

# Alec Soth's Archived Blog

March 29, 2007

## Unconscious models

Filed under: [crying & flying](#) — alecsothblog @ 12:39 am

In [an interview](#) with ArtNet, David LaChapelle discusses his recent pictures (previously mentioned on this blog [here](#)):

I'd been working so long with models who were quite conscious of the camera, and I wanted to find a way to make people unconscious of the camera (without feeding them "roofies" or knocking them out). I wanted to figure out a way to keep my subjects from posing. So I got this large tank and filled it with warm water...The people in the tank are basically forced to relax, all they can see is a big blur. And they're not professional models — I got people off Craigslist or went up to people at Trader Joe's and said, "Would you like to be in a dunk chamber?"

Speaking of unconscious models, [State of the Art](#) recently discussed two different photo controversies: the [murdered models](#) on "America's Top Models" and the Dolce & Gabbana [rape fantasy ad](#).

"Sexy and offensive are two concepts very far from each other," says Stefano Gabbana in an [interview with Newsweek](#), "Sexy can become vulgar according to how the item is worn and interpreted."

LaChapelle has a slightly different opinion. "I think we're in a post-pornographic time and nothing seems shocking, but everything remains carnal no matter what you do."

## 12 Comments

1. I love the idea of taking a portrait of someone in an unconscious way. I immediately think of the superb Philip-Lorca diCorcia, who has a long history of doing this, either just giving the appearance of an unconscious model as in his streetwork pictures etc. or quite literally in his 'heads' series. Of course that series created a little extra controversy of it's own: [http://www.boingboing.net/2005/07/01/photographer\\_sued\\_by.html](http://www.boingboing.net/2005/07/01/photographer_sued_by.html) that was resolved in diCorcia's favour. Good job he wasn't working in France where the shoe would be on the other foot.

Dave

*Comment by [Dave Greenwood](#) — March 29, 2007 @ [3:27 am](#)*

2. Interesting that the murdered models shots are creating a stir now... Haven't seen all the photos all the photos from the America's Next Top Model series, but seems pretty similar to what [Guy Bourdin](#) was doing 30 years ago; wasn't alive then, but [this wikipedia](#) says his work was well-loved by the media at the time. It's a good thing, though, that images depicting violence against women are being questioned. Also reminds me of the [war-on-terror fashion spread](#) in Italian Vogue. Don't know if that made controversy when it came out, but the boot to the neck of a model sure creeped me out, as did a few of the others from the spread.

*Comment by [M. Scott Brauer](#) — March 29, 2007 @ [7:05 am](#)*

3. For a different spin, there are Ben Donaldson's intriguing images at the fabulous Jen Bekman. [http://www.jenbekman.com/artists/benjamin\\_donaldson/](http://www.jenbekman.com/artists/benjamin_donaldson/)

From his statement, statement :: summerland

A series of photographs in which subjects are under hypnosis, instructed to experience the most beautiful landscape imaginable.

The title of the series, Summerland was a term used by 19th Century Spiritualists to refer to the afterlife. A contemplation of a possible "heaven" is one of the many places that some of these people may imagine under this hypnotic state. Some other subjects may have a more earthly vision.

I am interested in the expressions that people have while in this hypnotic state, where they are internally experiencing a sublime vista. ... While the viewer has the privilege of knowing the subject's state, the conundrum of never truly knowing what is held within another's mind remains.

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See also one of PDN's former 30, Shannon Taggart's amazing images of spirit mediums, often in trances, <http://www.bu.edu/prc/spirit/taggart.htm> and

<http://www.shannontaggart.com/TheSpiritualists/index.html>

*Comment by [Leslie Brown](#) — March 29, 2007 @ [7:53 am](#)*

4. I wonder if the Top Model producers were hip to Melanie Pullen's High Fashion Crime Scene series: <http://www.highfashioncrimescenes.com/>

*Comment by [John](#) — March 29, 2007 @ [9:01 am](#)*

5. Or the work of Izima Kaoru:

[http://www.galerieandreasbinder.de/galerien\\_muenchen/izimakaorugal.htm](http://www.galerieandreasbinder.de/galerien_muenchen/izimakaorugal.htm)

Comment by [Patti Hallock](#) — March 29, 2007 @ [9:38 am](#)

6. Dave, I immediately thought of diCorcia, too. I think, because I just posted about the outcome of the lawsuit [on my blog](#). Another photographer not yet mentioned here is [Marjaana Kella](#), who has explored hypnotizing her subjects for her series [Hypnosis](#).

And the idea of the 'unconscious model' is something I've sort of integrated into my own work with a series I made called [Middle Names](#), where the subjects photographed didn't realize how their image would be presented — without their eyes in the frame.

Comment by [Shane Lavalette](#) — March 29, 2007 @ [9:52 am](#)

7. I shamelessly admit that I watch that trashy, annoying, addictive piece of reality tv. In fact, I look forward to it.  
What was interesting was that this was the one week where almost all of the girls delivered. They all looked like real models. Somehow, it was easier for them to pose and look fabulous when they were pretending to be dead. Except for the girl that was eliminated. The judges said she looked "too dead".

Comment by [Annabel](#) — March 29, 2007 @ [10:01 am](#)

8. re: 'murdered models'

At a recent gathering a photographer friend expounded a theory that was too complex to try and unravel and re-state here. Suffice to say it was a very interesting take.

He talked about how human sacrifice was prevalent in some ancient cultures and how the most beautiful were always chosen to sacrifice.

And tied it in with how many cultures (Native, Muslim, Jewish...) refrain from having their pictures taken — not only because it's seen as idolatry, but also because a 'bit of the soul' is 'taken'.

There is an 'para-normal' effect on us when others look at our image and project their thoughts/reactions.

He talked about how in our 'modern' culture we sacrifice models, actors and celebrities. He was coming from a place of being aware & sensitive to what the effect on the psyche is to have all this publicity & to be the object of thousands if not millions of viewers fantasies — mostly very negative ones. The murdered models images seems to really feed into this.

Are we so desperate to get a rise out of our jaded audiences; are we so unable to find a new look; so alienated from goodness and truth and beauty that we choose to put all these incredible skills and resources into producing and glamourizing the 'dark side'. Sure it can be written off as "a movie", "an act", nothing harmful or serious and in "art" anything goes — but do we not carry some responsibility to bring light?

Comment by [Frank](#) — March 29, 2007 @ [10:44 am](#)

9. I don't like them at all for all the obvious reasons.

I looked at Melanie Pullen's high fashion page and found one of the funniest/crassest pictures ever — a remake of the Philip Jones Griffiths bandaged napalm victim. Incredible.

Comment by [colin pantall](#) — March 29, 2007 @ [11:06 am](#)

10. "do we not carry some responsibility to bring light?"

Absolutely. The spurious link between "darkness" and hi-gloss sexuality is the territory of adolescent boys (think heavy metal...) — our culture has made the huge mistake of mistaking this posturing for transgression ("Ooh, leather!"), and rewarding its proponents with the label of "avant garde". What is more convention-bound than S&M?

Someone once referred to the "heavy breathing" of Modernism, and there is a strong link between the attitude "this is SERIOUS and SIGNIFICANT, don't you dare laugh" and male sexuality (I think you know what I'm talking about, gals?). Boys, please take off that scary rubber mask, and let's all have some fun!

*Comment by Vinegar Tom — March 29, 2007 @ [11:19 am](#)*

11. I think there is no such thing as a "unconscious model" in a studio. Just because they look like they are not aware of the camera that does not mean they are unconscious of the camera.

The only unconscious model is a dead model.

*Comment by [Shen Wei](#) — March 29, 2007 @ [8:51 pm](#)*

12. I personally don't see a problem with exploring "the dark side" of humanity. For centuries we have killed, sacrificed, usurped, and condemned others to inhumane fates. My problem is the glamorization of this dark side.

Death isn't beautiful...its ugly. If you want to show someone hung then please make them look realistic. By taking these dark scenarios and using high fashion lighting, makeup, and retouching we are actually idolizing these acts...making them fashionable. That is the real crime in my eyes.

*Comment by Gregory Peralta — October 2, 2007 @ [2:29 pm](#)*