THE RAPE OF AFRICA

Galerie Alex Daniels and Fred Torres Collaborations

Present

DAVID LACHAPELLE
THE RAPE OF AFRICA

Colin Wiggins, The National Gallery, London

Fantasy and truth

What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

John Keats: Ode on a Grecian Urn

Fantasy - crazy and brash, bright, loud and glamorous. David LaChapelle's photographs have an instantly recognizable look to them. His pictures evoke a world of excess and exuberance, populated by beautiful people who are flawless and immaculate. When we look into his compositions, we find ourselves adrift in an ocean of fantasy.

David LaChapelle searches for beauty. He is enraptured by it, obsessed with it. He is captivated by the beauty of the human body in much the same way as those Italian painters and sculptors of the Renaissance who took such delight in representing the body. They allowed the light to shine in and illuminate the naked human form after centuries of religious prudery had kept it in the darkness. One of those artists was Sandro Botticelli, who invented an eroticized ideal that still holds us entranced half a millennium after his death in 1510. His Venus and Mars, now in London's National Gallery,

Sandro Botticelli: Detail: La Primavera, © Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY.

is iconic. It was painted in Florence in about 1485 or so. Botticelli's Venus, the Goddess of Love, is one of those rare beings, a beauty who no-one can remember encountering for the first time. She seems to have been in our consciousness forever. According to legend, she is based upon the celebrated Florentine Renaissance beauty Simonetta Vespucci, who was famed for her looks and was the tragic victim of an early death. She was also, apparently, the inspiration for the image of Venus in two other great paintings by Botticelli that are now in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence: the Birth of Venus and La Primavera.

Despite her position as a respectably married woman, Botticelli was in love with Simonetta, so the story goes. Nobody really knows if any of this is true. It's just part of the enduring myth, although anyone with an ounce of romance would wish it to be so. In Botticelli's painting, Venus is dressed in a diaphanous white gown and is sitting upright and wide awake. Her companion is a total contrast. Male, naked and asleep, we identify him by his armour and the weapons that four little satyrs have borrowed from him while he dozes. He is, of course, Mars - the God of War.

War is the bringer of death, grief and destruction. In Botticelli's painting however, he is vanquished. Look at that floppy hand. The limply dangling finger tells you all you need to know about what lies hidden beneath the drape just behind it. Mars is spent. His proud lance is now a plaything for the little satyrs who are about to jolt him from his post-coital oblivion.

The conch shell will sound a strident blast and the god will suddenly wake to find himself naked and humiliated, as the fully dressed Venus looks on with cold condescension. Her expression has a faint hint of annoyance about it, as she fixes her gaze on the god who has dared to fall asleep on her. Botticelli's message is plain. Mars cannot keep up with Venus. He is disarmed while she is in control. Love conquers war.

If only this were true.

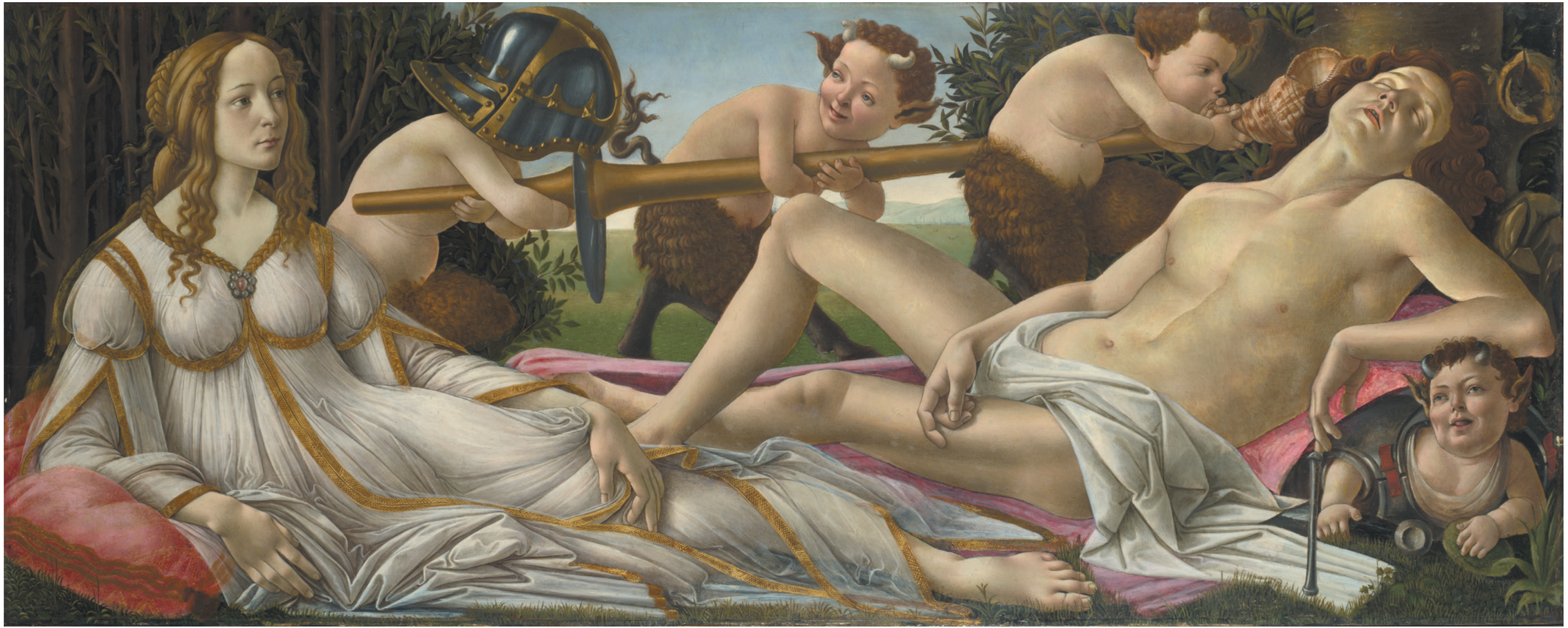
But we all know that it is not. Back in the real world, regular news reports of the child soldiers of Africa horrify us. We read stories of kidnappings, sometimes of dozens of children at a time. They are drugged and then forced to murder and mutilate. We learn of endless and ancient conflicts that have no meaning or purpose. These conflicts are fuelled by weapons that flood in from countries that consider themselves civilized and advanced. We shudder for the victims and then we put them out of our minds and turn back to the gossip pages. It is just so easy to fall into the belief that Africa, the Dark Continent, is incurable.

In David LaChapelle's response to Botticelli's painting there are three little black boys. Two of them are playing with huge guns, grim weapons of war, the weapons of Mars, as if they are fashion accessories. To these little lads, the weapons are toys to have fun with, like the tiny trucks in the background that are placed in an arid landscape. These little toy trucks echo the huge mechanical earth-mover that appears to emerge menacingly from the direction of Mars's groin. Look and think carefully because everything has a meaning. The jib of the crane seems to carve out a kind of negative pyramid. The pyramids are a great African monument that are here nowhere in sight. Instead there is emptiness.

David extends Botticelli's game of contrast. The Italian master opposes male and female, asleep and awake, naked and clothed. To this, David adds another opposite: black and white. And in doing so he deftly changes the image's meaning. Mars, of course, is a powerful European god.

He was worshipped in ancient Rome, the ultimate empire of merciless, brutal conquest. With the complicity of Mars, the Romans brought peace and civilization to barbarians: but only on their own terms. Do as we tell you or be slaughtered. The Romans worshipped Mars because he was always on their side, as they transported their enlightened values to the backward tribes whose lands they invaded and conquered. In David's picture, Mars slumbers peacefully. He is surrounded by the trappings of conquest: bars of gold and shiny trinkets, a gilded grenade and pistol. A diamond encrusted skull. And tellingly, a gilded bone.

It is these details that speak most eloquently of the meaning of David's picture. Look again at the landscape behind, where the little trucks are placed. It is dry and arid. The little trucks continue to desecrate it. The life that was once there, the trees, the grass, the animals and the people, have been scoured away from the surface



Sandro Botticelli:
C. 1484, Venus and Mars
© The National Gallery, London.

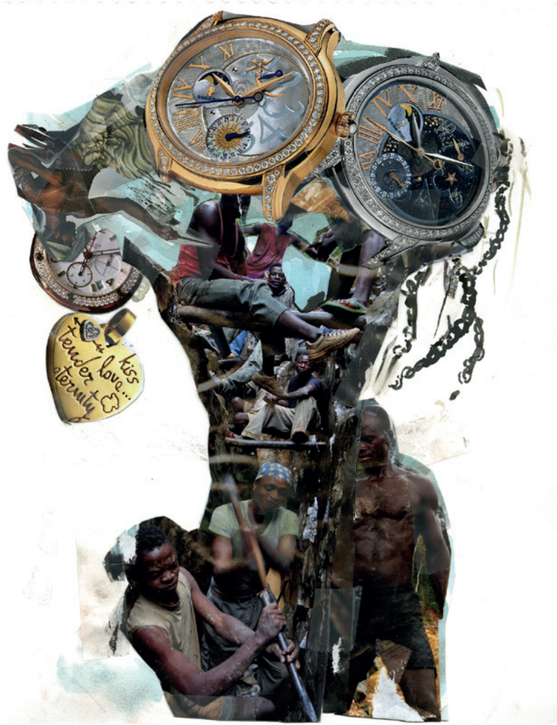
of a once beautiful world in a relentless search for treasure. This search has a cost. One of the most efficient methods of mining gold involves the use of mercury, which filters into watercourses and leaves its toxic residue to destroy the lives of those who ingest it. Bodies are withered, children are born deformed and impaired. How ironic that this poisonous metal takes its name from another European god: Mercury.

He is the god of commerce and profit, one more European son who arrives in Africa in a ruthless search for gold. Gold with which to gild the bones of the vanquished.

As if to emphasise his physical perfection, Mars has a little wound on his cheek. It is nothing too serious and nothing that won't heal. The little boy with the megaphone is wearing a footballer's helmet: maybe this is all just a game after all. On the left sits Venus. She is black. She is loaded with all of those aspects of black beauty that white Europeans have historically found so compelling. She is exotic, rare and aloof.

Her jewellery, her painted nails, lavish hairstyle and exposed breast all combine to produce an image of rare fragility. She is a black African woman seen through European eyes and has been rendered passive, tame and beautiful. In Botticelli's picture, Venus is in charge but in David's picture the lamb and the rooster that are placed beside her indicate that she is, like them, only a chattel. She has the same status as a piece of livestock. And a lamb, remember, is traditionally an animal of sacrifice.

Mars, although asleep, is still in charge



David La Chapelle: watercolor, graphite, collage on paper - 20x23 cm | 2009

Detail: Sandro Botticelli, Venus and Mars

Detail: David LaChapelle, The Rape of Africa

here. He can snooze away happily. He doesn't need his weapons anymore because the little African boys will do his dirty work for him. The boy with the megaphone will wake him up but the god will simply look around at his accumulated treasure and reflect approvingly on how his weapons bring the values of western enlightenment to a continent where the light seems permanently extinguished. The broken light bulb in the top corner is useless and dim: we hardly notice it in contrast to the painfully bright strip-lights that sear across the top of the picture. Here, it is the classical European god Mars who rules things, not the black African Venus. And he transports the means of destruction to the hands of innocents.

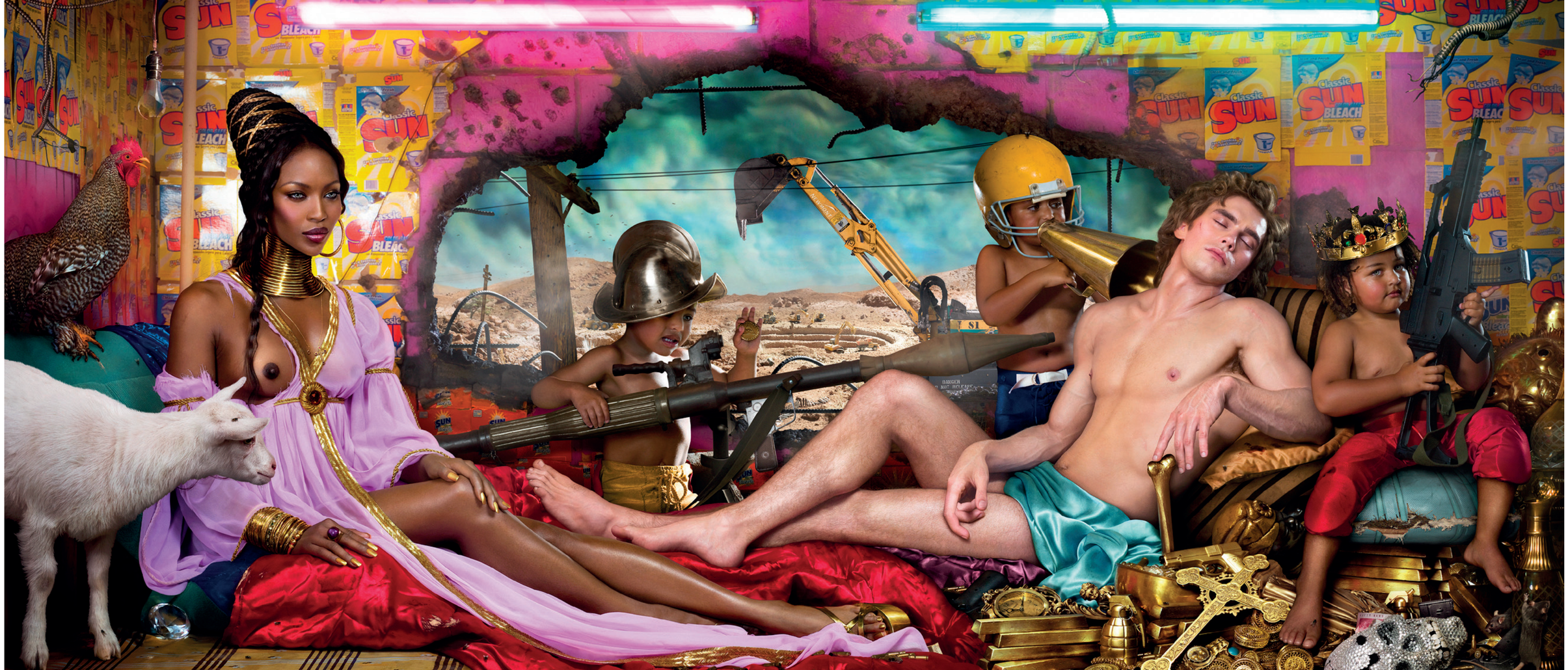
David LaChapelle's 'Rape of Africa' is a visual equivalent of Joseph Conrad's short novel of 1899, 'Heart of Darkness'. There, the appalling character Kurtz plunders vast amounts of ivory to send back home. Cleverly, the charismatic European fools the native Africans into worshipping him with their primitive rituals. To the Africans, the white man becomes a god. Kurtz and his fellow colonisers were motivated by a desire to take African riches to Europe. In exchange, from Europe to Africa they brought what they saw as enlightenment. With that enlightenment they brought weapons. And today, their descendants still bring weapons and, symbolising their own enlightenment, they bring 'Classic Sun: Color safe Bleach.' Yes, David LaChapelle is deeply concerned with beauty but he is not blind to its flip side, ugliness. Indeed, he is as passionate about communicating the existence of ugliness as he is about showing us beauty. For Keats, author of the lines quoted at the start of this essay, beauty and truth are the same thing – 'that is all Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know' – but he got it wrong. Ugliness exists and that is the truth too. Just think of those child soldiers. Ugliness is the opposite of beauty. Fantasy is the opposite of truth. Paradoxically however, it is through his brilliant use of beauty and fantasy that David LaChapelle somehow and irresistibly arrives at the truth. The ugly truth.

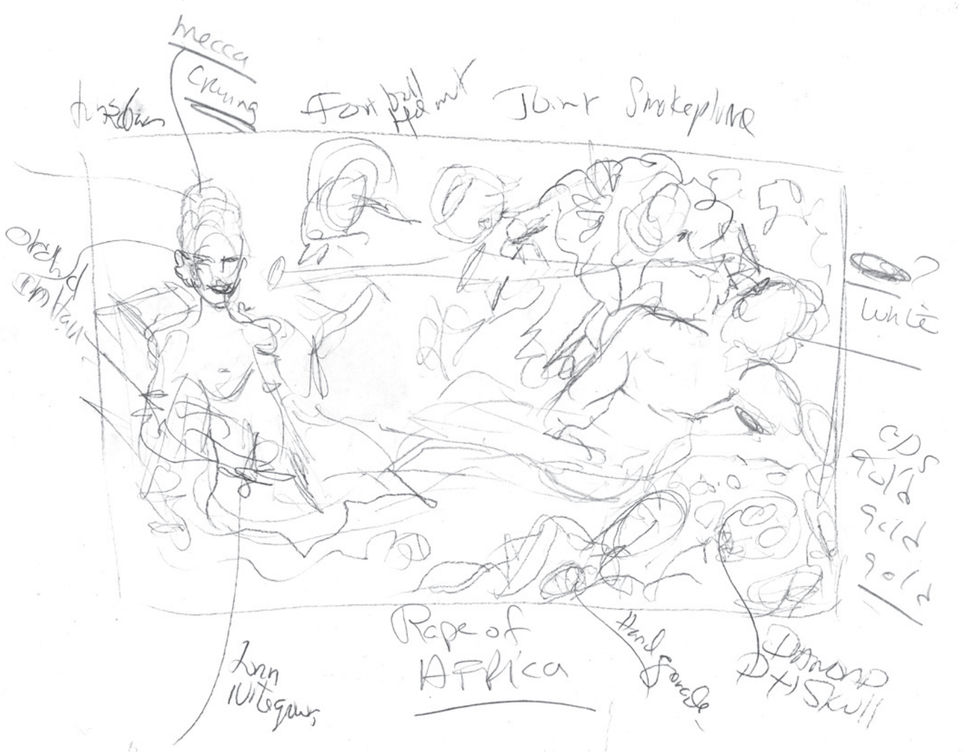
By all ye cry or whisper,
By all ye leave or do,
The silent, sullen peoples
Shall weigh your gods and you.

Kipling; 'The White Man's Burden'

Colin Wiggins,
The National Gallery, London

THE RAPE OF AFRICA


Classic
SUN
BLEACH



David La Chapelle: graphite on paper - 23x20 cm | 2009

Wim Pijbes, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam

Onaangenaam comfort

Afrika is een vrouw, zoals alle continenten vrouwen zijn. Afrika is vanzelfsprekend een zwarte vrouw en zo wordt ze al sinds eeuwen verbeeld. Afrika is het rijkste continent, Afrika is het armste continent, het oercontinent, waar de natuur in volle overvloed zijn gang gaat. Afrika is overdadig, overrompelend, bedwelmend en barok: bij uitstek het continent van David LaChapelle. Lange tijd was Afrika een onbekende in de Westerse kunst. Hooguit werd ze verbeeld in de allegorische voorstellingen waar de werelddelen verpersoonlijkt werden in fresco's en beeldengroepen in meestal grote publieke gebouwen. Het mooiste voorbeeld vinden we in Amsterdam, in het timpaan van het voormalige stadhuis, tegenwoordig Paleis op de Dam. De Republiek der Nederlanden was in de zeventiende eeuw immers Europa's leidende mogendheid en handelsnatie waar ook de kunsten bloeiden. In het wereldbeeld van de Republiek stond de Amsterdamse stedenmaagd centraal. Amsterdam beschouwde zich als de stad waarnaar alle werelddelen zich richtten., In de wereldvoorstelling, gemaakt door Quellinus de Oude zien we de zeegoden theatraal hulde brengen aan de Amsterdamse Stedemaagd.

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