THE EDEN ISSUE.
NOTHING LASTS FOREVER.
David LaChapelle created these candles and shot this image. In 1998, it ran in Flaunt's first issue called ‘First Love’.
Everyone wants to live in paradise, but not many of us ever make it happen. A few years ago, though, David La Chapelle, an exuberant aesthete possessed of both a warm heart and a cutting sense of humor, figured it out. At the top of his game, he walked away from it all, turning his back on one of the highest paying, highest profile careers in the history of photography. He moved into the dense Hawaiian rainforest, onto an eighteen acre farm of papaya, mango, banana, and coconut trees. There, he created a farm for artists and aspiring artists. Life is grand out on the sustainable, solar-powered, off-the-grid farm—truly, the land of milk and honey. He has goats for fresh milk, three colonies of bees that provide fresh honey, and a pink camouflage Meredith that runs on straight vegetable oil. He sleeps in a tiny cabin surrounded by the bellows of ducks, frogs, and distant whales. The main house, a plantation-style masterpiece, is reserved for his guests. A few steps away, a tropical, volcanic beach that remains 75 degrees year-round laps at the shore.

But this setting isn’t the only reason that this place is paradise. Here, far from the maddening crowd, one can bother La Chapelle, and that has brought him an immense amount of peace—which is exactly what he needed to begin his transition from photographer-for-hire to fine artist. Here, life is very, very quiet. Cell phones barely work in this fiercely private town, there’s only one Internet connection, and mail goes to a post office instead of to your door. The nearest movie theater is three hours away. The most involved activity can be picking up something sent to you from the port, like the several-ton package Courtney Love recently sent him. “Court knew I moved out here, and one night while she was buying stuff over the Internet at her house, she kept sending me pictures of all these enormous stone gates that she wanted to get me,” says La Chapelle. “I told her not to buy me them, but before I knew it, she’d called the gate person in England and left a long message and her credit card number. Six months later, they showed up at the port in Maui and we had to go get them.”

In other words, it’s a big day in town when La Chapelle flies 25 of his friends and colleagues in for a sevendary photography shoot on his land—something he’s started to do a lot recently. Today, cast members include his best friend, the stunning transsexual Amanda Lepore; Jesus Villa, a Cirque du Solei performer who holds a world record for doing 19 backflips through 100 yards in 21 seconds; and Denver software specialist Carlo Riley, a Michael Jackson impersonator, who says he began to pray as a child that he would become like Jackson in every way. “I specialize in the very late Jackson years,” explains Riley, nodding evenly. “That makes me one of the rarest Jackson impersonators around.”

If you can imagine it, La Chapelle is planning to shoot a scene in which Riley (as Jackson), as archangel Michael, is getting married to the Lady of Guadalupe, played by model Hana Soukupova in a $250,000 Christian Lacroix couture wedding gown (her husband, mogul Drew Aaron, has accompanied her here as well). But this is a mere distraction to the main focus of these seven days, which La Chapelle has been planning for over two years. The other shots—and one in particular—are the climax of La Chapelle’s astonishing, most personal, perhaps, about a world destroyed and paradise regained.

The paradise that La Chapelle imagines is one of unabashed fakelocking, where lovers entertain each other in the woods and Venus is born on the shores of the beach under a pink-blossomed branch of his land’s beloved shower tree. Instead of a Last Supper, Amanda Lepore, in a showgirl’s white feathered headdress, gives suckle to a baby for the first supper. “Why not?” says La Chapelle, coolly. “She’s plastic, and the baby’s plastic, too.” He then becomes more serious. “The narrative here is that the people come to the shores of paradise where they find nature. Nature is enlightenment, which is the purpose of life: to become better and become enlightened. This is what this epic, natural world represents to me, that concept: Paradise regained.”

Sometimes it seems like creating art in the rainforest is a version of paradise. Other times it can feel like a long-endurance marathon run by a fanatical perfectionist artist who will stop at nothing to realize his vision. The cast and crew labor to create La Chapelle’s images, far from any creature comforts, working almost 20 hours a day through driving rain, mosquitoes, and a staph infection that has taken hold in a few of the kids. Before the rehearsal for his most important image—a photo of the mostly naked survivors on a raft (cobbled together from the compound’s refuse and the town dump) reaching paradise—everyone seems about ready to wilt, tired of the long days and longer nights. Even La Chapelle takes a break.

Then he zooms back on the set and picks up a bullhorn. “I’ve been planning this shot for two years,” he says. “This is what I live for, except for friends and family, which all of you are anyway. And I just want to thank you for being here and helping me understand what’s going to happen. You’ve reached the shores of paradise from the old world. You’re about to reach enlightenment. I know there is a lot of mudder here, but this is not about that. This is not pornography or an erotic art. This is about the Renaissance, reminding everyone that the beauty of man proves that God exists. That’s an incredible idea, and one that I buy into.” He looks around the set: it’s all the people that he knows from town, like Rebekah Ruby, his garden mistress; Nate Gold, a seven-foot-four neighbor from a few miles down the road; even one of his carpenters and his housekeeper (and goat herder), an older couple with young spirits but gray hair. Then there are his close friends, like Fred Torres, his producer of 15 years and the head of Fred Torres Collaborations; and Patrick Toolan, his exhibitions coordinator; even Daphne Guinness, the style icon, who is spending a few weeks in Hawaii to recharge. “David,” she says, “has saved my life.”

La Chapelle picks up the bullhorn again. You can see in his eyes how much it means to him that all of these people cared enough to be part of his crazy art piece; and you can see in their eyes how much it means to them that he decided to include them. “All of you, young people and old people, I know we all have our body issues, but I just want you to recognize my intentions,” he says, quietly. “And I want you to know that I really, really thank you.”
After the bullhorn, La Chapelle and I sit down to talk some more about his intentions.

VANESSA GRIGORIADES:
How have these days of shooting been for you?
DAVID LA CHAPPELLE: It’s been very good, the realization of a dream. For the last couple years, I’ve been thinking about doing that shoot with the raft, but I was too scared of it. It was just daunting. I thought about it so much. I haven’t lost sleep over it ever, but I was starting out. And I’m losing sleep over these pictures, which is really exciting.

Freud said that there is no happiness in life except for the fulfillment of a childhood dream, and it seems that in Maui you have fulfilled something you longed for. What is that?
When I was a kid, I used to pray for three things: a cabin in the woods, vegetarian food (the kind of food I ate at Angelica Kitchen in New York), and to make a living being an artist. Those are the things that I need to feel like I’m me. My parents lived in the woods in Connecticut, and even after I moved to New York as a teenager, I would take the bus from Port Authority for seventeen dollars to their house. My father was Catholic, but my mother is really a naturalist more than anything else. She finds her spirituality in nature, and it was important for her to live near that. When I had a problem, I’d always explore the reservoir system on the street behind their house. I would always go to this one rock in a lake where birch trees dipped into the water. I’ll never forget the first time I dove in naked. I felt like Walt Whitman. That place was my solace, and afterwards I’d go back to New York feeling cleansed.

Why didn’t you keep going there?
Well, my father died in 2001, and my mother moved away, resettling in Florida. It was hard for me to be in New York with nowhere to get away to. Then my studio in New York on 13th street was demolished. It broke my heart. The least expensive place to rent in New York became, as advertised, the most expensive condos in the East Village. The neighborhood had changed so much, and I didn’t want to be the person who walks around saying, “It was so great in the East Village back then.” So I moved to L.A., which seemed natural because that’s where you make magic—Hollywood, props, sets. But in L.A. I just continued working like crazy. Really, when you look at my life, it was a twenty-year period of hypercraziness that lasted until a few years ago. The thing about being bipolar is that manic episodes can be really fun, and there are times of big
Why didn't you continue working for galleries?

They were two distinct worlds and you didn't cross over. So when I left galleries, I thought I was burning that bridge and would never be allowed back to show in galleries. I did have some exhibitions in the last twenty years, but I always felt that they weren't that serious. I felt that I was a novelty and being shown, in a way, to get large numbers of people into galleries and museums to see pictures of celebrities. Even though boundaries have come down a bit, there's still a stigma to photographers who work for magazines and shoot fashion, and it's difficult to shed that. You're either an artist or a prostitute. Generally, photographs in magazines are meant to be looked at very quickly and so very little is expected of them.

You can't possibly think that your pictures are like that, can you?

It's true that my images have always transcended the magazine's necessities. The pictures weren't just about Lil' Kim in Louis Vuitton, or a girl snorting diamonds—they were about an addiction to materialism, shopping as a drug, that need for consumption equated to chemical dependency. So I always had my own narrative going on, which I think is much more apparent. I'm still exploring many of the same themes in my art now but they're louder, clearer, and more pointed. I'm not being edited anymore or operating within the structures of someone else's agenda, which is so liberating—to say whatever I want to say, which I couldn't always do. That's part of what is so great about showing in galleries now. It's such a surprise to be invited back into galleries—a rebirth, and also an incredible challenge: to take pictures in a whole new way, where there is freedom.

And what was it that you began to focus on?

I started to think about how I could shoot nudes in nature, and it was very challenging. With nature, you don't want to shoot a postcard. In terms of nudes in nature, you don’t want the body to become cliché. I felt very driven to rescue the body from what I see as a critical time for the figure in art. It's almost like we're living in the reverse of the Dark Ages. Let me explain: in the Dark Ages, the body was viewed as sinful and so it was covered up, but when the Medics started the first art school, it became something else, something beautiful again—you had this explosion, Michelangelo, D'Annunzio, Botticelli... the birth of the Enlightenment. The body became holy and sacred, not merely beautiful, but also sublime. And now we're in a time when I think the body needs to be rescued again. With the Internet and porn, it has become little more than a commodity. In photography these days, the figure is really only associated to sex or a perfume ad. I want to change that. I want to reclaim the figure from its association with the banal—commodity and pornography.

What about the themes of your work? How have those changed?

I've become very interested in using religious narrative and mythology—some of the most celebrated scenes in art history—to depict smaller stories, the stories of regular life. My photographs of the pirtà came out of that. My narrative poses Courtney Love as an escort, holding my ex-boyfriend as a junkie on her lap. I saw that a lot when I was younger: so many people dying small deaths, small pirtàs, dying of AIDS or a drug overdose. And those little deaths never get depicted. I wanted to commemorate and depict the equality of these moments, and the parallels they share with Christ. We are taught that we're all God's children and we're all equal—in life and death.

Do you consider yourself a Christian?

I don't know. Although I have faith, I don’t identify with any religion. I find myself interested in all faiths. Religion is just story telling and meant to be interpreted, not taken literally. When things are taken literally, that's when you start to get into fundamentalism. I like the idea of being an atheist too. I like that no one has ever died or killed in the name of atheism. I believe in Christianity, as it was originally intended to exist in the world. The stories that Jesus told were beautiful. I love the Thomas...
Jefferson Bible in particular: Jefferson’s book is only made up of the words that he believed came out of Jesus’ mouth. For him, Jesus is humble and poetic, much like an artist, teaching people love and forgiveness.

I think the Christian right has tainted Christianity for many people. And who is that Pope to tell people what to do? I heard that the Pope went to Africa, and in his first speech, said to millions of people that condoms were a sin. If you ask me, that’s another form of genocide. I was in Brazil once, which is very Catholic, and a prostitute friend told me that he didn’t use condoms, because you’re preparing to have sex and you’re buying a condom, that’s a double-sin. It’s just heartbreaking to teach people that. I mean, Brazilians are going to have sex in Brazil. It’s human!

An apocalyptic strain of thinking seems to have crept into your art more as well. I do think that we need a world where there is clean air, clean water, and clean food. I had always known that, but now I feel it more deeply. We all do. So I’ve become interested in depicting the world born anew. A few years ago I decided to shoot a photo inspired by Michelangelo’s “Deluge” in the Sistine Chapel, but in my shot people are escaping Las Vegas—Sin City. My narrative from there is not apocalyptic; it’s very honest. These people are saved through the darkness, and eventually arrive in paradise on a boat that they’ve cobbled together from the flood. They go through the storm, and arrive on the shores of Paradise. I’m far less jaded than people expect. This is not a death scene, it’s a rebirth.

What about using Michael Jackson in these images?

I’ve been very affected by Michael’s death. I had become so disillusioned with the world back in the nineties, during his second trial for molestation. That was about the same time that the Monica Lewinsky scandal happened, and I really felt that we were at a low point in history. Clinton changed the course of history. If he hadn’t stuck his cigar up her, Al Gore would’ve been president and we’d live in a different world today. This is proof that an individual’s actions can change the course of history. I’d always thought that Clinton was being truthful, and that the women who came up to say they had had sex with him were framing him, but then Monica Lewinsky proved otherwise. Anyway, I remember talking to the producers of Rize, Richmond and Tone Talauega, two brothers who had been dancers on tour with Michael when they were 15 and are now famous choreographers, and saying to them, ‘Where’s the smoke, there’s fire,’ and they were like, ‘It’s impossible, you just don’t know Michael.’ But I was disillusioned with the world. Now, I know this is a person who was innocent and he was persecuted and ruined and destroyed and tortured to death—a great artist who had given a lot to the world suffered a slow, public crucifixion. His death teaches the world about condemnation and judgment. It proved once and for all that society’s unnatural fear of anything that’s different. He illuminated basic prejudices connected to gender and skin color. He exposed us to the need to topple those we once adored: our need to witness the brightest star, highest achiever, fall to the depths of what must at times have been a living hell. We imposed our perversions on someone pure of heart—a televised witch-hunt.

Where were you when you heard about his death?

I had just done an interview with an Israeli newspaper for an upcoming show that I was having in Israel, and the reporter asked me who I wanted to shoot that I hadn’t. I said, “Michael Jackson.” It had almost happened a few times: the record company had set stuff up, and I almost did it for Vibe once, even got as close as to planning a shoot in paradise with animals around, but it never came to fruition. The morning that I left for Israel, my close friend Sharon Gault, who was friends with Farrah Fawcett, woke me up. She was crying as she told me the news of Farrah’s passing. Later, when I got off the plane, I got all these texts that Michael had died. It didn’t hit me until I got back to Maui that I was devastated. I couldn’t get back to my house because the one road was blocked by a landslide. I checked into a hotel and for the next three days, I watched interviews, videos, anything that I could find of Michael on YouTube. What I then saw [here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZO4lRLcMrM] was an interview in Michael’s kitchen of a boy with his brother and sister, all telling of how Michael had cured the young boy of cancer.

It’s a miracle, a step toward saintly. Why didn’t the world notice the good that he had done? All they saw was a man holding hands with a boy. What’s wrong with that? I hadn’t seen any of these things because I was so busy working on Rize, and any job that I could do to finance it, all while doing Elton John’s The Red Piano show in Vegas. I had no time nor desire for television, newspapers, or whatever. I was so busy working that when I heard of the second trial, I didn’t want to know any details because it brought back negative feelings from the Clinton scandal. I guess my cynical outlook made it easier for me to step back than to deal with the possibility of another disappointment because I love Michael. I never met him, I never actually shot him, but I adored him. When Rolling Stone asked me to do the Millennium cover with free reign, I included every artist I could think of in homage to the Beatles’ Sgt. Pepper cover, with almost everyone but Michael wearing masks. As the focal point at the center of the cover, I put the Michael-look-alike holding Sharon’s newborn baby, who is wearing a crown. It was so funny because the baby peed on the guy’s lap that was posing as Michael. For so many years, the lyrics and meanings behind his music meant so much to me—it was the soundtrack of my life. Sitting in that hotel room in Maui, I was heartbroken and also felt so much remorse for losing faith in him, for ever having doubted his innocence. It was clearly impossible for him to ever have hurt anyone.

Do you think he was gay?

I think that it was none of my business. I know that he was a genius and a prodigy. He definitely possessed a magic, and an androgynous demeanor, which isn’t appreciated in our culture. The facts are: the music was a gift, and the amount of joy that music—if you put together all those house of people listening and dancing to it—has given the world is incalculable.

Is this a commune, here in Hawaii?

It’s a commune of sorts. It’s a cooperative. People working out here on the farm have similar ideals and visions. Everyone participates in making the pictures happen. Everyone has a skill to offer, and I’ve always loved the collaborative nature of photography. “Let’s go somewhere where we can all be happy and make art.” I’ve always lived and worked intuitively. This was a purely intuitive act: to leave everything I knew and start over. It wasn’t logical or thought out. I love the idea of writing a new chapter in your life and making a different path for yourself.

So what is it that you’re doing out here, really?

You know, I’m just living again.

LaChappelle’s shows this fall include “The Hope of Africa,” at David DeSantos Gallery (DeSantosGallery.com) in Los Angeles; “American Jesus,” at the Sebastian Guinness Gallery in Dublin, Ireland; and “Delirium of Reason” at Guadalogue’s Museo de las Artes.

All images courtesy of Fred Torres Collaborations (fredtorres.com).