, even Vicodin, finishes me off for days" — and lived a healthy life, "running six miles a day, eating macrobiotic food". He also became a rent boy.

"I was not in a good place. I had a choice and chose to do it. I didn't want to have a job. I wanted to be a photographer. But you're cheapening this thing that can be beautiful and sacred. It takes a lot of time to regain that, which I did. I'm not saying there's a right or wrong way to experience love or intimacy, but I would hate for those kids who look up to me to think this was in any way cool. It wasn't."

His first boyfriend, the dancer Louis Al-

REBIRTH OF VENUS Above, **The Rape of Africa**, with Naomi Campbell and unnamed models in a pose inspired by Botticelli's *Venus and Mars*, from the London show. LaChapelle says that he wants to reclaim the nude. Left, Dolly Parton



bert, died of Aids in 1984. "I had a premonition about it. It was horrible. This was before tests, before 'safer sex'. He went home to die in Ohio. His parents didn't want me there or at the funeral, which I understood. I represented New York to them."

In 1984 he came to London and photographed the gender-blending fashion and clubbing scene for *The Face* and *Interview*: "I saw way too many club darkrooms and nothing of the English countryside." He took "lots of Ecstasy". He also married the pop star Marilyn's publicist. "Why? I don't know," he says. "To get into the UK. It was a disaster."

He dashes to show me some William Blake etchings in the hall, which he bought in a shop near the National Gallery, where he fell in love with the artists of the Renaissance, Michelangelo especially. "They tried to reclaim the nude for what it was, something sensuous, not shameful. Today we're in our own dark ages. When photography encounters the naked body now, it's for porn and in contemporary art the body has to be deconstructed, made ugly, to be thought of as 'art'. I want to reclaim the body from the notion that it is something to trade and to make it beautiful."

His first magazine portraits were black and white, the predominant style of the time. Where did his trademark high-colour, deranged aesthetic come from? "It's so grey in England. For English magazines I thought colour, lots of it, screaming Hollywood, California, would be cool. The top photographers then were known for black and white and grunge was happening. I wanted to do something different. I never want to make someone look bad. I'm living my fantasy through those pictures of fame, beauty, glamour and stardom. I want them to look larger than life." Celebrities trust him [only Jeff Goldblum, "like, whatever", turned him down]. The pictures and pop videos may be wild, but he says that he didn't drink or take drugs on set, "although we had a blast" he laughs, recalling one Mariah Carey shoot in the middle of nowhere in which some strippers in a dub tearfully told the star that they had named their children after her, and LaChapelle got it on with a guy in the back of a limousine who, afterwards, looked up and said, "I'm not gay and I've never been in a limousine".

Making his critically acclaimed, charged

urban dance documentary *Rize* in 2006 was a turning point, as was turning down directing Madonna's 2005 *Hung Up* video. "She's really hard to work for. I didn't want to be yelled at. She wanted to film a subway scene with people running out. It was just after a subway bombing and I was worried it might be insensitive, but apparently she doesn't read newspapers. We haven't spoken since. But I don't want to direct Hollywood films. I was offered *Juno* but turned it down."

LaChapelle dismisses Hollywood as a "bullshit world" and is relishing his new gallery show-focused life. He has started a series of photographs of partially smashed heads in cardboard boxes from wax museums and recently completed an homage to Bruce Lee using a lookalike actor.

"I am criticised for retouching my pictures," he says. "You'd be surprised how much we design for real." He is a perfectionist in slacker's clothing. "David goes over

People find The Rape of Africa offensive because it's a serious message in make-up and heels

every pixel," one of the team says. "His passion seeps into everyone as osmosis," says another. One of his staff is playing Walt Whitman (complete with bushy beard), a great hero of LaChapelle's, for another series. These endeavours sound crazy, but less so than celebrities and their agents and the phone ringing. "I can choose what to do now," he says. "I'd never realised that when I was doing 20 jobs at once and shooting pop videos." He would love to shoot Barack Obama — "in some kind of repose. He's a physically beautiful man, which, at that level, is a bit of a first."

In LaChapelle's office are a hat and umbrella that belonged to Michael Jackson. He vigorously defends Jackson against all the allegations of child sex abuse. "I know good parents who were happy to leave their children alone with him. It was disgusting the way he was pursued and hunted. He was a good, sweet person." LaChapelle's last pic-

ture taken of Warhol is framed and sits on the floor, alongside a picture of the two of them during the shoot. Quietly, he says, he is fulfilled: he doesn't fear ageing or death.

What's his biggest failing? "I still deal with anger. I lose it very quickly," he says. "I say hurtful things, feel remorseful, apologise. One of my assistants said to me, 'Don't worry, I assumed the insanity wouldn't end with the photographs.' But it's happening less and less." LaChapelle has bipolar disorder and has been in hospital twice. Both times, barely clothed and behaving erratically, he was arrested. "Antidepressants don't work," he says. "Being bipolar feels good at the beginning, you're bursting with ideas, then you get delusional and think you can survive walking into traffic. I've got a good psychiatrist. Two consecutive nights of unbroken eight hours' sleep work for me. I don't want to 'cure' it. It feels like a gift."

There is an informal "family" around him, Gault and her daughter Adelaide at its apex. "Luis" is tattooed on his knuckles: Luis Nuñez was his studio manager of 16 years, who died in 2001 from a heart defect. They'd had a nasty argument that day and hadn't reconciled. "I lay in bed, numb, trying to figure out what to say at the funeral," LaChapelle says. "Suddenly I felt this immense warmth and Luis guide me to write down, 'Love as much as you can. Laugh like a child. Ride your bike.' The first two lines — got those. The last one though? I said it and his best friend started crying. Luis had just bought him a bike. It was a message for him." The words are written in red on his office mirror.

At about 1am, Mariah preparations wind down. LaChapelle is going out ("just for a minute or two") to a club. He grimaces at his photographs being described as camp or kitsch. "They're just words which mean people don't want to look. I've seen people stop and look at my work in galleries. Not just at the bodies, the genitalia, but really look." If he's the cartoonist his critics claim he is, he's a serious one and obviously happier with his work on gallery walls than in magazines. But you know that, through his lens, snowflakes whirling and tinsel shimmering, Mariah will never look more Christ-massy — even if the reindeer aren't real.

David LaChapelle: *The Rape of Africa* is at Robilant + Voena, 38 Dover Street, London W1, from Tuesday to May 25

culture notes



Sacred and secret by Sarah Dunant

Early on in the writing of my novel *Sacred Hearts*, set in a 16th-century Italian convent, I knew I was in trouble. The thousands of women who were, willingly and unwillingly, walled up (it was cheaper to marry them to Jesus Christ than a noble husband) had one place where their voices could be heard: in chapel. With the right singers and a talented choir mistress, convent choirs became famous, and travellers from all over Europe came to hear them. But all the written research in the world couldn't let me hear what those "virgin angels" would have sounded like. Then I found Musica Secreta, a group set up by the ex-Tallis Scholar Deborah Roberts and the musicologist Laurie Straus. Not only

had they scoured the archives for convent choir music, they had also recorded work by nun composers. Watching them perform gave me vital insight into the emotional release, the spiritual solace and the sheer power — this was a time when well-bred women were not allowed to sing publicly anywhere else — that many of my nuns must have found through music.

When I sent Deborah and Laurie a copy of the finished manuscript to check its musical veracity they had their own epiphany: this was the picture of convent life they had been waiting for. They decided to give the novel its own soundtrack: a CD of the music as it is featured in the book, from the moment the rebellious young novice opens her mouth and dazzles the convent with her vocal power to Palestrina's haunting *Lamentations for Holy Saturday*, adapted by convent choirs for women's voices.

The next step was to get story and music together on stage. After a successful small trial run at the Southbank literature festival last summer, now comes "Sacred Hearts: the Musical".

On Bank Holiday Monday, an abridged version of the novel performed by the actors Niamh Cusack, Deborah Findlay and myself, along with the combined talents of Musica Secreta and the group Celestial Sirens, will be staged as part of the Brighton Early Music at the Fringe festival at the Church of St Bartholomew.

The audience will get a chance to time travel, to experience convent life at its peak (scandal and drama as well as worship) and hear the most exquisite

religious music of the 16th century as it might have been sung by some of history's great lost performers.

Sacred Hearts (Virago) has been shortlisted for the Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction. Sacred Hearts and Secret Music, St Bartholomew's Church, Brighton (bremf.org.uk/fringe 01273 709709), May 3



Cartoon capers by Libby Purves

One of the oddest, most beguiling events of the year kicks off today with the Shrewsbury International Cartoon Festival. For two days the historic town square is colonised by enormous white drawing boards on which professional cartoonists — over the past few years Bill Stott,

Martin Honeysett, Andy Davey, Roger Penwill, Noel Ford and other masters — labour to produce giant coloured jokes, beautifully executed on a ridiculously large scale; gallant figures they are, usually wearing gardeners' kneepads and groaning a bit, while an entranced public looks on.

Punters line up to be caricatured free or to poke their faces through holes in a canvas and request the kind of body they would like (I am generally an octopus). Martin Rowson entitles his incendiary lecture this year *Giving Offence, The Greatest Gift*, and exhibitions and murals crop up all over town.

This year's international stars on exhibition are Australian and Greek cartoonists. The theme, mercifully, is not the general election but "Magic, Myth and Mystery". It will be interesting to see how the Greeks, heirs of myth, interpret this (and whether they bring any good financial jokes, come to that) and how the down-to-earth Aussies see magic.

Personally, I can't keep away, and always end up spending too much at the selling exhibitions. There is something special about cartoonists; all sensible journalists revere them for their ability to express in a few lines and a pithy caption the serious truths and risible absurdities that we struggle to put across in a thousand words.

And the boys and girls who gather at the year's big gig are (despite their exuberant weakness for drawing on tablecloths and their penchant for tuneless singing around town in the

evening) a strangely wise breed. I have loved their art all my life, ever since poring over Giles annuals as a child, and consoling myself with St Trinian's at school and Bill Tidy and Garland in my student years. The cartoonist's wisdom lies in seeing, faster than most of us, the truth about life. Which is that at the heart of everything there lies a joke. shrewsburycartoonfestival.com

wit and wisdom

"I've got a choice as to whether I sit down with a pair of headphones and listen to Philip Hammond for a few hours or kill myself" Rory Bremner, bemoaning the demise of the "personality politician", is uninspired by the Shadow Treasury Secretary

hard times by laura & abe

