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Alex Da Corte

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ARTSEEN | SEPTEMBER 2025

Alex Da Corte: *The Whale*

By Hannah Sage Kay



Alex Da Corte, *The Pied Piper*, 2019. Neoprene, EPS foam, upholstery foam, staples, thread, polyester fiber, epoxy clay, MDF, plywood, 120 × 120 × 6 ½ inches. © Alex Da Corte. Courtesy the artist and the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. Photo: Karma.

I often don't know what to say when people ask me what kind of art I write about, so I generalize, with perhaps excessive honesty, saying "pretty much anything other than painting." It's lucky then that Alex Da Corte—whose mid-career survey of paintings from the last ten years at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth—seemingly shares my distaste for the medium: "It sickens me to death," he's quoted as saying in the exhibition catalog.

The show nevertheless begins as what appears to be a traditional collection hang of contemporary painting. Works by Frank Stella, Andy Warhol, Richard Pettibone, Morris Louis, Richard Hamilton, Vija Celmins, Roy Lichtenstein, Marisol, and many others are interspersed with what, upon inspection of the wall labels, are revealed to be near facsimiles of these artists' work created by Da Corte. He copies them, but he also plays: remixing motifs, cropping compositions, and eliminating elements—none of which prevent you from seeing what you expect to be there.

Kay, Hannah Sage. "Alex Da Corte: The Whale." *The Brooklyn Rail*, September 2025.

This exhibition is premised largely on the question of what remains legible about identity when the cultural symbols and touchstones that define the presentation of self are stripped away or shuffled. As such it obviates the very medium that defines the works on view in a subversion not just of material terminology but also of the expectations we cling to, creating a productive friction by queering the norm.

The Whale
The Modern Art Museum of
Fort Worth
March 2–September 7, 2025
Fort Worth, TX

The transition from the collection hang of Da Corte's influences to a true immersion in his world—which is echoed by the exhibition title's reference to the Jungian journey of self-discovery whereby one emerges from the belly of a whale (a cavity for ghosts and histories) as their true self—is marked by *ROY G BIV* (2022/2025). Here, painting manifests simultaneously as fine art and occupation. While a video on one side of a large cubic structure pictures Da Corte in the role of four different characters, including Marcel Duchamp, his alter ego Rose Sélavy, and the Joker, at the Philadelphia Museum of Art among Brâncuși's white marble sculptures (which he rather subversively paints bright colors), the structure itself is routinely repainted in red, yellow, and blue over the course of the exhibition's run.



Installation view: Alex Da Corte: *The Whale*, Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, 2025. Courtesy the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth.

In its original presentation in the 2022 Whitney Biennial, this process was undertaken by Da Corte's brother who continued the family business of house painting. Regularly employing reverse sign painting (an exacting commercial technique) and all manner of found materials—mostly products and culturally iconic ephemera—Da Corte blurs the rigid parameters of perhaps art's oldest medium, acknowledging its primary appeal as a flat thing on a wall that bequeaths to the beholder some form of cultural cachet. We are gullible viewers, and what Da Corte highlights more than anything is our lazy desire for the significance of the symbol and what that says about us, rather than the context and contours of the symbol itself.

In the same way a child pastes magazine tear-outs, album covers, movie posters, and other paraphernalia on their bedroom walls in an effort to locate themselves within a sea of content, *The Whale* is Da Corte's childhood bedroom tripped out with higher production value. It makes you want to lounge against his puffy paintings of an anvil from *Looney Tunes*, blue gloves playing a carrot like a flute à la Bugs Bunny, or a smashed Halloween pumpkin from a 1943 cover of *Walt Disney's Comics and Stories*; sit on the pink, purple, blue, and green stained wood benches that were custom-made to compliment the exhibition; peruse his favorite posters... I mean artworks; and play with toys (such as a stormtrooper cutout, a plastic pumpkin, ceramic cat fishbowl, and vampire fangs) scattered about his shelves (thoughtfully provided by *A Time To Kill* [2016] and *Haymaker*



Installation view: Alex Da Corte: *The Whale*, Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, 2025. Courtesy the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth.



Alex Da Corte, *Siren (After E K Charter)*, 2015. Digital print on poplin, foam, spray paint, anodized metal frames, plexiglass, sequin pins, velvet, 56 x 56 inches, © Alex Da Corte. Courtesy the artist and the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. Photo: John Bernardo.

[2017]). Just as the teenage Da Corte painted his own bedroom walls with Disney villains, having learned to draw cartoons from his mother, the adult artist Da Corte remixes and re-contextualizes all manner of referents, from pop music to cartoons, movies, books, and cultural phenomena, unveiling alternative ways that they might speak, hold our attention, and conjure an object-oriented animism normally reserved for people and personifications.

As exemplified by his earliest work on view (*Andromeda* [2012]), Da Corte's "shampoo paintings" quite literally reflect his penchant for understanding how identities are constructed through a constellation of objects and material habits. He invokes shampoo as an apt example, as its varied scents, such as, he explains, "Island Mist," allow us to believe we can be transported through space and time to such an idyllic locale and become the kind of eternally-at-ease, undoubtedly beautiful person that must reside there. Da Corte's early use of such an unnatural, brightly colored liquid as a medium has since served as just one example of the readymade products that he uses to map identity, sexuality, and their respective interpretations across the spectrum of contemporary culture.

While Da Corte instrumentalizes objects (like shampoo) as a mirror in this series of “paintings,” he similarly illuminates an object’s function in the public performance of sexuality in *The Failure Factor* (2019). By replacing the prism through which light passes to create a rainbow on Pink Floyd’s album cover for *The Dark Side of the Moon* with signs of heteronormative masculinity as embodied in brand iconography (a Nike swoosh and the Monster energy drink’s logo), Da Corte underscores their function as “mechanisms through which one might become recognizable in the world as, say, a straight man,” Kemi Adeyemi writes in the exhibition catalog. While this is true, I might argue that the transfigured motif also suggests a willful subversion: despite the elimination of the prism, a rainbow nevertheless emanates from these corporate, traditionally masculine-coded symbols, suggesting an inherent, omnipresent queerness—should we choose to see it.

The issue of willful perspective on the part of the viewer is made more apparent in a gallery outfitted with a floor-to-ceiling seventies-inspired mural of curvilinear bands in the colors of Neapolitan ice cream (what flavor is your favorite?), atop which hang over a dozen of Da Corte’s reverse sign paintings. Immaculately framed in different colors, many of these large-format, square, album cover-like multimedia paintings remove the figural subjects of their appropriated source material. Lily Tomlin, for example, is absent from her iconic *TIME* magazine cover, but her hat, gloved hands, and ornamenting stars remain in *The Great Pretender* (2021); Mariah Carey’s scantily clad body is evidenced only by the misalignment of the spray-painted rainbow on her eponymous album cover as it passes over her (now phantom) boobs in *The End* (2017). For those in the know, these references remain known, creating a default community of theoretically like-minded individuals.

Object affiliation may be the easiest way to self-sort, and while the ephemera, tear-outs, knickknacks, and family photos housed within joyously pink, blue, red, and green vinyl-sided display tables alongside the reverse sign paintings may ultimately serve the same function, their apparent accrual over the artist’s lifetime speaks to the individual behind the performance, as well as the desires underpinning the “paintings” that these objects have informed. Against the backdrop of the slick, conceptual play of sociocultural referents and remixes within his “paintings,” the vitrines bring forth a warm nostalgia for the ghosts and histories of Da Corte’s past. Unexpectedly, perhaps, for an exhibition about masking, here there is both an unknowability and an intimacy, one that is not embodied by the stuff and the images so much as by the act of their collection and the care with which they have been carried forth in time.

It is through this joyous embrace of the stuff that makes up our lives, and a deviant, childlike proclivity for questioning the narratives that inform our worldviews, that Da Corte mounts an investigation of identity’s varied forms—and capitalism’s hold on our sense of self via the products we buy, the jobs we perform, and even the ways in which pleasure and joy are commodified.

Hannah Sage Kay is a contributor to the *Brooklyn Rail*.

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The Washington Post

Glenstone is open again – and still setting the bar for contemporary art

Two new shows by Alex Da Corte and Jenny Holzer at the private museum try to make sense of America.

April 17, 2025



A path leading to Glenstone Museum's Pavilions, open again with new installations after a closure that lasted more than a year. (Iwan Baan/Glenstone)

Review by [Sebastian Smee](#)

The Pavilions at Glenstone, the private art museum in Potomac, Maryland, is open again after an 18-month closure. The Thomas Phifer-designed building, the museum's architectural centerpiece, appears from above as a cluster of giant cinder blocks surrounding a tropical-looking water court and set into a hill. Problems with the construction of the roofs and windows had become apparent soon after the museum's public launch in 2018, according to the

Smee, Sebastian. "Glenstone is Open Again – and Still Setting the Bar for Contemporary Art." *The Washington Post*, April 17, 2025.

museum's co-founder, Emily Wei Rales, in an interview. But the fix is complete, and Glenstone — surely one of the world's most congenial places to see contemporary art — is again fully accessible.

Some small things have changed since the 2018 launch. Instead of hosting temporary exhibitions, a building called the Gallery, which remained open during work on the Pavilions, is now reserved for highlights from the permanent collection, with a focus on older works by, for example, Willem de Kooning, Lee Krasner, Nam June Paik and Ruth Asawa.

The Pavilions, meanwhile, continue to contain galleries dedicated to thrilling long-term displays of sculptures by Cy Twombly and Charles Ray and to a powerful installation by Robert Gober.

But it also has temporary shows. And among the exhibitions this spring are presentations by two artists — Alex Da Corte and Jenny Holzer — both trying, in different ways, to make sense of America.

Like all of us, I suppose.



A detail of Robert Gober's 1992 work "Untitled." (Ron Amstutz/Robert Gober/Matthew Marks Gallery, Glenstone Museum)

Smee, Sebastian. "Glenstone is Open Again — and Still Setting the Bar for Contemporary Art." *The Washington Post*, April 17, 2025.



Alex Da Corte's 2022 "Rubber Pencil Devil (Hell House)," a neon-lit structure with video vignettes inside that explore themes of humor, satire, violence, and tenderness. (Ron Amstutz/Alex Da Corte/Glenstone Museum)

Both artists have previously appeared at the Venice Biennale: Holzer in 1990, when she represented the United States in its dedicated pavilion, and Da Corte in 2019, when his works — two of the same ones showing at Glenstone — featured in the Biennale's main curated show.

Da Corte is a poet of American guilelessness. His works treat pop culture as a sculptural material, malleable, foam-like, and receptive to his tender touch. The artist himself features in many of the video vignettes that make up "Rubber Pencil Devil," an almost three-hour video screened at Glenstone inside the schematic frame of a neon-lit house. (Don't worry: It's fine to watch it in short bursts — but you'll probably want to stay awhile.)

Brightly colored and often droll, the vignettes present gently tweaked pastiches of, or homages to, "The Simpsons," "Sesame Street" and Warner Bros. cartoons, the Pink Panther and the Wizard of Oz, the Muppets and Mister Rogers — whom the artist impersonates dancing in the rain while lip-synching in slow motion to a sped-up version of Dolly Parton's "Light of a Clear Blue Morning." For the special benefit of art lovers, Da Corte also tosses in references to various artists, among them Frank Stella, Patrick Caulfield, Mike Kelley and Alexander Calder.

Each short video has a hallucinatory, drug-dragged quality. (I found myself thinking of the British children's television series "Teletubbies," beloved by stoners.) Da Corte uses clean, saturated colors; exquisitely tailored, handmade costumes; and skillfully applied prostheses and makeup. You're always aware of the fakery. The alloy of joy and pathos one associates with drag shows is part of the effect. But the intensity generated by Da Corte's lovingly and laboriously constructed scenes lifts the work above the level of "failed seriousness" (as Susan Sontag defined camp) into a higher, fresher, more disorienting zone.

Da Corte, who grew up in Caracas, Venezuela, and lives in Philadelphia, comes off as thoughtful, unhurried and empathetic. He has a deep, resonant voice that has a lulling quality. As a child, he loved animation and wanted to work for Disney.



A still from Alex Da Corte's video "Rubber Pencil Devil." (Alex Da Corte/Glenstone Museum)



Jenny Holzer's 1990 work "The Child Room." (Jenny Holzer/Artists Rights Society/Glenstone Museum)

"I thought," he says at the beginning of an Art21 documentary about him, "how do I know my life? How I know my politics? How do I know my religion? How do I know my love? I was, like, I probably learned it from my family. But ... mostly I probably learned it from TV."

"If I were to make a portrait of a place," he concludes, "maybe I'd begin with TV."

Da Corte's work asks us to wallow awhile in a certain idea of American innocence. He is not out to mock anyone. The sincerity of his immersion is complicated only by small, carefully measured doses — ambient suggestions, really — of critique.

You walk into "Rubber Pencil Devil" via a room that contains Da Corte's "The Decorated Shed," a model-train-scale reimagining of the suburban community in "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood." Looming high over the evening streets are illuminated signs for Taco Bell, Burger King, McDonald's and KFC. The walls of this same gallery have been upholstered in a flower pattern inspired by Prince's 1985 album "Around the World in a Day."

Da Corte has said he likes to take disparate things and link them together (he is an experienced seamster), ignoring preexisting hierarchies. His early masterpiece, a visual poem that invented a private language around sex and loss, was a short video set to Leonard Cohen's "Chelsea

Hotel No. 2.” Made with cheap ingredients, it showed hands coming in and out of the frame performing simple actions: painting cherries with red nail polish, lifting a slice of bologna from an upside-down orange bucket, peeling a banana with a hoop ring attached to one end, and so on.

In his more recent work, Da Corte’s joy in innocence is real, but it alternates with an uncanniness that’s reminiscent of David Lynch — a tart suggestion, like a whiff of some unfamiliar, possibly toxic gas, that at any moment the vast, intricately constructed facade of American happiness might simply evanesce.

Jenny Holzer’s view of America is darker and more explicitly political and, to that extent I fear, less successful. Just as Da Corte’s medium is pop culture, Holzer’s is text: pithy truisms, government documents, military maps, presidential tweets and court documents. She is known for her light projections, LED signs, posters and engraved stone slabs disseminating these texts in unaccustomed places.

At Glenstone, Holzer’s works are scattered throughout seven galleries. The show includes works that reproduce, as silk-screens and LED signs, declassified documents relating to recent wars and terrorist attacks, as well as Donald Trump’s communications with Mark Meadows, his former chief of staff, before and during the Jan. 6, 2021, assault on the Capitol.



The Water Court at Glenstone's Pavilions complex. (Iwan Baan/Glenstone Museum)



Cy Twombly's 1978 work "Cycnus." (Ron Amstutz/Cy Twombly Foundation/Glenstone Museum)



A detail of "Water Double, v. 3" by Roni Horn, completed between 2013 and 2015, on view in the Pavilions. (Ron Amstutz/Roni Horn/Glenstone Museum)

Pulses may quicken as people read enlarged copies of official documents littered with redactions. I find myself frustrated by the indiscriminateness of Holzer's approach. Her presentations are either too fragmentary, evading the responsibility to provide necessary context, or too cute. A fragment of stone engraved, for instance, with "WORDS TEND TO BE INADE ..." — the word "inadequate" cut off by a break in the stone — may serve as a commentary on memorials or even, self-reflexively, on a career spent making art from text. But if it were used in a poem, you would think it amateurish and tricky.

I find many of Holzer's works feeble in this way. She takes texts as found objects, in the Duchampian manner. But for all her busy repurposing, the political intent behind them is too obvious, while the artistic intent is maddeningly inconsistent.

What makes Glenstone — which was founded and is funded by Rales and husband Mitch Rales, who live with their children on the property — so special?

Walking through its undulant campus — forget the art for a minute — can set you dreaming about other, less strenuous and more receptive ways of being. From the parking lot off Glen Road, one's approach to the art is choreographed to encourage busy minds to shift into lower

gears. Awareness, narrowed, perhaps, by the drive, is gradually expanded, aerated and softly folded into something richer and more receptive. (The museum is free to visit but ticketed, and declines entry to children under 12, except infants. Emily Wei Rales said they are considering changing the age policy, but there's no timeline yet.)

All of which is lovely, of course. But what's most impressive about Glenstone is the art. The collection is not made artificially coherent by an easily identified "taste" — a preference, for instance, for sleek minimalism, hectic expressionism, earnest political art or shrewd conceptualism. Quite the reverse: The range of artistic sensibilities, styles and media you find at Glenstone is remarkable.

The works at Glenstone won't appeal uniformly to everyone, and I'm no different from anyone in developing favorites as I make repeat visits — among them (if you want to know) sculptures by Twombly, Roni Horn, Martin Puryear, Michael Heizer, Ruth Asawa and Richard Serra, as well as a painting by Miyoko Ito and the Gober installation. But what sustains the collection and draws it together, besides the Raleses' close involvement with the living artists they collect, is a very, very high baseline of quality.

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ARTnews

A Revelatory Alex Da Corte Survey Finds the Dark Side in His Buoyant Art

BY ALEX GREENBERGER

August 15, 2025 8:00am



Alex Da Corte's Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth survey.
COURTESY MODERN ART MUSEUM OF FORT WORTH

Most kids who are into Disney—which is to say, most kids in general—typically surround themselves with representations of Disney Princesses. But when Alex Da Corte made his first painting, at age 12, for the walls of childhood bedroom, he instead depicted the characters who antagonize these Princesses. Rather than sleeping beneath Cinderella, her evil stepmother loomed above his feet at night. A smiling Ursula appeared to emerge from a nearby window; Ariel was nowhere to be found.

Greenberger, Alex. “A Revelatory Alex Da Corte Survey Finds the Dark Side in His Buoyant Art.” *ARTnews*, August 15, 2025.

Da Corte is now in his mid-40s, but he seems no more interested in Disney Princesses now than he did 30 years ago. The only Disney Princess that does appear in his current survey, at Texas's Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, is Elsa the Snow Queen, of the "Frozen" movies. She appears as an upside-down standee in *A Time to Kill* (2016), a wall-hung work that also includes the cardboard from which she was cut, a faux bouquet with a knife stuck in it, two mini disco balls, and a *Star Wars* Storm Trooper standee. Inverted and left to dangle, this Elsa wears a smile that becomes a frown.

That frown makes sense, because despite the twee reds and pinks of this work's slats, *A Time to Kill* is about something horrible: the 2016 shooting at Pulse, in which 49 people were killed and 53 were wounded at the gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida. Da Corte does not explicitly represent that massacre or even directly allude to it, which may just be the point. (And you probably would not know it's about that subject, either, unless you read the wall text.) He seems fascinated by the notion that Elsa and the multitude of American pop-cultural signifiers with which he works are emblematic of something insidious—even when they seem cheery and fun.

Is Da Corte celebrating all this pop culture or critiquing it? For much of the past decade, I couldn't tell. It was often hard for me to tell from the camped-up videos in which he dressed up as



Da Corte's *A Time to Kill* (at right, from 2016) meditates on the Pulse shooting.
COURTESY MODERN ART MUSEUM OF FORT WORTH

Greenberger, Alex. "A Revelatory Alex Da Corte Survey Finds the Dark Side in His Buoyant Art." *ARTnews*, August 15, 2025.



Alex Da Corte, *The End*, 2017.
PHOTO JOHN BERNARDO/©ALEX DA CORTE

Frankenstein's monster, Eminem, and Mister Rogers; the large-scale installations he filled with mod furniture and design objects, such as one that transformed an entire New York building into a haunted house; and the big sculptures he made of witches' hats and homes. I began to write off Da Corte as an artist more interested in surfaces than ideas as a result.

How wrong I was. The Fort Worth show convinced me that, in deliberately omitting anything viewers might find too disturbing, Da Corte was mimicking how corporations, movie studios, record labels, and the media push certain people out of the picture, so that we can no longer see them. His work, I realized, is about everything you can't see because it isn't put front and center.

Take *The End* (2017), a print in which a blurry rainbow is sliced into three fragments. Da Corte has intentionally created two cuts that correspond to the edges of Mariah Carey's body on the cover for her 1999 album *Rainbow*, in which the arch of colors jumps from the wall behind Carey onto her white tank top. But that smiling pop star isn't here, leaving this rainbow looking sad and bereft. Excising Carey, a gay icon, could be seen as a violent gesture—especially so for a queer artist—or, perhaps, a campy one not meant to be taken too seriously.

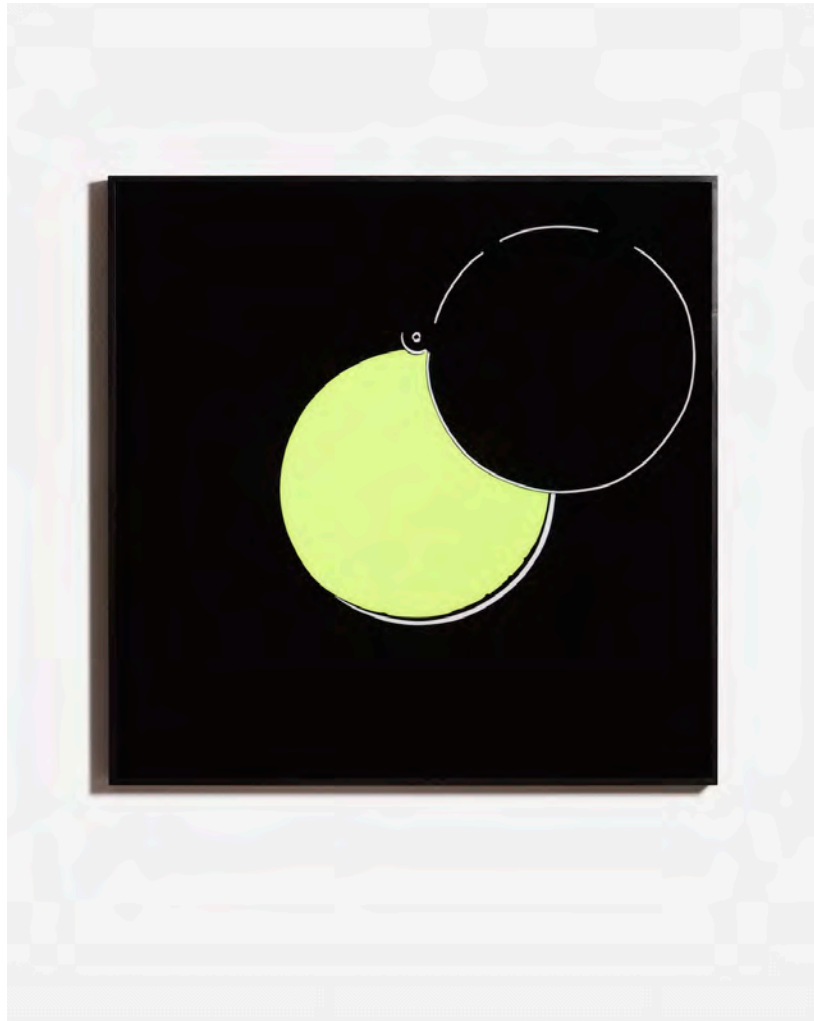
Even more telling is the 2021 painting *The Great Pretender* in which a pair of hands hold a white top hat surrounded by stars. The hands once belonged to Lily Tomlin, a lesbian comedian who graced the cover of a 1977 issue of *TIME* magazine in a white top hat for a profile that didn't mention her sexual identity upon her request. With Tomlin now absent, the painting becomes a statement about erasure—specifically queer erasure—as enacted by the media. What we see in a magazine like *TIME* is often only a part of the picture.

For this survey, titled “The Whale” and on view through September 7, curator Alison Hearst has focused on Da Corte's painting practice, which is a less exhibited part of his oeuvre. That might seem strange, especially given the fact that Da Corte says in the exhibition's catalog, “I don't like canvas. I don't like the feeling of paint on canvas. It sickens me to death.” (This isn't much of an exaggeration: none of the 60 or so works by him marshalled here are conventional oil-on-canvas paintings.) But the works in this show go a long way in clarifying the sickly-sweet flavors evoked in his well-known video installations.

The show finds Da Corte returning repeatedly to Halloween and horror movies, neither of which seem particularly fun in this artist's hands. Two of the earliest paintings in the show, both from 2014, feature appropriated images from a website advertising couple's costumes—one showing a



The Anvil (2023, at right) alludes to images seen in *Looney Tunes*.
COURTESY MODERN ART MUSEUM OF FORT WORTH



Alex Da Corte, *Eclipse*, 2021.
PHOTO JOHN BERNARDO/©ALEX DA CORTE

beaming bacon-and-eggs twosome, the other depicting a peanut butter and jelly sandwich combo. Their smiles appear to warp because of the way Da Corte has let this image crumple. With titles namechecking both Jeff Koons’s pornographic “Made in Heaven” paintings and Michelangelo’s *Last Judgement*, these works feel more than a little evil.

Da Corte’s horror-inflected spirit is also found in 2019’s *Non-Stop Fright (Bump in the Night)*, one of several upholstered works made from foam here. Across its seven panels, the work shows a jack o’ lantern that has been cracked, leaving its grin incomplete and its innards exposed. At least one other soft painting also hints at carnage: *The Anvil* (2023) takes its form from the steel blocks that typically fall on Wile E. Coyote as he chases after Road Runner.

Works like *The Anvil* seem lighthearted and amiable. But in omitting Wile E. Coyote, Da Corte seems to have something serious on his mind: the ways that certain individuals are scrubbed out and made invisible. So maybe it makes sense, then, that in the only work billed as a self-portrait here—a 2019 painting called *Triple Self-Portrait (Study)*, featuring a painter’s tools stuck in a

mug—the artist isn’t even represented at all. And if you’re unsure whether this is a political gesture, check out *Untitled Protest Signs* (2021), in which pastel-colored monochromes appear in place of activist slogans, a gesture that seems to mimic how the silencing of protesters’ messages by those in power.

The title of Da Corte’s self-portrait appears to reference a famed 1960 self-portrait by Norman Rockwell, which shows the artist painting a self-portrait as he peeks over the canvas to look at himself in a mirror. Rockwell’s paintings helped formulate a distinctly American sense of middle-class identity for many white suburbanites in the postwar era, and Da Corte once said that his father, a Venezuelan immigrant, may have discovered that the US was “Hell” when he arrived there—a far cry from what he might have imagined. The artist described wanting to channel that view in early works, and perhaps he’s done so, as well, in *Triple Self-Portrait*, which at first glance seems gleeful, then appears eerily vacant upon extended viewing.

Triple Self-Portrait could be read as a negation of a beloved painterly genre, just as Da Corte’s appropriations of pop culture are often negations in their own ways. He’s even curated a nice grouping of works from the Modern Art Museum’s collection for his exhibition. This part of the show is largely centered on the great white males of recent art history: abstractions by Frank Stella, a word painting by Ed Ruscha, a screen-printed gun by Andy Warhol, self-portraits by Robert Mapplethorpe and Francis Bacon. But alongside these works, Da Corte is also showing his own subversions like *Mirror Marilyn* (2022–23), in which Warhol’s *Shot Sage Blue Marilyn* is appropriated, then printed backward.

Edits, deletions, and removals are common in Da Corte’s works about art history. *Eclipse* (2021) riffs on Roy Lichtenstein’s *I Can See the Whole Room...and There’s Nobody in It!* (1961), in which those words are painted above a man looking through a peephole. All we get in Da Corte’s take, however, is the peephole itself, with no one there to do the peeping. Da Corte, who is currently in the process of cocurating a Whitney Museum retrospective for Lichtenstein, drains this Pop artist’s work of meaning, then gives it a new one through his title, which suggests that the yellow crescent seen here may represent the moon passing before the sun.

Yet maybe this isn’t all so cynical. Eclipses temporarily leave the world in darkness, leaving people to momentarily find new ways of seeing. Perhaps that is exactly what Da Corte intends to do with his total eclipse of art, which asks viewers to imagine new people to fill Lichtenstein’s empty room.

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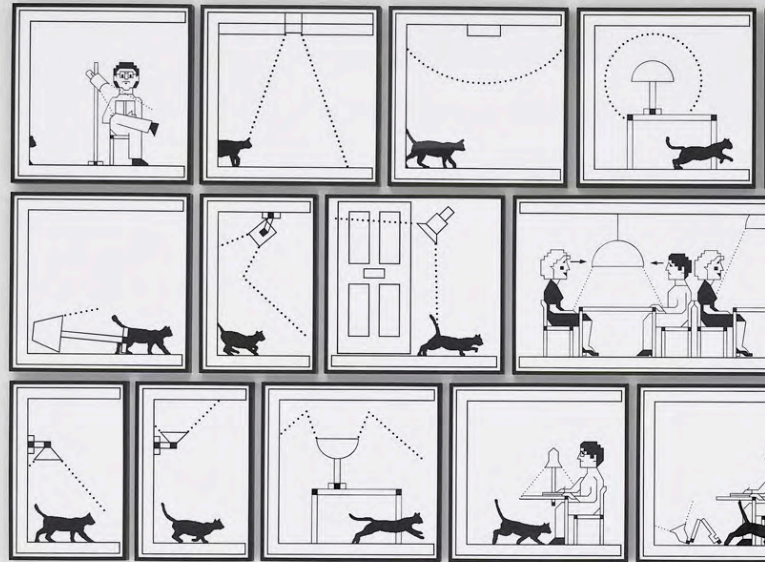
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Issue 171 / Spring 2025

Installation view of *THE
DAEMON*, Matthew Marks
Gallery, Los Angeles, 2023.
Images courtesy of Matthew
Marks Gallery. Works © Alex
Da Corte.

Alex Da Corte





by John
Haskell

I met Alex Da Corte in 2023, while we were both living at the American Academy in Rome. One day he asked if I'd like to see a video he made, and sent me a link to *Slow Graffiti* (2017). Later, while waiting for a bus, I took out my phone and started watching it. And I was stunned—literally. I let the bus pass without getting on, standing there at the edge of Trastevere, watching the video unfold. Based on Jørgen Leth's short film *The Perfect Human* (1968), *Slow Graffiti* is colorful, bright, yet oddly melancholic, an empathetic evocation of both Frankenstein's monster and the actor best known for playing the monster, Boris Karloff. Just as he does when performing as Popeye or Eminem or Marcel Duchamp, Alex wears elaborate prosthetics in the video, creating a fantasy world so absurd and unsettling that the longing his characters portray somehow seems more human, and more real.

Much of Alex's work—which includes video, sculpture, installation, and painting, as well as music videos for musicians like Tierra Whack and St. Vincent—is playful and allusive, but behind the colorful pop culture references is an undercurrent of anxiety, an implicit acknowledgment of pain. It transcends cartoonish superficiality and allows for an art that's visceral, powerful, and yet ambiguous and open. Wanting to find out how his practice came to be, I found myself, last fall, walking through a mostly deserted Philadelphia neighborhood and arriving at Alex's studio. He recently moved into a cavernous brick warehouse that he's divided into areas for designing and fabricating, and one large, curtained-off area that has become a stage, with lights and cameras, where he was staging and recording an opera based on the life of the Venezuelan pop artist Marisol. For our conversation, we sat in the middle of a high-ceilinged room, surrounded by large windows, at a table piled with books.

opposite: Stills from *Slow Graffiti*, 2017.



JOHN HASKELL: *Slow Graffiti*, as you know, was my introduction to your work. I love how it's thoughtful and serious, yet there's also a lightness, an offhand freedom that seems to arise from a view of the world that's slightly askew, that doesn't assume the world is "normal" and is either brave enough or silly enough to question what normal is. I'm wondering if queerness might play into this. Not sexual queerness or gender queerness but a queerness of vision that sees the world from an angle or a slant.

ALEX DA CORTE: There are many levels to how the word *queer* can be defined and used outside of sexuality and gender. There's a queer way of looking at the world, outside of one that is normative, and I think a lot of people embody that.

Anyone who has grown up marginalized in any way, be it from being queer or from having your back against the wall—not always because you're pressed, but because that's the best place to see everybody in the room—develops a certain way of looking. You develop a rich sense of how you're rooted in the world while also nurturing an empathy and an understanding of the rest of the people at the party, even if you're not part of that party.

I felt alien from a very young age. I felt not of this world, not welcome or accepted. I don't know if that was from growing up in Venezuela and then moving here and feeling like I didn't fully fit in or something else. I was gay, I was shy. I hadn't found my footing, and I didn't know how to communicate. I was in my head, inventing worlds. I was happy, but as my siblings say, You have to participate. You have to perform. You have to be into sports, or whatever it is that people do, and there was a fear there that I had to overcome.

JH: I think about all the bright, fun colors in your work, which exist on one level, but there's another level, an emotional level that seems darker, almost menacing and anxious. When I watched you impersonating Eminem in *THE SUPERMAN*, when you were smoking that bong, I felt slightly

Stills from *THE SUPERMAN*,
2018.



uncomfortable, but also curious. Is that something you know you're doing?

ADC: When I was a teenager, I was coming out, articulating what I wanted to do in the world. I knew that I wanted to pursue art. I was right on the brink of verbalizing, finally, the things that I thought I was. And that is when I lost my intestines. I suffered from ulcerative colitis, which then became Crohn's disease. For twenty-seven years, I've negotiated a very complicated site: my body. I have gone through horrors in the world that most young people don't have to experience. Right when I'd found a place that was safe, it was ripped out from under me, and the trauma and violence of that has never left me. Which is not to say that I embrace anxiety, but I accept that things change, and that change is good. I've learned to do that by working with familiar figures and images and by saying, through my work, that they can be different, and that difference is hopeful. I think that can make people anxious, especially if they like to rely on things that are stable. You don't want to say that the person you are will be different tomorrow—that would be unnerving and alienating, especially if you already feel alien. For me, the work lives in this space of understanding anxiety as part of the vast river of being, and that you have to be in all of it. I don't want to make work that doesn't embody the uglier things of the world, because that's what makes the world a rich place.

JH: You were born in Camden, New Jersey, moved with your family to Caracas, and then moved back to the US.

ADC: My father is from Venezuela and my mother is from the States. The world that completes my mother is here, and the world that completes my father is in South America, and the world that would complete me is both here and there, near and far. I might always exist as this immigrant that has moved back and forth and never actually finds a site to land on, feel safe, and be rooted. My dad has been here for over fifty years, and he still feels uprooted. We've seen the people of Venezuela fleeing, I've seen my family

flee, and they'll never be given a space that is safe and stable. Of course, that goes into my work, where I'm looking for a future place that can reflect back on the now. If that now is filled with violence, it will surely be embedded in the work so long as the work is asking questions that are real and of their place and time.

JH: How old were you when you discovered you had Crohn's disease?

ADC: Eighteen. The disease spread subtly over the next two years. This happened on the heels of the AIDS era, the '90s panic. Being a young gay person who was afraid he might be gay and quite naïve about the world, I didn't know what was happening to me. I thought I was dying. When I finally was able to seek help, it was too late. It happened so fast. There wasn't as much medicine available as there is now, and I tried everything. I was in the hospital for a long time. I just couldn't get better. Now you would do things differently. You would change your diet. Seek help for your mental state. Find holistic ways to mitigate the disease, besides pumping a bunch of chemicals into your body and praying it works. All of that surely saved my life, but I don't think it had to be as extreme or gnarly as it was. I went through it, I survived it, and I'm thankful, but it did change my relationship to my body and to a stability that so many young people want and almost expect of their life. It pained me to realize that what I thought I might arrive at would never come. And so I spent my early adulthood renegotiating my relationship to everything I had lost and letting all the violence I experienced move through me. At some point, I had to make a real promise to myself that I would find ways to see the world with hope and not become bitter. I had to choose that in order not to be destroyed by the violence. Because the violence won't stop.

JH: When you say you don't have intestines, you mean that literally?

ADC: That's right. They were removed and pieces were cobbled together to act as a new surrogate absorption organ.

JH: That's amazing because, looking at you, you seem in very good shape.

ADC: (*laughter*) That is the brilliance of modern medicine. I've had many, many surgeries. I had a new round of surgeries not so long ago, and during that time I started to look back at how my body went through this crazy metamorphosis. Did it inform or find its way into my work, which is so much about transformation, embodiment, ghosts, possession, and alchemical change? Of course it did. But saying, "Something bad happened to me and I'm gonna make work about it" is not interesting to me. You cannot deny the history of violence that lives within you and around you, but that history can become something strange and cool and weird and funny and sad and anxious, and all of those things at once, if you're paying attention. *Slow Graffiti* is just one way I thought about embodiment and how to get out of my skin. My work as Eminem is related to a kind of uncanny, *jamais vu* distancing of what's familiar. All the ways I'm thinking about each of the characters I play—how I play them and how they play me—is related to this particularly strange scientific collision I had twenty-seven years ago that told me the body I had then was not actually the one I was going to go through life with. That's when I started thinking a lot about ghosts and skins and repossession and the ways in which the general surface of things in the world may share the same experiences I've had within my own skin.

JH: It makes sense that you wouldn't have an actor play Marcel Duchamp or Mister Rogers, that you would want to do it yourself. All the different characters you inhabit let you transcend your own personal self—your skin—and become something other.

ADC: Part of this is also the actual, practical uncanniness of being inside a prosthetic, looking at the mirror, and not seeing yourself. When you speak to someone while in prosthetics and they don't see you, a distancing happens. There's a metaphysical transference that happens—an embodiment—when I'm afforded the chance, for a brief time, to be away from this vessel that

has me chained and bound to the ground. Of course, it's not something I asked for. It's something I was born into. But what can I do besides try to be free in the ways that I can? I'm not gonna have a pity party about it or be a victim. I'll do what I can to model this clay, this shell, into something else. Doing that allows me a lot of freedom.

JH: Mental freedom.

ADC: Yeah. It's a total psychedelic state to live in and truly be outside my body. The time I spend researching a person and then performing that person allows me to go to another space where my mortality as I know it is lightened.

JH: The idea that we can have all these thoughts, but that these thoughts don't really define who we are—strikes me as almost mystical or Buddhist. Thoughts and identities come and go, and they shouldn't, as you say, chain you down.

ADC: Sure. But skin only stretches so far before it tears and then, in time, scars. I think about Aristotle's notes on the persistence of vision. He understood the malleability of time; he allowed for memory and scars to carry on beside us. I imagine that there are limits allotted to us, physical brackets that—at our best—we might bend or break. This makes me think of the old rubber pencil trick. If you hold a pencil with two fingers and wiggle it at a certain point with some verve, it appears rubbery and defies the physical architecture of lead and wood as we understand lead and wood to be. Hard becomes soft, and soft, here, is magic. It's power. The *Tao Te Ching* says that the gentlest thing in the world overcomes the hardest thing in the world. How do you actually leave the vessel that is yours?

JH: That seems to happen in *Slow Graffiti*. And doubly so because you perform Boris Karloff and then the monster that he becomes. Are you still working with prosthetics?

ADC: Yeah. I'm doing a new lecture series where I'll be dressing up as Frankenstein's monster, in full

prosthetics. I'm giving a talk at an academic symposium on collage at the Athenaeum here in Philadelphia. Collage is the construction of many different spaces where their edges are called into question. The person you are at the moment might just be a collage of experiences as you've been bumping through town until you got to where you are now. Time and material culture fold into collage.

We could think about time as a collage, but we could also think about collage as something as simple as putting on your daily outfit and what that process looks like. Let's start with a sock. It might be yours or your boyfriend's or your sister's. It might be from Target or a thrift store or made by your abuela. Now for the pants. Are they worn or new, washed or unwashed, skinny or loose? The grass stain is from the other night, the paint stain is from last week, the bloodstains aren't ever going away. See, we aren't even halfway through dressing and we've spanned time, we've collaged time. Collage, for me, is an amalgam of different territories that seem to have bounded edges, and a noticing of what happens to the space where those edges meet and shift. It's kind of dadaist—it may signify one thing on one side, and a different thing on another side. It's like Frankenstein's monster, where various pieces have been pulled together to build this being. We always think of the monster as a fraught figure looking for an answer to the question of its self. But we also could consider stepping away from the monster as it is in the novel to the person that plays the monster, Boris Karloff. That's a site of collage too: the person inside and the person outside the monster. What does that look like, and how do those things fit together? Which is to say: We all have our edges as we define them, and they abut other edges. We have to think about the space between and how to bridge those edges, understand them. I think we are constantly negotiating between edges.

JH: This idea of time and collage gets me thinking about the individual frames that make up a film. What we ultimately see are afterimages. One frame followed by another and another, and

opposite: Stills from *ROY G BIV*, 2022.

because of time we end up seeing one thing, like a double exposure or a series of Eadweard Muybridge photographs. The mind, when going from one frame or thing to another, has to make sense of the juxtaposition.

ADC: Afterimages relate to the persistence of vision and, depending on how you think visually about time, they may be more like puzzle pieces abutting each other. And when puzzle pieces abut edge to edge, they become a map.

JH: What you're saying about the persistence of vision seems to be an almost magical but also scientific way of understanding the world.

ADC: It's so funny that you say that. Growing up, I would always buy books with the money I made from babysitting my sister and cousins. I was always around drawing, nature, and science books. Books that were not quite how-to books but trying to unlock mystical puzzles. I wanted to know how things worked, why systems operated the way they do, and how I could be a participant in that. From a young age, I was interested in blocks of things coming together, matter changing, alchemical things, magical things. Early Houdini. Even though I don't necessarily attribute this to being raised Catholic, there was, of course, so much conversation around transfiguration and other types of magic that Christians believe in.

When I got back to the States, my mom would take me to art classes. In the classes, we would talk about paintings like the Sistine Chapel's ceiling. What I discovered in learning about them was the golden ratio and the mathematical ways in which those paintings were built and structured. It related back to my interest in systems, in that you could build a system or an image through math. So the ways I drew became really analytical, more architectural.

JH: I remember being so fascinated when I first learned how to draw with perspective.





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ADC: That way of drawing really embraces coincidence, in a literal sense—things meeting each other, coinciding. Everything is related. That’s just how images and structures are built. I started thinking about how a lot of different things—the Pink Panther, Boris Karloff, painting a house—have some correlation. I was able to find where things that seemed very far apart coincided, where their edges met.

JH: Collage!

ADC: Collage—that always has been my interest. When I was at the School of Visual Arts, I had this animation teacher named Howard Beckerman, who was an old-school animator and did hand-drawn animation. He taught a History of Animation class, where he showed two films that really changed my life. One was called *Rainbow Dance* by Len Lye, from the 1930s. The other was *Frank Film* by Frank and Caroline Mouris from 1973. To this day, I can still remember seeing it in 1999. It rocked my world. It was just this man saying, My name is Frank and this is the story of my life. But underneath that is a poem largely made up of *f* words that sort of apply to the things on the screen. It had this flutter of collaged images that he and his wife had cut out and filmed, frame by frame. All done in analog, shot on panes of glass, and the blurs done with Vaseline. Thousands of images, stacked and flying across the screen. But they’re telling the story of his life. He’s going to school, there’s a bus, he wants to work in fashion, there’s a shoe. He’s in college, there are drinks. Coincidentally, there’s an image at the end with Frankenstein’s monster and these light bulbs on his head. That was a new idea for me, because in art school, if people weren’t thinking about theory, they were talking art speak. But what motivated Frank, at least in this film, was purely autobiographical. It was just him and his very plain way of moving through the world, and that changed my life.

The film shaped how I visualized what I was interested in. At that point, I had, as I imagined it, a completely unremarkable life. I wasn’t out. I wanted to be free to be myself but I hadn’t experienced that yet. I didn’t even know what art was. I was terribly bullied,

so I lived in my mind. And then I saw someone who, with his partner, was able to acknowledge and put images to the fantastical world that was in his mind so plainly and have fun with it. All of that was so enlightening. It made for this place of possibility that I hadn’t known about.

When I was maybe twenty, I remember thinking, Well, I like this and I like that. But I can’t make sense of how and why I’m able to like so many things. Is the evidence of that taste just me? How do you show the history or existence of a cornucopia of taste? What does that look like? Surely, for me, it’s born out of the way I grew up, being, geographically speaking, from many histories. Being from many peoples, you develop space to absorb and then analyze difference. Then you put it into the world and it’s your voice. With my work, I’ve tried to navigate what all that coincidence looked like, to collage it all together. I’ll look at many different things and know that they’re actually one thing.

I’m not terribly interested in pronouncements of taste, but I am interested in why people make such pronouncements, and what it reveals about them. I’m interested in the histories of how one comes to like certain things.

JH: Which is more about what people do with what they like. You like Boris Karloff, for instance, or the Pink Panther, but what you do with that, the way you embody that, is what’s interesting. The actual thing is almost arbitrary.

ADC: I don’t think it’s completely arbitrary, but I also do think that I’m open to coincidence. For instance, it was on April Fools’ Day that my intestines were taken away, and I love that. I was like, Don’t let that one slip away! Laugh about it. It’s very funny. I’m interested in a weird, cosmic kind of convergence. I do move through the world trying to keep an open mind that these stimuli are pieces of a puzzle, part of this great question I’ve been asking about the world. I will never ask “Why me?” but I do often wonder “Why not, and how?”

JH: It seems that you’re at a point

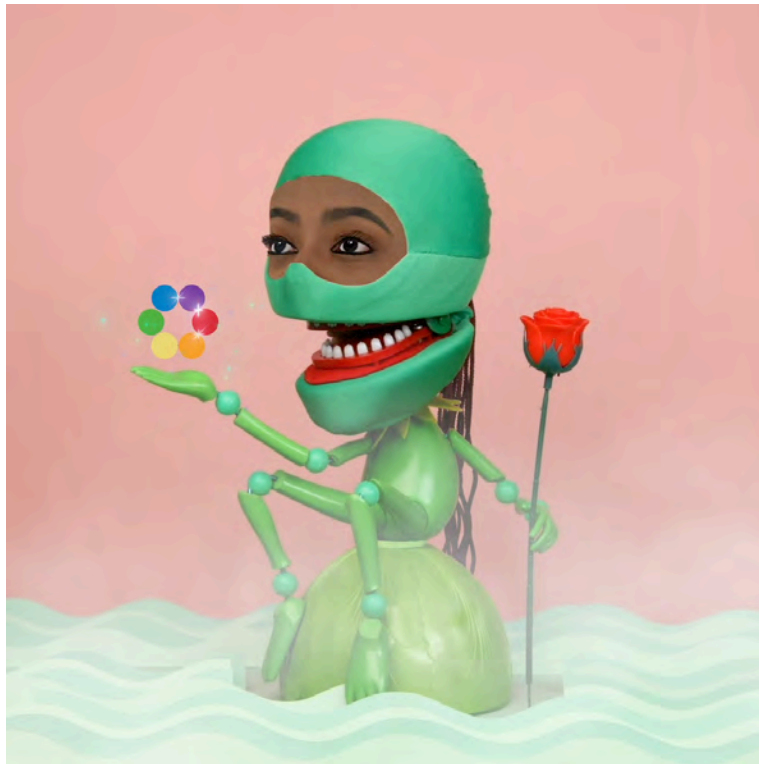
now where you can just follow your instincts. I’m thinking of Picasso or Matisse when they were at their most prolific, in a groove, taking things almost at random and being inspired by those things and making art with them. It seems at this point, you’re able to take almost any stimulus and transform its meaning.

ADC: I don’t want to think about it that way. If that was the case then I wouldn’t be writing an opera, because I don’t know enough about opera to be writing one. It’s something that beguiles me, and when I’m working and making, I like being in this unknown space where I’m confounded, confused, asking questions, trying to find the magic that I’m interested in pursuing. I want to be searching for something and feel the energy of taking a step forward without knowing where I’m going to land. To me, that is the opposite of just taking things and transforming them. It’s about being willing to run into collisions and traumas and asking why. Why is that a no? How could it be different?

JH: In the opera you’re working on right now, about the Venezuelan artist Marisol, I’m wondering what those collisions and traumas are. Having seen the set and the characters you’ve created, it looks like it could be about family. Or collectivity. Or about how people get along.

ADC: Yeah, it’s about collectivity, neighbors. I often talk with my friend Kim Nguyen, the eminent curator and writer, about this notion that our lives are not our own, that we share them, that what we do affects other people. You share this space, and that inherently makes you accountable for how you share that space with others. I’m interested in what that looks like within a group, in an ensemble cast, this notion of working together, even if it’s different people and ideas, all of which are righteous and good, coming

opposite: Installation view of *As Long as the Sun Lasts*, 2021, as part of *Mr. Remember*, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk, Denmark, 2022–23.



together. Any difference or disagreement is actually not to be feared, but to be addressed. Take a seat at the table and work it out. I don't want a puzzle where all the pieces fit together easily. That's boring. The structure of a family, particularly in this opera in progress, is the party. It's a group of people that I don't know. I don't know how they know each other, but I've written these histories for them that might reveal that all is not what it seems, and that there may be some tension. And then I let that tension bubble up and come forth and be worked out—or not—in front of people.

JH: Is there a script, with a beginning, middle, and end?

ADC: Oh yeah.

JH: For *Slow Graffiti* you didn't have a script, but you had a template—Jørgen Leth's *The Perfect Human*. You told me earlier that the writing for that was by Sam McKinniss, the artist, and that William Pym, the writer, read out the text. Very eerily I might add.

ADC: I've known both for a million years. I'm interested in collaboration, and I didn't feel like I needed to do all this myself. Sam's a great writer. William's a great voice actor. My brother, who's a great painter, paints in the video. My friend Brendan catches me when I fall. I didn't feel it had to be this one man show even though it was about, ironically, one person's collaborative relationship with themselves. I remember shooting fifty-some shots in a day or two. It was cobbled together. Now the way I work is so much slower. At the time, Secession in Vienna had asked me to do a show, and I was developing a whole world for it, along with this new video. It was intimidating to do it at such a historic and cool space. I had many things on my mind, like dementia and how the reshaping of memory affects the body, how memory can be made manifest and physical, what happens when your memory is actually my memory.

JH: It's very sad, in a way. As well as funny.

ADC: I started thinking about Boris



Karloff's sad relationship to his self and this character that he plays. Visually, there were layers where I am not Boris Karloff, yet I'm playing Boris Karloff playing the Frankenstein's monster. And then I have these layers of the many people in my life who have supported me. I have the voice of my friend, the words of my friend, and the physical painting and erasure of myself done by my brother. All these layers show how one person is actually built up and held together by so many supporters and found family. I think that's what *Slow Graffiti* is about. Boris Karloff was looking for that all his life, and I felt that there was something to be learned about perfection that's different from how Leth had depicted it—in terms of whiteness and class and a cisgendered heteronormativity—and also that perfection is a funny thing to chase after.

JH: What's your relationship to making art or an opera, as opposed to doing music videos? You've done a lot of videos with Tierra Whack. I really liked "Dora."

ADC: Thank you. That was the first video I did with Tierra. She's in Philly, and I've since made four videos with her that all came out this past year.

JH: And I see you're wearing a Breeders T-shirt.

ADC: Yeah, I just made a music video for Kim Deal. The first thing I did in this new studio was shoot her album cover and her two music videos.

With art or an opera, the process is just so much slower. Each kind of work affords its own complicated dance. But even with music videos, no one musician or video is the same. It's always a totally different type of collage and experience. And it's different than it used to be because making music videos is not a lucrative business anymore. They're almost out of fashion, or a little bit out of time. It's just not how people look at or think about music now. I do it because I grew up on music videos, and they taught me how to see and be creative.

MTV—which I was not allowed to watch but would sneakily—was visually so wild. I'm a huge lover of

music. Music is playing in the studio constantly. Last year was sort of strange, because Tierra reached out to make some music videos, and I started thinking about her album as this holistic world, a world that has everything about it living within itself. That rolled into this opportunity to work with Annie [Clark, a.k.a. St. Vincent] again. So we did the same thing with her album. And then, along the way, I met Kim Deal, and she asked me to do the same thing. It's been this funny year of working with these three amazing women and their radically different ideas and points of view, and then thinking, Well, what do those cool sonic ideas look like visually?

JH: And yet it all looks like you, like it came from your mind.

ADC: I drove to Oberlin last week to screen *Rubber Pencil Devil*, something I've been working on since 2015—it's very long—and maybe fifty people saw it. Whereas when I put out a music video for Tierra Whack, the whole world sees it in a day. I'm for seeing art in many different places. You can see a music video on your phone. It has a freedom that painting or sculpture doesn't have. I like to be a part of that. And I love Tierra. I love Annie. I love Kim. I'm into their music. I'm a fan.

JH: A lot of people make art, but honest human emotion is rare. It's certainly in your work. And I'm curious about that. How do you get a feeling that's in your heart to become apparent in the thing you make?

ADC: I'm a sensitive person and feel very deeply about things. I'm moved by people in the world and by other people's stories. I'm listening all the time, and if I hear a funny story or see something in the street, these granular little things that someone may pass by, I'll remember them for a lifetime. I've always been like that, and maybe it's heightened more and more over the years. I recognize the instability of how things are in the world.

JH: That's a tender place to be. Most people wouldn't feel they have the time.

ADC: I feel like I have all the time in the world. In some ways, I'm in a rush, and I'm an impatient bastard. But I also have seen both sides. I'm a person who's on the move. When I was young, I couldn't imagine ever being tied to a hospital bed. But after spending so much time in a hospital, my whole relationship to time and how I saw the world changed. It became a really safe place for me to be. I was like, You know what? I don't actually long for anything. I'm actually content staying in this room forever. And when I am in the world—when I'm able to *be*—I want to be the best sponge and absorb it all. I want to notice it all, because when I'm back in this little room with nothing, I'll have all of that to look back on and think about again. And that could give me life forever.

opposite (top): Still from Tierra Whack, "Dora," 2020, Interscope Records. Directed by Alex Da Corte.

opposite (bottom): Still from *Rubber Pencil Devil*, 2018.

ARTFORUM

TOP TEN

ALEX DA CORTE

Alex Da Corte is an artist based in Philadelphia. He was the recipient of the 2021 Roof Garden Commission at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and has been the subject of several monographic exhibitions at numerous institutions, including the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Humlebæk, Denmark, and the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art in Kanazawa, Japan. "The Whale," a survey of the artist's paintings at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth is currently on view through September 7. Next year he will cocurate, with Meg Onli, a Roy Lichtenstein retrospective at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art. (See Contributors.)



Photo: Izzi Galindo

1



1. Cover of *American Pop Art: 106 Forms of Love and Despair* (Moderna Museet, 1964). 2. Alex Da Corte's Spotify set on repeat to the Louvin Brothers' 1959 "Satan Is Real," March 2025. Photo: Alex Da Corte. 3. View of "Ken Lum: Klump!" 2024, Ulises, Philadelphia. Photo: Constance Mensh.

1

AMERICAN POP ART: 106 FORMS OF LOVE AND DESPAIR (MODERNA MUSEET, 1964)

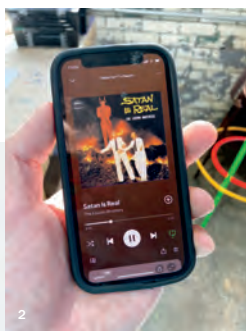
This catalogue, created for an exhibition curated by Pontus Hultén (1924–2006)—director of the Moderna Museet between 1958 and 1973—was its own peculiar work of art. The show was a close read of seven then up-and-coming artists utilizing Pop imagery and populist subjects. This seemingly unfussy staple-bound book contained pictures of artworks that were printed, aside from a few tip-in plates, entirely in duotone. Imagine a world where we might know and remember Roy Lichtenstein's or Claes Oldenburg's or George Segal's art in peachy pink and magenta, muddy green and gray. This volume offered up a subversive Pop idea—that these psychedelic reproductions depicting different paintings and sculptures could have (or should have) appeared this way in real life. It anticipates a world where images as we experience them are and are not what they seem.

2

PLAYING ONE SONG ON REPEAT This habit started for me on Christmas morning, 1994, as I found myself rewinding my Walkman to listen to Mariah Carey's ode to seasonal yearning over and over again while building my new K'nex Roller Coaster, complete with loop the loop, in my family's mildewy basement. The ritual became a meditative exercise that I have employed throughout my life, especially while in motion, and especially on airplanes. I repeat Nina Simone's "I Want a Little Sugar in My Bowl" on my way to Kansas; the Cocteau Twins' "Heaven or Las Vegas" on my way to Chicago; sza's "Love Language" on my way to the Dominican Republic, and so on. The song plays until it becomes all clicks and pings, like the sounds of an MRI machine, and I leave my body.

3

"KEN LUM: KLUMP!" (ULISES, PHILADELPHIA, 2024) Lum is one of one—a supernatural creature, like a gremlin, who can multiply himself after midnight. Always revisiting and remaking the world through his own singular lens, Lum collaborated with Ulises, a radical and righteous bookstore/gallery, to look again at his 1989 photo-work *Melly Shum Hates Her Job*—a picture of the namesake woman, smiling and trapped in an overcrowded cubicle. It was first seen on the facade of Rotterdam's Witte de With in 1990 as a temporary billboard, but public affection for the piece became so intense and enduring that it was made into a permanent fixture. The space even renamed itself the Kunstinstituut Melly in 2021. For his contribution to Ulises's year-long "Commodities" edition series, Lum put the beloved Melly—who resembles a character from an episode of *The Office* or a *Cathy* comic—on a coffee mug. He forces Melly to reenter the workplace and the drudgery of capitalist pursuit, forever hating her nine-to-five. She's out there somewhere now, sipping from the mug bearing a picture of her own mug, spilling all the tea.



2



3

3



4. One of Alex Da Corte's CD jewel case paint palettes, March 2025. Photo: Alex Da Corte. 5. Thomas Schütte, *Die Fremden* (The Strangers), 1992, glazed ceramic, steel. Installation view, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2024. Photo: Jonathan Dorado. 6. "Bad Things Happen in Philadelphia" decal, 2020.

4

JEWEL CASES Plastic is bad, but I love the wonderful houses that CDs live in. These fetish objects make the designs of an album's liner notes SHINE and look valuable, reflecting the ways I often feel about the songs contained within. I've used jewel cases as palettes for mixing paint and as frames for collages. They are little TVs or proto-cell phones; a world behind a five-by-five-and-a-half-inch pane of plastic; a humble valentine to pore over and wonder about; a place where images become something.

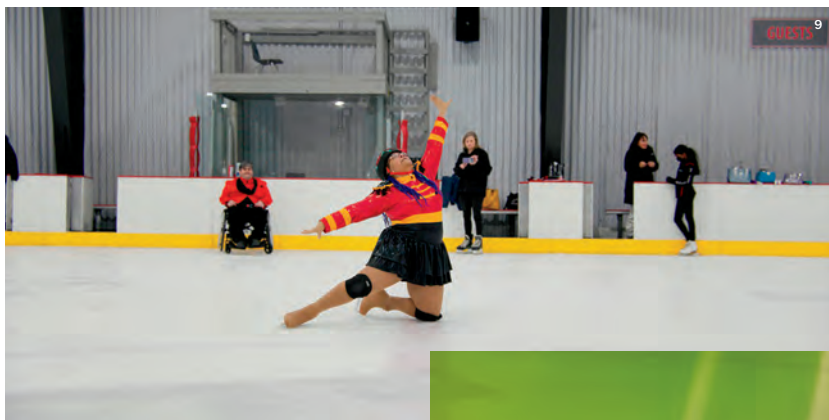
5

"MARISOL: A RETROSPECTIVE" (BUFFALO AKG ART MUSEUM, 2024–25) AND THOMAS SCHÜTTE (MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK, 2024–25)

There were many signs of electric life in the career-spanning retrospectives of Marisol's and Schütte's art at the AKG and MOMA (organized by Cathleen Chaffee and Paulina Pobocha, respectively). Carved and cut, gnawed and broken; ripped, painted, and sewn; cast and collaged; leaning, laughing, screaming; crying and side-eyeing—their sculptures depicted everything, from big babies to small dictators. Witnessing all these portrayals of fragmented bodies in the round reminded me of a studio rat's labor, fueled by a passion that runs hot. From today's perspective, the work of both artists defies the compressions of life as experienced through the screen—their art asks us to be out in the world as flesh-and-blood beings, living, breathing, and sweating.

6

PHILLY I saw a bumper sticker recently that struck me like a bolt of lightning. It read **BAD THINGS HAPPEN IN PHILADELPHIA**. It's true! Have you heard about my hometown's tradition of greasing the poles? We love being haters and have made some tired declarations, so what makes the City of Brotherly Love so . . . *lovable*? Here is a short list: "Go Birds!"; Wawa; the Philadelphia Museum of Art's stairs and the Rocky Balboa statue; "The Soap Lady"; Tierra Whack; Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown; Stephen Powers (aka ESPO); jaws; flags—not the old one, the newer gay one; electricity; hoagies; the Sound of Philadelphia; Jonathan Lyndon Chase; the Barnes Foundation; Alex G; *Étant donnés*; the Phillie Phanatic and Gritty; Terry Gross; the Philadelphia University of the Arts and Sid Sachs; serpentwithfeet; Sun Ra and his Arkestra; Horace Pippin; the Gross Clinic; Tastykake; Love Park . . . I can go on and on. And I will.



7. Cover of Mannequin Pussy's *I Got Heaven* (Epitaph Records, 2024). 8. Photo from Christian Holstad's *Fellow Travelers* (Edition Nord, 2009). Photo: Alex Da Corte. 9. Ted Passon, *Patrice: The Movie*, 2024, 4K video, color, sound, 102 minutes. Patrice Jetter. 10. Caroline Mouris and Frank Mouris, *Frank Film*, 1973, 35 mm, color, sound, 9 minutes.

7

MANNEQUIN PUSSY, *I GOT HEAVEN* (EPITAPH RECORDS, 2024)

Sometimes you just have to scream. Or bark. Marisa “Missy” Dabice, the lead singer of this Philly-based outfit, begins her fourth studio album with a little hum and then a growl: “I went and walked myself like a dog without a leash.” Raw and at times unhinged, *I Got Heaven* feels like it’s balancing on a razor blade. Fiona Apple declared during her 1997 MTV Video Music Awards speech that “this world is bullshit”; MP’s latest record brings me back to that moment. I’ll take heaven wherever I can get it.

8

HOMEMADE HALLOWEEN COSTUMES AND JANE ASHER’S *FANCY DRESS* (OPEN CHAIN PUBLISHING, 1983)

My mom has always insisted that it’s fun to be scared. We created all kinds of costumes in our house: a ghost on vacation; a pile of laundry; a return-to-sender letter; a pickle. My brother and sisters and I would hide and try to frighten the living shit out of one another. It is something I still like to do. Get a roll of aluminum foil, gauze, a couple of sweatshirt sleeves, some string, and you can be a spider, a mummy, or a microwave. You cut a rubber mask of Bill Clinton in half horizontally and place the brow on top of a hat and, voilà, you’re Frankenstein’s monster. Stack another rubber mask on top of that hat and you’re Butt-Head. See Christian Holstad’s 2009 book, *Fellow Travelers*, for more brilliant costume ideas.

9

PATRICE: THE MOVIE (2024) Philadelphia filmmaker Ted Passon’s latest documentary follows the life of disability-rights activist Patrice Jetter as she prepares for her commitment ceremony to Garry Wickham. The film captures Jetter and Wickham, who are both disabled, navigating the endless complexities of the United States health care system, and managing to find laughs in the process. I met Ted twenty-five years ago, and he asked me to make the costumes for his first movie, *Robot Boy* (2003), about a world built to alienate and obstruct anyone who seemed different. Like Mister Rogers, he envisions a kinder, gentler place for every one of our neighbors.

10

FRANK FILM (1973) When I was a teenage art student, animator Howard Beckermann (1930–2024) showed me Frank and Caroline Mouris’s *Frank Film*, which changed my life. This wry and complex stop-motion animation, roughly eight minutes long—and made from thousands of hand-cut and collaged magazine clippings—tells the story of Frank’s life, narrated by Frank himself, on two different layers of audio. Frank speaks plainly about his hopes and dreams as a young artist while a series of words, mostly beginning with the letter *F*, serve as dance partners to a seemingly countless number of images rapidly passing by. The work is a graphic confection with endless depths of meaning. *Frank Film* taught me, at a young age, that you could make art about the things you like, or dislike, if you just stack ‘em like a sandwich, then serve it cold. □

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FORT WORTH Weekly

The Whale

Pop culture and art history collide in Alex Da Corte's new exhibit at the Modern.

By JANEEN NEWQUIST - March 12, 2025



Photo by Abeeku Yankah

Alex Da Corte has a deep connection with the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. His visit 20 years ago left a lasting impression on him. The architecture of the museum, along with its permanent collection, became not only a place of reflection but also a source of inspiration for his future work, particularly Martin Puryear's "Ladder for Booker T. Washington" and Ellsworth Kelly's monochromatic canvases "Red Panel," "Dark Blue Panel," and "Dark Green Panel." Da Corte's experience with the seamless integration of art and

Newquist, Janeen, and Alex Da Corte. "The Whale." *Fort Worth Weekly*, March 12, 2025.

architecture at the Modern changed his understanding of how art interacts with the space it occupies. The artist reflects on a novel idea: that art can extend into and harmonize with its surroundings. His new show at the Modern, *The Whale*, is grounded in the idea that art, space, and symbolism all come together in unexpected ways to convey deeper meanings.

Weekly: *The Whale* surveys several bodies of your work over the last 14 years, including an “alien view” of the familiar. Could you elaborate on that?

Da Corte: I guess I’ve always felt like an alien, and, for one way or another, I’ve felt sort of on some kind of perimeter of, say, society. And so I have found that, you know, in being what I like to call “a wallflower,” someone like sort of living on the edge, that you kind of have the best view of what is in the center, what is familiar, what is common, and bringing that perspective to the familiar ... makes the work or makes the familiar change. It makes it stranger. ... Over time, your relationship to the work can change because you yourself



Da Corte: "I hope that for any moment in time — be it going into a sandwich shop or going into a museum — that the viewer, the visitor, will change and is open to change."

Photo by Abeeku Yankah

change, and I didn't want to look back at the work with any kind of sentimentality. I wanted it to feel like I could approach the work as though I was receiving it or looking at it for the first time and therefore arrange it in ways that were new to me or alien. And I could also do that with the work from the collection that was also familiar to me because it is in history books and in the world for a long time, not to disrespect the work but only to see it fresh and see it as though I'm meeting it for the first time.

How important is creating an environment when presenting your work — the murals, the benches, the colors of the display tables — and showing your art in tandem with the Modern's permanent collection?

Da Corte: Well, you know, I have a kind of aversion to whiteness, and, historically speaking, the white cube has been the kind of place where there are rules around how art is shown. And although art is free in its making within an artist's studio, it gets kind of confined. There's a potential for it to be confined and constrained within the white cube space, even so far as calling the label that accompanies the painting or the sculpture on the wall a tombstone. It's a wild thing. ... A museum wants the work to stay alive. Its mission is to keep artworks alive and preserve the legacy of an artist and remember them, so my interest in changing the white space — making it a color, making the benches different — is just to say, "I want to introduce precarity when looking at the work. I want to destabilize the white space, so that when you're viewing the work, what you think is a real Warhol is actually a replica of one or what you think is a real Marisol is a replica of one." It creates a kind of anticipation that what you're looking at or how you're looking at what you're looking at is not secure and that it's liable to change, which is just to say that change is good and change is righteous and to introduce color to white walls is to introduce a new feeling or a new way, sort of psychologically speaking, of viewing work that is old to you or familiar to you. And what does it feel like to look at work in a red room if red makes you hungry or red makes you angry? What does it feel like to look at a Manet in a purple room versus a white room? It may feel quite luxurious or just different, and those differences are the things I'm wanting when viewing work.

I love the fact that you chose Vernon Fisher's "84 Sparrows." I love that piece, and I loved Vernon Fisher, and I loved the fact that he had a degree in English, in writing, that was very important to him, so he has this kind of absurd story. It's about ... a guy who, I think, is dying. He's bleeding to death under a van. And those sparrows are this metaphor or somewhat of a reference to blood. ... You're used to seeing a contained canvas or a sculpture. It's one piece in a space. Here you get three disparate pieces telling one story. Loved it. And I see that with what you're doing. There is a little bit of absurdity. There is a little bit of humor. There is a little bit of, "You know what? The world's wacky, and there's some crazy stuff going on, but it's also beautiful. It's a beautiful world we live in, but it's rough."



Da Corte: "When the young person becomes a flower, that's a beautiful thing."

Photo by Abeeku Yankah

Da Corte: But it's also been rough for a long time, like, as long as time has existed. And I wanted to start with Vernon Fisher's work because of all the things you say. It's out of the frame. It's talking about color. You know, it's thinking about red and all the ways that red is. It's thinking about humor. It's thinking about violence. It's thinking about the cosmos and being alive and being a person in the world. You know, I was thinking about how the art world oftentimes loves itself and sort of looks at the world but thinks that it doesn't need the world. But we know that the world needs art and the world benefits from art, but oftentimes the art world forgets that it, too, benefits from the world. And Vernon Fisher is a perfect example of an artist who's looking out into the world, embracing it for all of its strangeness, and then bringing it back in and saying, "Now look at this, look at how strange and weird and mad this world is" but not dismissing it. Just saying, "Let's consider it." How cool that you knew Vernon.

I just thought he was so funny. Well, there was some sadness to him, but he was very funny. I thought he was a fantastic artist.

Da Corte: He is.

By embodying Marcel Duchamp and acting the part [in the video “ROY G BIV”], what did you discover about him and his intent as an artist?

Da Corte: That’s a great question. Well, with embodying Duchamp and then Rose Sélavy, his alter ego, one of my first wants was to kind of humanize him because I myself did not know him, [but] a friend, Calvin Tompkins, did know him and ... wrote the biography on Duchamp and a very cool little pamphlet ... *The Afternoon Interviews*. It’s really a quick read, and it’s fantastic for any artist. It’s like the best thing ever because it’s just him and Duchamp talking about things and what it means to be an artist that’s so, so deeply cool. It’s very cool. But I grew up, you know, going to the Philadelphia Museum [of Art] and seeing these works, his final work, “Étant donnés,” and all of his other works, which are paintings, and these, you know, very opaque sculptures, and although I knew they were celebrated and at some point I understood why they were radical, I felt like I was being lazy in my understanding of them. I accepted that to be true, but I thought, “Why am I accepting that to be the one radical thinker of that time?” Or, “Why was that act so singularly celebrated, and who was that person?” And so outside of reading so much about him, I wanted to kind of put that skin on me. I wanted to kind of wear the clothes and kind of feel, even if just for a day or two days or weeks of rehearsing, like him, and studying him, I wanted to kind of just understand what was it like to be that body, not my body, to maybe understand a little bit more about how things were lifted, how things were cobbled together. It is in some ways like a kind of a method. It would be like method acting, but you don’t think about that in terms of artmaking. But here I am just trying to immerse myself if only to understand and to say, “Even if I don’t get you, even if it is not you and will never be you, how can I empathize and really understand you?”

When did you start doing performance? When did you start dabbling in that, bringing that into your process?

Da Corte: It was about 1999. So, it’s been quite a long time since I started making work. I was in undergraduate school, and I had met some friends who were interested in that. It’s not what I studied. I was studying animation, but they spoke about installations, and we spoke a lot about making a diner. And in my mind, I thought, “Installation art sounds pretty cool because if it means making diners, I like diners. That works for me.” I didn’t think about it in terms of art. I just was like, “Gosh, I like diners, a place to drink coffee all the time.” But that then slowly introduced kind of performances around being in a diner: drinking coffee, living inside of a salt shaker, carrying a ketchup bottle. ... Due to so much time spent in the diner and being immersed in this really safe space — which was just a booth with some friends, unlimited coffee, French fries, ketchup, salt, pepper, sugar, the whole bit — that became our theater, and we started imagining all of these cool ways to kind of have our theater be bigger than that. And that’s when I started performing. I started making little videos where I was, you know, dancing all night and, you know, watching some balloons fall.

It must be fun, but that's work.

Da Corte: It's absolutely work, and it's also, you know, like I said, I can be quite a wallflower. It was not my nature to speak at all, like I was so quiet, and as a young person, I was in my head. I was a nerd, and I was not, you know, not saying much at all. ... And so to even be a performer: As young people, when you're taking risks and learning, you want to try on a new hat, and you want to say, "I can get outside of this show because although I've been this person, maybe there's something else I don't know." When the young person becomes a flower, that's a beautiful thing.

You're learning about yourself.

Da Corte: Exactly. And who that is and how far can it stretch. And I think my interest in performing and being Duchamp or Jim Henson or Eminem is to say, "How far can you stretch this mask?"

How did being a kid with two homes, New Jersey and Venezuela, shape your imagination and worldview?

Da Corte: It is a great question and so essential to how I think about everything. As a young person, when you're developing a sense of family and what that is and home and what that is, [it] sort of links to, for some, security or a kind of stability. My relationship to living in two places always meant that, in my mind, I was always half complete. I was always like a half of a finished person in that all of my loved ones were very far away. And because this was before the internet and before cell phones, you know, when we were still making very expensive long-distance phone calls or writing letters, there was a kind of distance. ... The ways that I remembered places were through color or through smell, which are these really formative things. And so I remember being steeped in Caracas and being with my abuela and my abuelo and all of my cousins, and all of the piñatas and the fruits and the clay tiles and all of the colors and textures that I love, and then to leave and go somewhere very far away, where all of the textures and colors were different and all of the people were different [along with] the names and the language. It stretched my mind in ways that have stayed with me, because I have since tended to want to bridge a gap between different things. I've wanted to say, "How is Eminem something so very different [from] Life cereal?" Or "How is Duchamp like the Muppets?" You wouldn't think that typically, but it is to say I am a person who is of many places. You know, that is a kind a common condition for a diasporic body. They're stretched across places.

And yet you kinda feel like you don't belong anywhere.

Da Corte: You don't belong anywhere. You know, they call that kind of being an immigrant of time, a person who sort of says, "In time, I will land somewhere," and yet you can feel like you never land. You know, in all of the discussions I've had with my dad about being

an immigrant, he says, "I've been here for 56 years now, and yet something about me is always incomplete because my home is elsewhere." And there's also a part of me that says, "Maybe I'll never be welcome here." And that kind of longing is also baked into the work because there's a kind of, as much as there's humor, there's also a melancholy in the work. And there is a kind of sense for searching for home and searching for belonging.

You first came to [the Modern] 20 years ago?

Da Corte: Yup.



Da Corte: "I wanted to start with Vernon Fisher's work because ... [it's] out of the frame. It's talking about color. You know, it's thinking about red and all the ways that red is. It's thinking about humor. It's thinking about violence. It's thinking about the cosmos and being alive and being a person in the world."

Photo by Abeeku Yankah

What impression did it leave, and how has that influenced you making your art — or has it? — from seeing it 20 years ago?

Da Corte: I was raised Catholic, and so a lot of the art we were looking at was sort of born out of art that would be in Rome. And so, it's not quite the art that you find in the Museum of Modern Art, et cetera, or here. And, in my early 20s, when I came here 20 years ago, I remember both being struck by the museum itself and its grandeur and its very complicated architecture but also the actual artwork that was there. I hadn't seen Stellas, and I hadn't really known Warhols, these pillars of 20th-century art. And then, really, what kind of blew me away was Martin Puryear's "Ladder for Booker T. Washington." And that, I think, singularly changed my life. I was so moved by it for its craft, for its ability to be transformative, to be beyond metaphor, to be so inspiring and free and yet still abstract, for it to be made by a person, for its relationship to history and politics. It blew me away. And I don't think I ever was the same after that. I just really left. ... I just didn't even know what to do with myself. And I went to school for craft. I went to school for animation, and then I transferred to a school that now just recently shuttered, University Arts, which was the Philadelphia College of Arts, and it was one of the oldest art schools in the country. And it was really known for craft, wooden craft, jewelry making, metal making, you know, ceramics. And so that was my mindset. That was sort of my space, where I thought good art is really made by hand and made well. And the first time I ever saw Martin Puryear's work, I just think that changed my life.

What do you hope viewers will take away from *The Whale*?

Da Corte: Well, *The Whale* is named after Carl Jung's writings around [Jonah] and what it might mean to be consumed by a whale. And if I think about this experience in the museum as a whale that has consumed many artworks, Jung proposes that you can change, that the body inside the whale will change. In darkness, they will change. Things that were one thing may be new because of a relativity. I hope that for any moment in time — be it going into a sandwich shop or going into a museum — that the viewer, the visitor, will change and is open to change. And that change does not have to be, "I like the art." That change doesn't have to be just two thumbs up. It can be, "I don't like cartoons," or "I don't like that art at all." That's also good. But my want is that viewers are open and receptive to renegotiating how they thought about something they hadn't thought about before.

And "What is an art museum? How does that display work?"

Da Corte: Exactly. And saying, "Hey, we have kind of rested on our laurels in relationship to white walls and paintings that're 60 inches high and tombstones. What if we introduce a newness to that experience, which will give it life, which will say, 'These wall labels aren't tombstones. They're celebrations. They're ways of reenergizing and questioning and reinvestigating work that has been supposedly laid to rest in a museum, but now here we are, and it can be new, and it can be fresh.' "

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APOLLO

THE INTERNATIONAL ART MAGAZINE

INNER VISION

Through painting, film and sculpture, ranging across pop culture and art history, Alex Da Corte mines his own past to explore the human psyche. The results are both personal and profound

By Helen Stoilas

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Unless you're a family member or a psychotherapist, you rarely get to rifle through someone's childhood memories and personal touchstones, but while visiting Alex Da Corte at his North Philadelphia studio, it feels like I am doing just that. The Venezuelan-American artist is putting together the final touches on a set of vitrines for his show 'The Whale', at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth (2 March–7 September). These will hold objects that give insight into the artist's practice, as well as the references – from comic books and dollar-store toys to family photos and magazine covers – that feed into the finished works, in this case mainly paintings. 'I've pulled all of this archival paper material that's never seen the light of day to put together a sampling of what it looks like to get to the painting,' Da Corte says.

His *CD Paintings*, for example, developed from his early use of plastic compact disc cases as palettes for mixing paint (Fig.3). As the paint dried into peelable sheets, he realised it could serve to mask off specific images on the liner notes, such as Janet Jackson's stunning smile or Mariah Carey's rainbow-splashed bust, as seen in the paintings *Siren (After E K Character)* (2015) and *The End* (2017). (Music has always been and continues to be a deep well for Da Corte, who recently collaborated with both St. Vincent and Kim Deal on music videos.) The CD works also led to Da Corte's more recent reverse-glass paintings, which employ a technique often found in sign-making and hard-drawn animation, in which an image is painted on the 'back' of a sheet of clear glass or plastic, so that when viewed from the 'front', the first layer is the topmost.

Other items are much more personal. A drawing made by his mother features cartoony portraits of her family on one side and a dancing pumpkin-headed character on the other, proof that Da Corte came by his love of Halloween and dressing up in costume honestly. A photograph shows Da Corte's teenage bedroom in New Jersey, across the walls of which he painted a cavalcade of Disney villains, from Ursula and Cruella de Vil to Jafar and Scar, all impressively rendered mid-swoon or flounce. 'It was the first time I was able to translate something from a small scale to a large scale with no projection. And I realised I could [do that] just by eye,' Da Corte says.

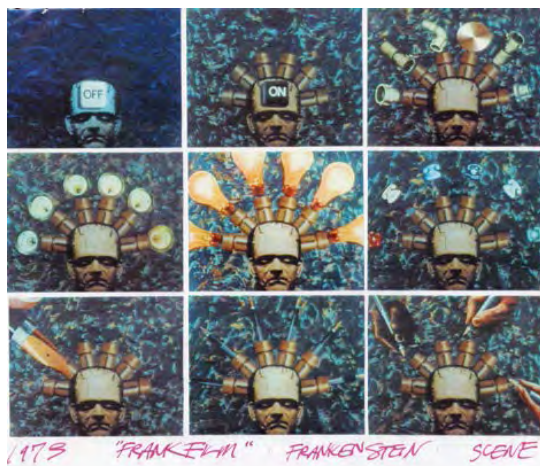
These were the early steps Da Corte took towards becoming an artist, although at the time he thought it would be as a Disney animator, creating the characters he loved so much. It was also an early lesson in how a person

shapes their identity through the images and stories they connect to, and how that evolves throughout one's life. 'I was so absolutely into the villains. And it makes sense, since so many of the people who were illustrating those Disney villains, classically, were queer,' he says. 'I didn't know that at the time, as a young person, but they have a certain sass, and there's a certain kind of rhythm to them and their body language – in retrospect, it's all so camp.'

Another pivotal point came when Da Corte was studying animation at the School of Visual Arts in New York, when his teacher Howard Beckerman showed him the Oscar-winning short *Frank Film*, by husband-and-wife directors Frank and Caroline Mouris (Fig. 2). They collected thousands of images cut from magazines to create an audio-visual collage of the things Frank enjoyed throughout his life, a kaleidoscopic dance against a soundtrack of Frank narrating his life story while simultaneously running through a list of words that start with the letter F.

'It was the first time I ever heard the word avant-garde,' Da Corte says. 'I didn't know anything about art. And what

was so cool about it was, it was this guy, in this kind of unremarkable way, talking about the things he loved and sharing what he liked. And it gave me this licence to say, "Oh, well, I can make work about the things that I like, and if I like ketchup, say, which I do very much, I can make work about that, and that's also okay." It just broke my brain open.' When Da Corte went home after that class, he immediately wrote Frank Mouris a letter, and the director responded, sending a VHS copy of the film, which Da Corte has kept for more than two



2. Still from *Frank Film*, 1973, Frank and Caroline Mouris, 8 min

decades and plans to include in his show at the Modern. (He also furthered his art historical education soon after this experience, completing a BFA in printmaking and fine art at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia, and an MFA at Yale.)

When asked what makes him decide to keep one object over another, Da Corte points to a patch of green plaid, explaining it is the pocket of a long-lost favourite shirt, while a pair of teddy bear decals create an association with Felix Gonzalez-Torres's depictions of love. 'I thought it was extremely cute in the moment – this probably could have been 25 years ago, but there it is, and then it stays with me,' Da Corte says.

All these objects are keys to unlocking the complex relationships embedded in the work Da Corte has produced over the past 20 years, which draw equally on pop culture and art history, consumerism and creativity, humour and pathos. To further expand on this psychological mining, the whole exhibition at the Modern is modelled around



3. *The End*, 2017, Alex Da Corte, digital print, poplin, foam, spray paint, Plexiglas, sequin pins, velvet, 144.8 x 144.8cm. Private collection



4. Installation view of *Rubber Pencil Devil* (2018) by Alex Da Corte in 'For a Dreamer of Houses', an exhibition at the Dallas Museum of Art in 2021

Photo: John Smith; courtesy Alex Da Corte Studio; © the artist

Carl Jung's concept of a mythological 'night sea journey', in which a hero is devoured by a sea monster and dragged through the depths to commune with the ghosts of their past, before rising again as a new person. The first thing visitors will see when they enter the galleries is a new work, an image of a big, black anvil, pulled from the cover of a *Baby Huey* comic book and recreated in puffy neoprene, looming large on a wall painted blue like a hovering whale tail about to crash against the sea. 'It's some kind of large vastness that's always on the horizon,' Da Corte says. 'It could be death, it could be opportunity – it's just the future. It's the thing that exists that's further than us or our understanding of what is next.'

Facing the anvil is a small painting hanging on an opposite wall, *Andromeda* (2012; Fig. 5), the earliest work in the show and an example of Da Corte's experiments using store-bought shampoo. Condensed and poured onto a framed mirror and allowed to dry, the shampoo has morphed over the years, darkening from a brilliant gold and blue to an earthier brown and grey, growing a soapy crust, and seeping into the surrounding frame.

'It bleeds and it changes, and it's very much alive,' Da Corte says of the work, adding that each shampoo painting is completely unique in how it has aged. 'The ones that I made for my parents, around the same time, are in perfect condition – but you could put one somewhere else, and it might become completely volatile and change, and you just don't know, which is part of my attraction to it.' Da Corte is so invested in



5. *Andromeda*, 2012, Alex Da Corte, shampoo, mirror, frame, 68.6 x 68.6cm

how the painting might change that he is personally driving it to Fort Worth, along with the archival materials that will fill the table-top vitrines, undertaking his own 'night sea journey' with the pieces of his past.

This constant exploration of personal psychology, and what the things we love say about us and our relationship with the world, is the core of Da Corte's work. It plays out even more theatrically in his films and immersive installations, in which Da Corte takes a starring role, enacting beloved characters from his childhood, such as Mister Rogers, Frankenstein's monster, the Wicked Witch of the West and Popeye, to name just a few. (His new studio in the former Frankford Arsenal, which he just bought and moved in to last June, was fittingly once used by the Opera Company of Philadelphia for set building and storage.)

One of Da Corte's best-known film installations, *Rubber Pencil Devil*, originally created for the 2018 Carnegie International exhibition in Pittsburgh, features 57 vignettes, in which Da Corte performs as different characters, including the titular scarlet-skinned devil, who in one scene is a

weatherman predicting a spate of fires across the country (Figs 1 & 7). The nearly three-hour-long work was shown at the 2020 Venice Biennial and is currently on view in the show 'Ear Worm' at the Museum of Contemporary Art Toronto (until 3 August). A new iteration, *Rubber Pencil Devil (Hell House)* (2022) screening inside a neon structure that appears to be on fire, was commissioned by the Glenstone private museum in Washington, D.C., and can be seen there from 20 March.

The Glenstone show has given Da Corte the opportunity to document the work more thoroughly – 'I'm quite an avid bookmaker,' he says – and the more than 700 props and costumes that went into making it. It also led to the creation of a new billboard project for the High Line in New York, due to go on view this spring, for which Da Corte once again donned his Pink Panther costume from the film. This time, the character will be seen lounging on the ground, with an array of blank protest placards surrounding him.

'I thought pink is the kind of righteous colour to work through for this year. I had just written this essay on softness and soft power, and I was thinking about memory loss, about people who have dementia, and how there's a kind of softening that happens. But how can we rethink softness as something that is powerful?' Da Corte says.

One example Da Corte came up with is the difference between falling and lying down, how one is an action without true autonomy, and the other is a choice. Similarly, the blank placards draw on 'the need to find a voice, to speak to

the many things that we want' during difficult times and 'not knowing how to', Da Corte says, because there are too many words to choose from, or because none of them will do. 'Silence has its own kind of power.'

The project also connects to other recurring themes in Da Corte's work, such as a person's relationship with their own body and how this affects their perception of themselves, especially over time. 'You can spend a whole lifetime reckoning with that,' he says, 'the person you thought you were going to be, or what was foretold you might be and you aren't, and how that can be completely horrifying and devastating and alienating – and maybe, for some, gratifying.'

This kind of evolution, as Da Corte sees it, can apply just as much to objects as it does to people, since objects have a life of their own and in many ways are extensions of the people who make them, or use them, or appreciate them. 'I've always likened this kind of shifting to the moment when a regular t-shirt that you bought at a store becomes your favourite t-shirt,' he says. 'There's no way of



6. Part of Alex Da Corte's installation at the 2022 Whitney Biennial, *ROY G BIV*, which also involved his brother Americo painting and repainting the outside walls in different colours

knowing when that was, but all of a sudden it happened.' This humanising of things might be why Da Corte has an issue with terms like 'ready-made' and 'found object' when it is applied to items that were imagined, designed and constructed by people, even if forgotten or ignored.

'Things have meaning because they're made by people,' he says, adding later on that 'there's so much invisible labour around the world.' He gives as an example the painting of a home's exterior or a gallery's walls, usually done by a hired professional who isn't given a second thought once the work is done. The subject is a personal one for Da Corte, who comes from a family of house painters, including his brother Americo, who has collaborated on previous projects with the artist. Among them is his installation *ROY G BIV* for the 2022 Whitney Biennial, for which Americo painted the exterior a new colour of the rainbow every few weeks (Fig. 6). Drawing attention to the work that goes in to something as deceptively simple as the colour of a surface turns it into 'a kind of force with changing moods and a psychological impact over time'.

Throughout our conversation, we keep returning to the archival objects that have informed Da Corte's work for so many years. Like Jung's hero, we gather the elements of the past in order to shape the form of our future. Sometimes this means dealing with genuinely painful memories, as well as joy, a familiar experience for Da Corte, who has weathered 'unimaginable violence' to his body because of multiple surgeries he needed when he was young and the Crohn's disease he lives with now. 'It sort of sets you

in this place where you have a choice,' he says, remembering a time when his struggles with his health left him weeping and his mother shook him and told him, 'You have to choose to get through this.'

'So yes, you absolutely have to go through the depths,' Da Corte says. 'Absolutely go right through it and be in it, accept it, whatever that thing might be, and find some kind of betterment, or new perspective.' Returning to process the pain of the past can also teach a person valuable lessons about accepting the flaws and failures inherent in growth. 'For me to survey all that I have done in these many years is not to propose that this is all wrapped up in a beautiful bow, but that it is an unravelled kind of mess on a table, and that too, is righteous.' But perhaps the biggest lesson Da Corte says he's learned from this constant psychological digging is to live with empathy. 'That's something that I truly work towards and want to be,' he says. 'And I think all of my projects are about that.' ^A

Helen Stoilas is a writer based in New York and a former editor at the *Art Newspaper*.

'Alex da Corte: The Whale' is at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth from 2 March–7 September (www.themodern.org).

Recent works by Alex da Corte will be at Glenstone, Potomac, from 20 March (www.glenstone.org).



7. Still from *Rubber Pencil Devil* by Alex Da Corte, a set of 57 vignettes in which the artist performs as different characters

Courtesy Alex Da Corte Studio; © the artist



Soft Power by Alex Da Corte

Soft power. It has always given me strength, fortified me, even if I didn't realize it was there. Flowers. Balloons. Colors. Corduroy. Carpet. Candles. I remember so much talk about being hard. Hard line. Hard body. Straight edge. Edge lord. How edges bound, edges guarantee, edges own. Then what about mutable edges? My edges are soft. My wants are softer.

I'm standing on the edge of the ocean, heartbroken, and I realize that neither this coast nor this moment is defined. And the shell shaped like a crescent moon that I had become so fixated on is gone in a flash, a rush of cold water and

foam. My attention is on the edges of the sand. Sand kissed by waves, now. Sand kissed by waves just past. Sand kissed by waves some time before, with edges defined by skeletal bits of seaweed and glass. My sister and I go walking. We look for glass. She collects it and I help. We are looking for a little flicker of blue or green or amber. Glass isn't sand yet, but it will be. All in good time. It isn't hard anymore, even though it's a fragment of its former self. It isn't broken. It is a softer, slightly muddier version of its former self. It is soft and smooth in your hand. It holds light, it warms it. My sister isn't hard like she was

when we were younger. In fact, she is soft and warmer than ever. I remember the album *Room on Fire*. There is a line on the second single, "Reptilia": "The room is on fire while she fixes her hair." This was my sister. Sometimes we need the fire, and sometimes the fire just happens to us. Its power irrefutable. Its edges undefined.

What is soft power? Soft power is level and a playing field, a map upon which we may expand as our edges lose their sharpness. Porousness grows and we become absorbent. It is a place for fairness, for clear views clearly expressed, for mutualistic relations that benefit all parties or, at least, show consideration for all parties. It is the site for truce. What is the difference between falling down and laying down? Falls happen when gravity chooses its partner to dance with. I prefer to lay. Now I lay me down to see. ●

designlines

your guide to design in Toronto



Alex Da Corte Sees What Andy Warhol Missed

SEPTEMBER 26, 2024

BY SIMON LEWSEN

In “Ear Worm” at MOCA Toronto, Alex Da Corte proves his mastery of pop culture, surpassing the Pop Art master himself.

To figure out the work of 44-year-old Alex Da Corte, perhaps the best pop artist of his generation, you might start by looking at two archival photographs. The first, by Hans Hammerskiöld, captures the late Claes Oldenburg, a '60s pop-art legend, walking the streets of London and straining under the weight of his own sculpture, a giant tube of toothpaste. The second, by Bill Pierce, depicts Carroll Spinney, the *Sesame Street* cast member, doing puppetry for Oscar the Grouch while dressed, from the knees down, as Big Bird, the other character he played on the show.

The images were taken before Da Corte’s time, but they capture the Da Corte vibe. They’re cartoonish, surreal and, above all else, devotional. Oldenburg must have loved that ungainly toothpaste tube with paternal fierceness—instead of entrusting it to the care of a gallery attendant, he carried it himself. Spinney was so committed to his alter egos—the overgrown avian and the trash-can dweller—that during busy days on set, he embodied them both at once.



Alex Da Corte, Installation view, *Rubber Pencil Devil*, Prada Rong Zhai, 13, November 2020 – 10 January 2021. © Alex Da Corte. Courtesy The Artist; Prada Rong Zhai; and Sadie Coles HQ, London. Photography by Alessandro Wang.

That devotional impulse is present in everything Da Corte does. He's hardly the first artist to appropriate images from pop culture, but his way is different—more tender, less trollish. Consider his peers: Paul McCarthy, who depicted Snow White doing the kinds of things you'd normally see on the outer fringes of Pornhub; Kaws, who transformed the characters in *The Simpsons* into zombies with X'ed out eyes; and the filmmaker Rhys Frake-Waterfield, who reimagined Winnie-the-Pooh as a sledgehammer-wielding psycho. Nothing is sacred, these artists tell us.

Da Corte seems to believe that everything is. Or rather that, as the journalist John Jeremiah Sullivan wrote, that all people “partake of some holiness.” His first video, *Carry That Weight* (2003), depicts him struggling to walk down the street with a plush ketchup bottle as tall as he is—an obvious reference to both Oldenburg and the Stations of the Cross. His most famous work, *As Long as the Sun Lasts*, temporarily installed in 2021 on the roof of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, was a 26-foot-tall imitation of a mobile by Alexander Calder, the mid-century American sculptor. The main character was Big Bird, who perched on one of Calder's moons and looked out at the New York skyline like an angel at the Annunciation. Da Corte grew up Catholic, in a Venezuelan American family. He's also gay and loves costumes and camp. All of these facts seem relevant to his work.

His latest exhibition, *Ear Worm*, at MOCA Toronto, features a reinstalled version of *Rubber Pencil Devil* (2018), originally commissioned by the Carnegie Museum of Art, in Pittsburgh. The video is divided into 57 parts, each chapter focuses on a figure from pop culture played by Da Corte. We see Carroll Spinney, in his Big Bird legs, sharing a drink with Oscar. We see Ebenezer Scrooge heading up to bed, except the stairwell is a Stairmaster and he's doomed, like Sisyphus, to climb forever. We see the Statue of Liberty collapsing under her own weight.

Da Corte chose these characters because they're ubiquitous. "They are familiar to the point of banality," he told me. "I find myself wondering, *What was the allure from the beginning? Why have they stood the test of time?*" All of them, notably, are doing things they haven't done before. "For me," Da Corte adds, "the biggest question is, *Can these characters change? Can we afford new lives to the things of the past?*"

In this respect, he seems locked in a dialogue with his fellow Pennsylvanian Andy Warhol, the man who introduced the world to ironic appropriation. Where Warhol runs cold—his images emit icy glamour—Da Corte runs hot. The MOCA installation is spread over four screens, each bombarding you with music and DayGlo colours. (I interviewed Da Corte in the middle of this scene, an



Ear Worm, Alex Da Corte, MOCA Toronto (2024).

Lewsen, Simon. "Alex Da Corte Sees What Andy Warhol Missed." *Designlines Magazine*, September 26, 2024.



Alex Da Corte, *Mouse Museum (Van Gogh Ear)* [detail], MOCA Toronto.

experience every bit as bewildering as you'd expect it to be.) Warhol, ultimately, was interested in sameness. His silkscreens of Marilyn Monroe resemble nothing so much as his other silkscreens of, say, Grace Kelly, Mick Jagger, Wayne Gretzky or Chairman Mao.

He was telling us that pop culture flattens people. To which Alex Da Corte responds: Yes, but then we flesh them out again. And he's right. We watch prequels and write fan fiction. We hire charismatic hotties, like Colin Farrell, to humanize ugly villains, like Gotham's Penguin. We speculate that Taylor Swift, a paragon of red state femininity, might secretly be queer, and we reimagine Donald Trump, a man with the attention span of a housefly, as an investigative mastermind routing out a vast global conspiracy. Sometimes, I see my daughter gently chastise her stuffed elephant and for an instant, a figure made of cloth and cotton becomes a living entity.

Like my daughter, Da Corte understands that a being needn't have flesh and blood in order to live. "I've often learned things from the characters I've emulated," he told me. "I've discovered that walking in their shoes is different than I thought it would be." As he spoke, the Wicked Witch of the West sang *Blue*, by LeAnn Rimes: "So lonesome for you. Why can't you be lonesome over me?" Oscar the Grouch bopped contentedly behind her.

carla

Alex Da Corte at Matthew Marks Gallery September 23– November 4, 2023

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Alex Da Corte's works possess an irreverent goofiness. A 2021 installation for The Met's rooftop, for instance, featured an introspective Big Bird sitting on a reinterpretation of a kinetic sculpture by Alexander Calder, while in his *Bad Land* (2017) videos, Da Corte impersonates Eminem's alter-ego, Slim Shady, eating cereal and nonsensically fiddling with video game controllers. Unlike an older generation of lewd provocateurs like Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy who also fixed their gaze on mass culture, sully the innocence of well-known figures like Snow White and Heidi, Da Corte largely drains his work of transgression. For journalist Arthur Lubow, such lightheartedness belies the underlying anxiety that is often more covertly present for Da Corte. Da Corte's work, he observes, is "soothing art [that] is also self-soothing,"¹ in that it inoculates the viewer against violence or perversion. In *THE DÆMON*, Da Corte's most recent exhibition at Matthew Marks Gallery, he turned his object of study from character to atmosphere. Comprising paintings and sculptures centered on

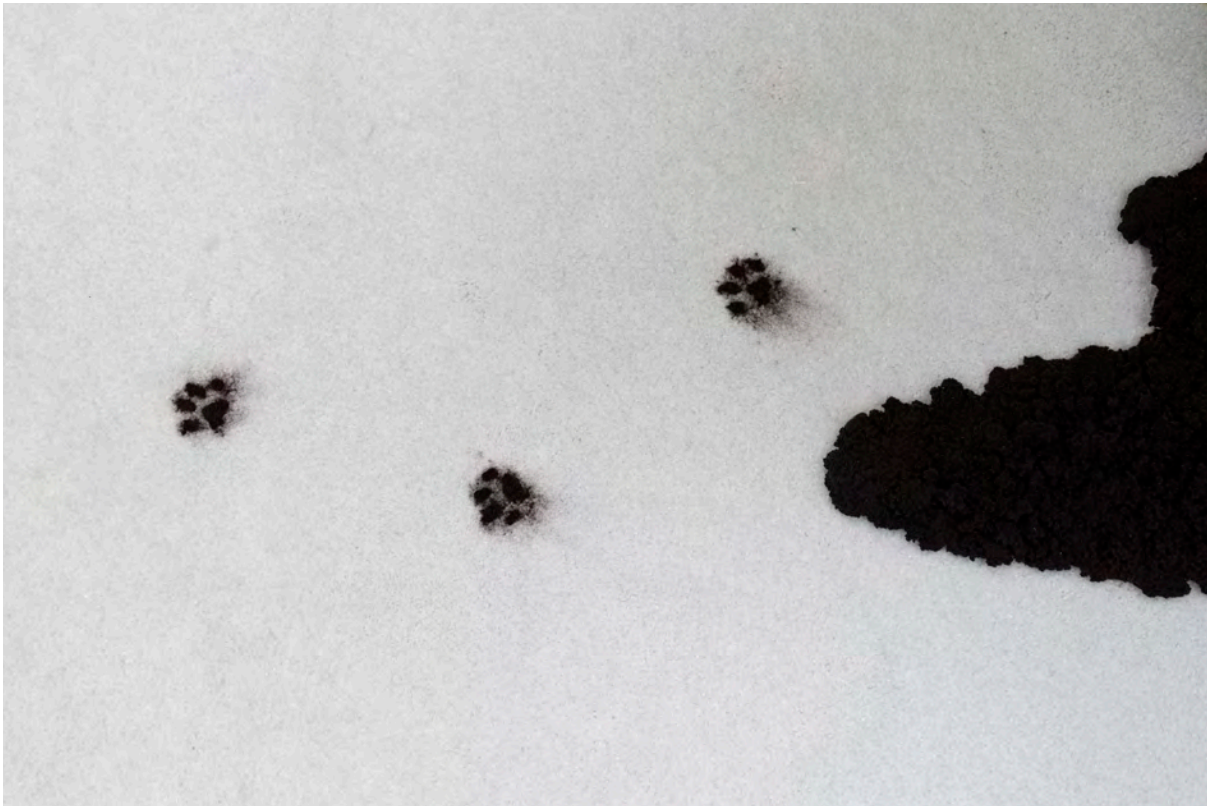
cartoonish renditions of 1960s domestic interiors, the exhibition questioned the modernist promises of sleek, relaxed domesticity, infusing the home with unnerving, even supernatural forces.

Da Corte's destabilization of the domestic—a sphere more often associated with warmth, comfort, and security—began upon entry to the exhibition. A stark, bright light suffused the space, reinforced by the plush, white carpet floor and white walls that conspired to recall the padded rooms of psychiatric hospitals. In the room's center, Da Corte built a recessed conversation pit } (*The Conversation Pit*, 2023) and filled it with unusually vibrant retrofuturistic furniture—curved loungers, standing globe lamps, and oversized pills that served as sculptural accents. The forms were modeled after the set design of Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), a film that situates its depictions of graphic and brutal violence within hyper-stylistic interiors that mix nods to midcentury, retrofuturism, and pop art. A cornerstone of midcentury interior design, conversation pits were marketed for their cozy intimacy and association with sleek hipness. In the exhibition, however, the living room setup was imbued with

a sense of tension and clinical coldness, as though it were meant to be studied rather than lived in. Despite its plush and colorful surfaces, certain elements suggested foul play. A potted plant made of flock, foam, and wire-core urethane lay haphazardly on a mirrored coffee table, toppled over by some unseen force. Faux dirt sullied the pristine floor as a series of cat paw prints wandered off from the spill, then vanished mysteriously. Though the overall scene could be ripped from a high-end design catalog, *The Conversation Pit* included unsettling moments that complicated the associations with domestic space—a sense of unpredictability and mystery shot through otherwise meticulously arranged objects.

On the back wall, a set of black-and-white mixed-media paintings titled *The Dæmon* (2022) resembled a discombobulated cartoon strip. The non-sequential works depict a cat walking through a home, as well as scenes of a couple reading and conversing in their living space. The comic strip quality recalls Da Corte's investment in playful popular culture, but the work's nonlinearity reinforces the exhibition's brooding sense of uncertainty. In the center left frame,

Isabella Miller



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Alex Da Corte, *The Conversation Pit*
(top: detail; bottom: installation view) (2023).
© Alex Da Corte. Matthew Marks Gallery,
Los Angeles, 2023. Images courtesy of the artist
and Matthew Marks Gallery.

the black cat stands next to a floor lamp it has presumably just knocked over, recalling the toppled plant in *The Conversation Pit*. The cat seems as though it were a traveler between the sculptural and flat artworks on a mission to disrupt domestic peace. In Greek mythology, a daemon is a supernatural being who works as a bridge between gods and humans. The show is coy about whether the cat is a daemon in the mythological sense, but it does use the animal in ways that toy with its association with the supernatural—cats are typically considered to be tranquil domestic companions (you can pet them, they are pleasant to look at) but here, the feline operates as the disruptive force that transcends mediums and artworks. Here resisting the self-soothing inclination articulated by Lublow, the artist takes prototypically soothing material—domestic spaces and animals—and makes them into disruptive forces.

The Grimalkin (2023), a digital photographic print on poplin and plexiglass that hung unusually high on the wall opposite *The Dæmon*, depicts a statuesque, dirt-covered man framed by a vibrant cerulean sky. “Grimalkin,” an antiquated term for a grey cat, was also a word used to refer to women suspected of witchcraft in the early modern era.² Witches, like daemons, straddle the physical and supernatural planes. Across the show, these cosmic interlopers (whether a cat or the gargoyle-like man pictured in *The Grimalkin*) strand the viewer in an atmosphere of strangeness. Shot from an extremely low angle, the

source image for *The Grimalkin* was originally featured in a local Arizona news article about firefighters who rescued a young man who had been stuck in a chimney for several hours.³ For Da Corte, like the Arizona man, the longer one stays stuck inside the home, the more potential there is for unsettling transformation. Chimneys—the passageways of warmth, gifts, and good cheer—can also be claustrophobic tunnels filled with perilous ash and smoke. In *THE DÆMON*, Da Corte pulls back on his supposed impulse to self-soothe and instead imagines a shifting world where one expects the pinnacle of stability but is often met with the unknown.

1. Arthur Lubow, “Alex Da Corte, Puppet Master,” *The New York Times Style Magazine*, June 16, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/15/t-magazine/alex-da-corte.html>.

2. Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “grimalkin (n.),” July 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1513517564>.

3. Nicole Hernandez, “Man rescued from his chimney in Tucson,” *The Arizona Republic*, October 17, 2016, <https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/arizona/2016/10/17/man-rescued-his-chimney-tucson/92309632/>.

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The New York Times

Weekend Arts

NEWS | CRITICISM

FRIDAY, APRIL 1, 2022 CI

HOLLAND COTTER | ART REVIEW



CHARLIE RUBIN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



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WU TSANG, DESIGN PICS INC./ALAMY STOCK FOOTAGE

A Show of Shadows and Light



CHARLIE RUBIN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

The latest Whitney Biennial is reflective, not reactive. It's an adult-thinking exhibition, and a welcome sight.

AFTER A YEAR'S COVID DELAY, the latest Whitney Biennial has pulled into town, and it's a welcome sight. Other recent editions — this is the 80th such roundup — have tended to be buzzy, jumpy, youth-quake affairs. This one, even with many young artists among its 60-plus par-

Whitney Biennial 2022:
Quiet as It's Kept
Whitney Museum of American Art

ticipants, most represented by brand-new, lockdown-made work, doesn't read that way. It's a notably somber, adult-thinking show, one freighted with three years of soul-rattling history marked by social divisiveness, racist violence

and relentless mortality.

Organized by two seasoned Whitney curators, David Breslin and Adrienne Edwards, the Biennial's title, "Quiet as It's Kept" — a colloquial phrase, sourced from Toni Morrison, indicating dark realities unspoken of — suggests the show's keyed-down tone.

Top from left, Rebecca Belmore's sculpture, "ishkode (fire)" (2021) with, in background, photographs of East Los Angeles by Guadalupe Rosales (2022); an image from Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's "Permutations" (1976); and an image from "Moby Dick; or, The Whale" by Wu Tsang. Above, Alex Da Corte's "Roy G Biv" (2022).

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Cotter, Holland. "A Show of Shadows and Light." *The New York Times*, April 1, 2022, pp. C1, C10–11.



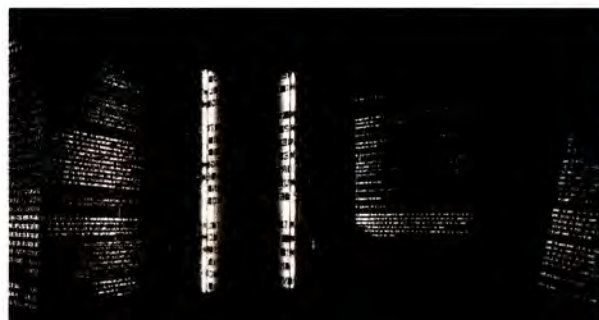
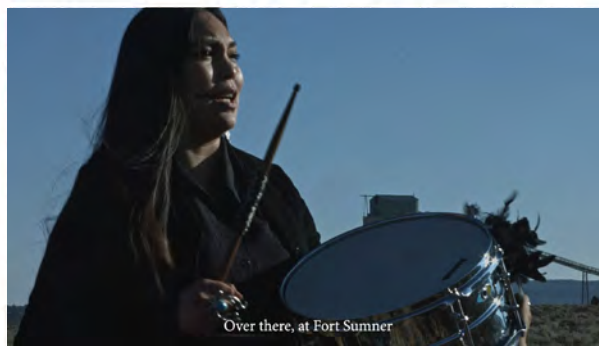
A Show of Shadows and Light

Near right, from top, an image from Raven Chacon's "Three Songs" (2021); Jonathan Berger's "An Introduction to Nameless Love" (2019); and a tribute to Steve Cannon, recreating an interior from his home and salon. Far right top, an image from Alfredo Jaar's video "06.01.2020 18.39" (2022). Bottom, photographs by Daniel Joseph Martinez.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE C1

Its very look gives a clue to its mood: Its main installation, on the 5th and 6th floors of the Whitney Museum of American Art, is literally split between shadow and light.

For the occasion, the museum has removed nearly all the dividing walls on its fifth floor, opening its Manhattan space from end to end — from Hudson River to High Line — and spread out art in island-like units throughout. The arrangement isn't beautiful; it has a jumbled, salesroom look. But it called to mind, for me, a quietly utopian



art-world moment.

In 2009, a local nonprofit entity called X Initiative, made up of artists, dealers and curators, staged an event in Chelsea, not far from the present Whitney, called "No Soul for Sale: A Festival of Independents." It brought together dozens of alternative galleries and organizations under one roof and used exactly this boundary-less format — one that did away with art fair-style booths and V.I.P. lounges, not to mention admission fees — and let art and its audiences mingle freely, shar-

ing common air and light. (The city's Independent Art Fair originally adopted the no-walls model but soon dropped it.)

As the curators have emphasized in statements about the show, the idea of boundaries, and getting rid of them, were important to their thinking about this biennial, starting with questions (also addressed by the 2019 edition) of how to break down the geopolitical borders that have traditionally defined and delimited the Whitney's version of "American art."

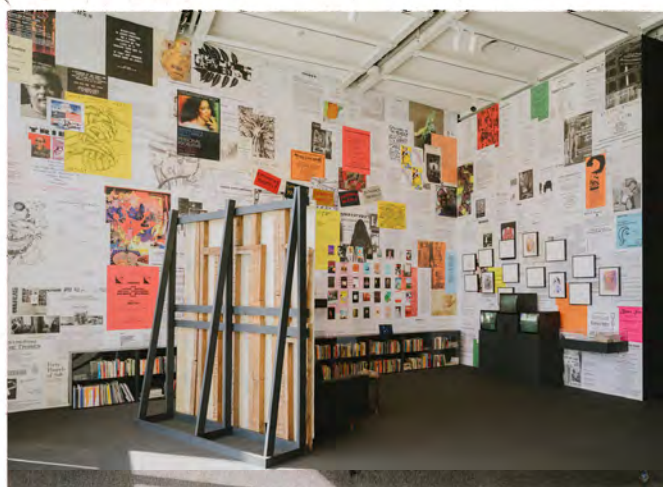
Of the 2022 artists, three live and work in Mexico (Mónica Arreola, Alejandro Morales and Andrew Roberts), and two in Canada (Rebecca Belmore and Duane Linklater, both of whom are of Indigenous heritage). More than a dozen were born outside the continental U.S.; some still live elsewhere part-time. One, Rayyane Tabet, who lists Beirut and San Francisco as home, was in the process of applying for U.S. citizenship when the Biennial was being assembled, and in a series of text pieces posted inside and outside the museum, quotes from the official U.S. naturalization test.

Borders within art media are scrambled too. The curators have expressed strong interest — partly, I would guess, in reaction to the current market fixation on figure painting — in abstraction as a liberating mode, one that can free art from specific social and political meanings, but also — quiet as it's kept — accommodate these.

Painters of an older generation, James Little and Denyse Thomasos (1964–2012), whose work appears



CHARLIE RUBIN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



CHARLIE RUBIN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

to fall into a Modernist tradition of "pure" abstraction on which the Whitney itself was built, illustrate this dynamic. Two spectacular pictures by the Trinidad-born Thomasos are all about painterly gesture, but they're also all about the history of Black captivity, past and present, as their titles — "Displaced Burial/Burial at Goree" and "Jail" — reveal.

Little, who showed for decades with the veteran New York gallerist June Kelly and is now attracting wide notice, also lets titles tell a tale. In his magisterial, all-black, oil-and-wax "Stars and Stripes" (2021), it's hard to say whether the bars that make up its geometric pattern are converging or colliding.

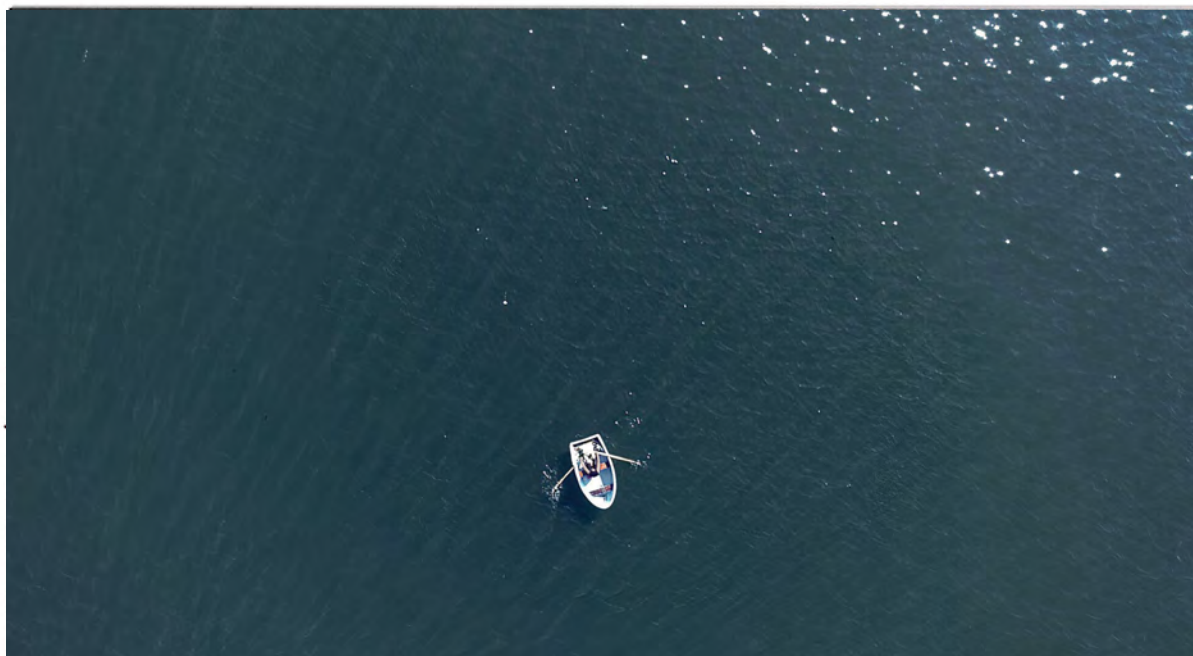
Of other abstract painting in the show, the ones of interest are those that touch on other disciplines. Two large paintings by Linklater use tepee forms as a template. Tapestry-like hangings by the artist Lisa Alvarado were made as environments for musical performances in which she participates. The Puerto Rican artist and choreographer Awilda Sterling-Duprey, who is in her 70s and counts John Cage and Afro-Cuban religious ritual among her influences, paints while dancing, blindfolded, to jazz recordings. (Her three pieces in the show were executed on site in the museum.)

Performance merges with abstract sculpture in a video by the estimable Dave

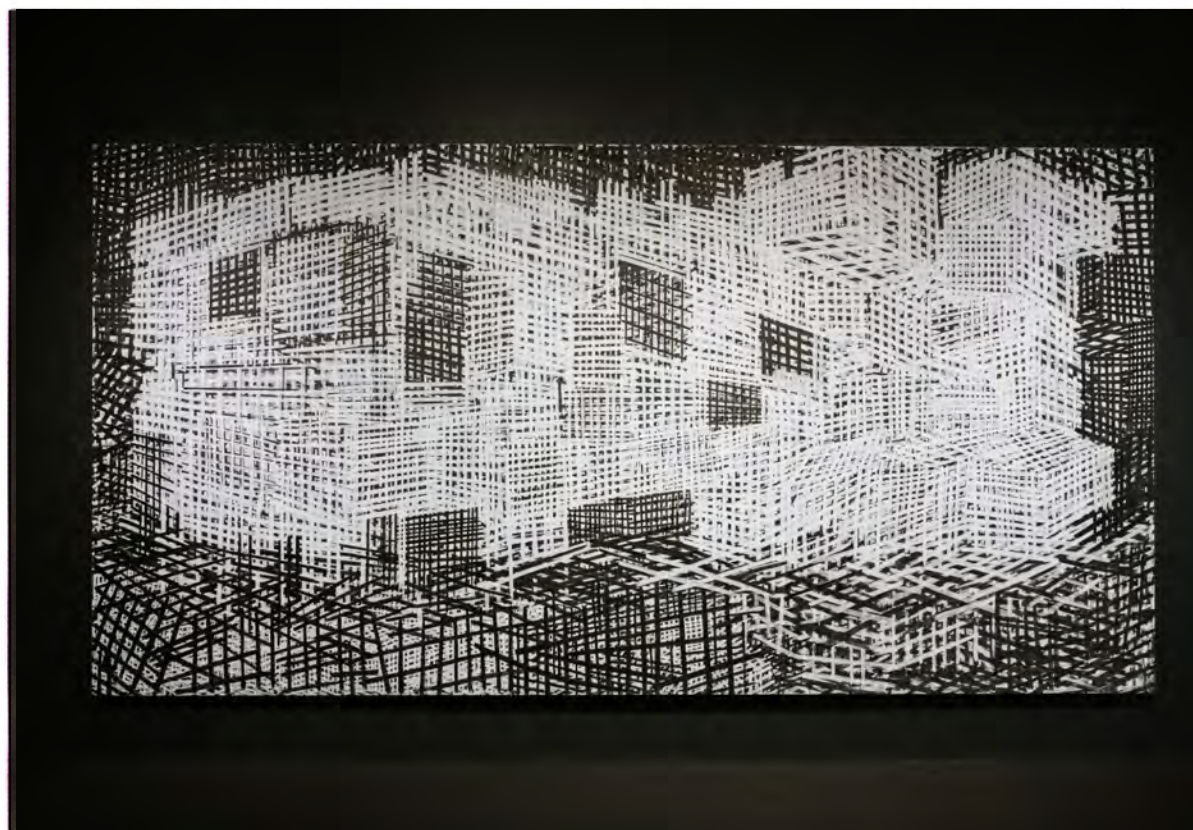
McKenzie, whom we see improvising balletic encounters with stray objects in his studio, where he seems to have spent a good deal of lockdown time. And Alex Da Corte brings off a kind of formal trifecta in a 2022 video in which he acts multiple roles (Marcel Duchamp, the Joker), while embracing historic sculptures (Brancusi's) and defacing — that is, repainting — historic pictures, Gainsborough's "The Blue Boy" among them.

Every Biennial produces at least one audience favorite, often a video. The Da Corte piece — funny, creepy, lushly produced — is a natural candidate. (By rights, Jacky Connolly's four-channel "Descent into Hell," comparably weird but, in its tight, wraparound format, harder to watch, should be in the running too.) By contrast, what's less likely to grab attention is work in a different medium — language, visual and spoken — though the show is rich in it. It's in Jane Dickson's paintings of urban signage; in Tony Cokes's fast-flashing video texts ("How to mourn mass death?," "I CN'T BRTH"), and in Ralph Lemon's drawing and paintings suggestive of a kind of cosmic dance notation. Most of these are all on the 5th floor, though the main concentration of word-based art is on the 6th floor, where partition walls are up, gallery lights are low, and the soul of this Biennial is focused.

In a sense, the political spirit of this border-conscious, history-telling Biennial, and like-minded ones that have preceded it, have sprung from a single declarative eight-word sentence — "I Can't Imagine Ever Wanting to Be White" — which,



COCO FUSCO AND ALEXANDER GRAY ASSOCIATES



CHARLIE RUBIN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

From far left, James Little's sixth-floor installation, with "Exceptional Blacks," "Stars and Stripes" and "Big Shot" (2021). Near left, top, an image from Coco Fusco's video "Your Eyes Will Be an Empty Word" (2021). Bottom, Denyse Thomasos's "Jail" (1993).



ALFREDO JAAR AND GALERIE LELONG & CO.

controversially, was printed on metal admission tags made for the 1993 edition. The phrase and the tags were conceived by the artist and provocateur Daniel Joseph Martinez, who later contributed to the 2008 show, and does again to the present one.

For his 2022 new work, he photographed himself in the (prosthethically enhanced) guise of five pop-cultural “post-human” antiheroes including Frankenstein, Count

Dracula and the Alien Bounty Hunter from “The X-Files.” But what makes the piece gripping is a statement that accompanies the images, a scathing indictment of the human race as the earth’s “ultimate invasive species,” one that’s about to self-destruct and take every other living thing down with it.

The work’s eschatological tone finds an echo in Alfredo Jaar’s taut video account, replete with special effects,

of the 2020 police attack on demonstrators in Washington D.C. And there’s a tone of end-times mourning to Coco Fusco’s “Your Eyes Will Be an Empty Word,” a narrated video tour of Hart Island, the vast public cemetery in the East River that has, for over a century, received the bodies of New York City’s unclaimed dead, now including Covid victims.

Biennials are, almost by definition, in-the-now events (and encompass in-the-now politics: unionized Whitney workers seeking higher wages leafleted this Biennial’s V.I.P. opening this week). These events seldom traffic in the backward glance. But this one does. Fusco’s video is a meditation on what has vanished and continues to. Adam Pendleton’s video portrait of the theologian and social justice activist Ruby Nell Sales

is a stirring tribute to a long, gallant personal history that continues into the present. Jonathan Berger’s utterly extraordinary sculptural installation “An Introduction to Nameless Love,” a giant book made of letters cut from tin, is a kind of walk-in “Lives of the Saints.” Some of those saints are still with us, some not.

And a sound piece called “Silent Choir” by the Navajo artist Raven Chacon — one of a cohort of outstanding Native American participants in this Biennial — is a document of the past unlike any other here. It’s a 2016 audio recording made during a silent vigil — an act of “sonic resistance” is Chacon’s term — organized by women protesting the Dakota Access Pipeline near Standing Rock, N.D. With only the sound of rustling and breathing and the occasional whir of surveillance helicop-



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ters breaking the silence, it's a deeply moving piece of history-almost-not-there.

Moving, too, are a pair of tributes to cultural figures from the past that bookend the show. One figure is the artist Theresa Hak Kyung Cha. Born in South Korea in 1951, she immigrated with her family to the United States in 1962. By the end of that stormy decade — the student protest movement was on the boil, the feminist movement starting — she was studying art, film and literature at the University of California, Berkeley, and beginning to do experimental work in all three fields. This work took her to Paris, then back to Korea and finally to New York City, where she married the photographer Richard Barnes in 1982. On Nov. 5 of that year, she went to meet him at the Puck Building in Soho, and was raped and murdered by a security guard there. She was 31.

In the years since, her luminous art and writing have become hugely influential among young artists. And the Biennial's mini-survey, housed in the equivalent of a small white tent on the fifth floor, gives a good sense of it, with examples of her handwritten notebooks and of videos. In one, the face of her sister Bernadette repeatedly flashed, for minutes on end, on the screen. Then suddenly a different face appears — that of the artist herself — but just once, and then is gone.

The other tribute, on the 6th floor, feels quite different in character: it's to a man, a place, and a collective project. The man was Steve Cannon (1935-2019), a New York writer and teacher active in the downtown Black literary collective Umbra in the 1960s. (The poet N.H. Pritchard,

whose hand-decorated manuscripts appear in the Biennial, was also an early member.) The place was Cannon's East Village townhouse — home, beginning in the 1990s, to a project called A Gathering of the Tribes, which encompassed an art gallery, a performance space and an arts magazine still published online.

Over the years, countless artists, musicians and writers came through Tribes' door, which never closed. And Cannon, who was blind, was always there, ready to give and take ideas, enthusiasms, opinions. The Biennial has recreated, or reimaged, the apartment setting, bringing in old furniture, installing a wall painting by Cannon's friend, the artist David Hammons, and including personal items, like Cannon's ever-present ashtray, along with stacks of the books, notebooks and magazines that filled the place. In short, it conjures up the ghost of a utopian situation. That a Biennial, a constitutionally of-the-moment enterprise, would do that, says something about the reflective spirit that sets this edition apart.

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T THE NEW YORK TIMES STYLE MAGAZINE

T'S 2021 ART ISSUE

Alex Da Corte, Puppet Master

A great and unlikely success story, the artist creates funny and therapeutic works in the hope of easing the “exquisite pain” of modern life.

By Arthur Lubow

June 15, 2021 Updated 10:51 a.m. ET



Alex Da Corte, photographed in costume in his Philadelphia studio in May. Jeffrey Stockbridge

Alex Da Corte planned to become an animator for Disney until he determined that he lacked the chops. Still, he never truly abandoned his youthful dream. “It wasn’t until I went to school that I thought, ‘I’m not a good animator,’” he told me. “I couldn’t draw very well. It was a winding road to figure out what telling stories through cartoons might be for me.” The spirit of Walt hovers over the Day-Glo hues of Da Corte’s installations, the adorability of his Muppet figures and the gentle empathy of his video impersonations of characters as divergent as Fred Rogers and Eminem. He

Lubow, Arthur. “Alex Da Corte, Puppet Master.” *T: The New York Times Style Magazine*, June 15, 2021.

once constructed a sculpture of a rampant viper with scales that were brightly colored artificial fingernails. He has a penchant for transmuting anger and danger into cartoon jokiness. His art soothes.

“You can take pain or fear or sadness and turn it into something new,” he said in his northeast Philadelphia studio, a vast space flooded with light through industrial casement windows, where he directs half a dozen assistants to craft costumes, props, puppets, masks and whatever else is needed for his videos and sculptures. His attitude of determined optimism made him an inspired choice to construct this year’s rooftop installation at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which was unveiled in April, soon after the yearlong pandemic lockdown eased up. “It was a really sad time and a really sad year,” he said. “I keep thinking of it as four seasons in hell.”

“As Long as the Sun Lasts,” the roof showstopper, is a 26-foot-tall sculptural mash-up of Alexander Calder and Jim Henson. On top of a towering trapezoidal steel base, which is painted Calder Red — the vermillion that Calder used for his stabile “Flamingo” (1974) in Chicago’s Federal Plaza — but textured to resemble the snap-together plastic pieces of Little Tikes toys, Da Corte attached a vertical spindle supporting a tilted horizontal armature that bears on one side five brightly colored discs (a nod to Calder’s modernism) and, on the other, a blue version of Sesame Street’s Big Bird,



Da Corte's studio is full of props, costumes, masks and other objects used in the artist's videos and sculptures. Jeffrey Stockbridge

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A model for Da Corte's recent sculpture "As Long as the Sun Lasts" (2021), installed on the rooftop of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. The work is a mash-up of Alexander Calder and Jim Henson. Jeffrey Stockbridge



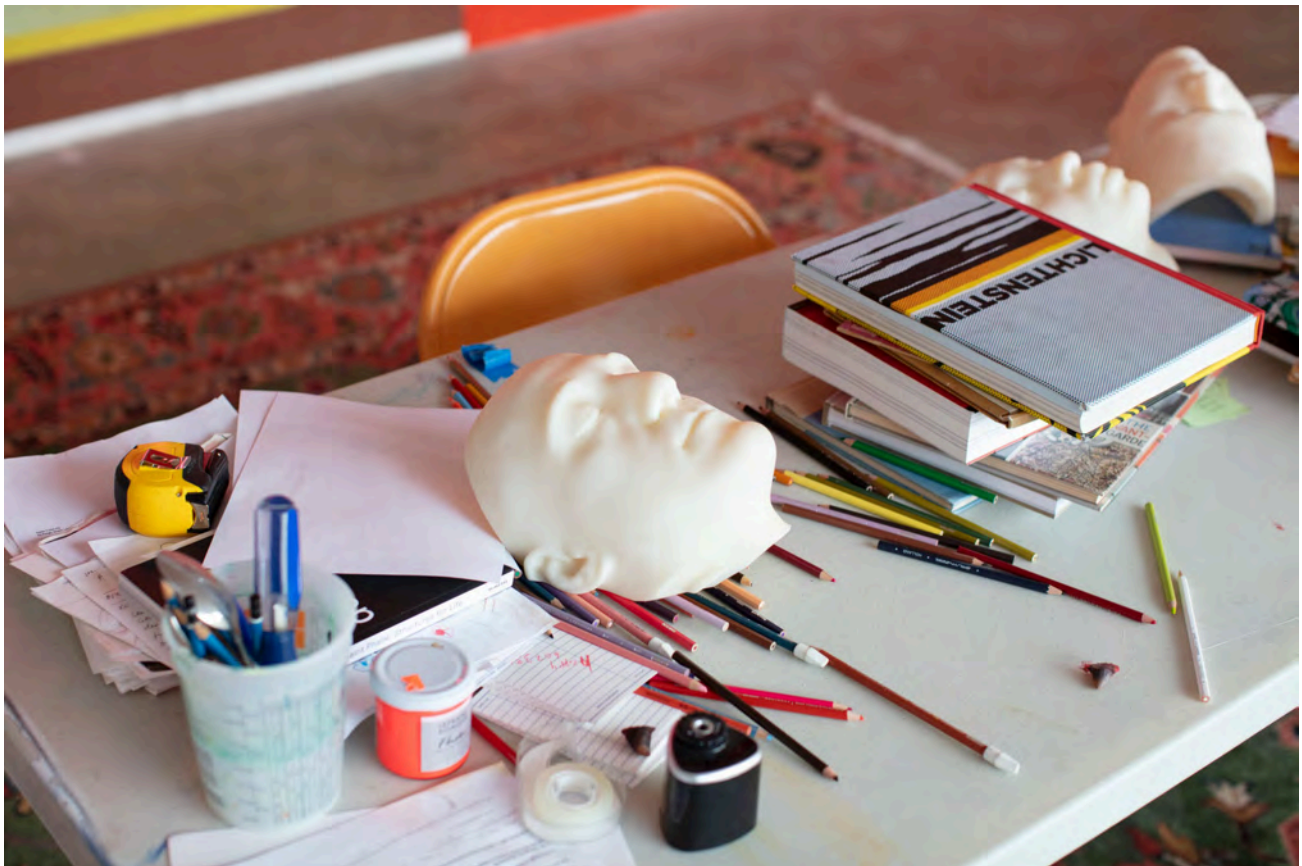
Da Corte's plans for "As Long as the Sun Lasts," which prominently features Big Bird. Jeffrey Stockbridge

who is seated on a crescent moon holding a short ladder (a fond wink at childhood). "I wanted the work to be hopeful or look forward, look beyond that exquisite pain," he said.

At 40, Da Corte is a prominent artist of his generation. He is representative in how he mines and recombines the ubiquitous imagery of contemporary life but, in many ways, his career path has been exceptional. For one thing, despite earning his M.F.A. at Yale in 2010, he maintained his roots in his native ground of Philadelphia, working as a painter's assistant and placing work in group shows there before skyrocketing. In 2012, he had exhibitions in New York, Paris, Dublin and Palma de Mallorca, Spain. "It's exciting that he can live in Philadelphia and be seen all over the world," said Sid Sachs, the director of exhibitions and chief curator at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia. "I'm just amazed by him. It's a different model of an artist. At one time, you got into a gallery like Castelli or Paula Cooper and they guided your career. But Alex just bops around from gallery to gallery." And he does it without presenting an identifiable, branded persona as an artist-celebrity. Indeed, it is fitting that one of his favorite characters to impersonate is the Wicked Witch of the West, played by Margaret Hamilton in "The Wizard of Oz," because Da Corte himself bears comparison to the Wizard, hiding behind a curtain, exposing himself only in multiple disguises.

Having seen him only in his video incarnations, I felt a little like Dorothy encountering this tall, thin, dark-haired unassuming fellow with a soft, low-pitched voice and a shy, courteous demeanor — because, like the Wizard, his reputation is not as modest as his persona. “He’s one of the best working today,” said Jamillah James, the senior curator of the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, who has known him since 2008. “He’s maturing as an artist, refining his visual language, providing some alternatives to the horror of today with work that has some lightness to it.”

The unrelenting lightness puzzled me when I tried to understand how Da Corte relates to the older artists he admires. Unlike the abject, scary or kinky stuffed animals of Mike Kelley, which are so smeared and grubby that you would hesitate to touch them, his puppets are endearingly cute and cuddle-worthy. His neon figurative artworks inevitably bring to mind those of Bruce Nauman, whose blinking neon pieces of 1985 transformed clowns into aggressively sexual beings brandishing hefty penises; Da Corte, in three neon creations currently on display at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, performs a reverse alchemy, muting scenes of violence and disaster — a burning house, a pistol, a trapped cat — into tranquil, formally beautiful designs. And in contrast to Paul McCarthy, who dirties the Disneyfied purity of Snow White and plunges her into orgies of sexual perversion, Da Corte’s fantasies unfold in a thoroughly G-rated domain. More than these artists whom he takes after stylistically, Da Corte reminds me of Takashi Murakami and his protégés in the production company Kaikai Kiki — taking nightmares (for Murakami, most notably, the atomic bombing of Japan) and flattening them into cheerful, post-ironic cartoon imagery.



One of Da Corte's masks. Jeffrey Stockbridge

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Ladders are something of a recurring theme in Da Corte's work, inspired by his love of Buster Keaton, as well as his cousins' work as house painters. Jeffrey Stockbridge

In the videos that constitute the major portion of his output, Da Corte often takes a malignant character and, through impersonation, drains out the venom and replaces it with more sympathetic humors. Michael Myers, the white-masked slasher of the “Halloween” movies, was his first such venture. More recently, in gallery shows and videos, he has embodied Eminem, inspired originally by a friend’s mistaking a photograph of the macho rapper, famous for his rage, with mild-mannered Alex, whom he somewhat resembles. Da Corte dyed his hair blond and put on an oversize white T-shirt, assuming the persona. “When I was growing up, he was celebrated, and I thought, “That person is not for me, he scares me,” Da Corte said. “Being Hispanic and gay, I thought his language seemed threatening. I wondered about the realm of people who loved his work and the violence, and what that’s about. If you embody his skin, do you become just as angry, just as white, just as straight, or is it the other way around?” He continued, “I think it’s about trying to find forgiveness.”

Born in Camden, N.J., Da Corte is the son of an upper-middle-class Venezuelan father and a white mother from a working-class family in the Philadelphia suburbs. When he was 4, the family moved back to Caracas, where his paternal grandfather owned grocery stores, but they returned to the United States when Da Corte was 8, where his father took a job in finance. The artist is no longer fluent in Spanish. “I’ll look at old videos and I’m speaking Spanish, and it’s like another person,” he said. Of course, he is accustomed to seeing himself in videos as another person.

He spent his later childhood and adolescence in Gloucester City, N.J., a blue-collar town near

Philadelphia. “I grew up Catholic, and studied so much of that way of understanding the world,” he said. “It is through transformation of materials and a kind of body as offering or object. I think of the Lives of the Saints — plates with eyeballs on them. So much of the iconography or interest in dismembered bodies seeps into the work.” A carefully edited self-presentation is second nature to him. “There is that code-switching that any person who has been marginalized knows, so you don’t get bullied,” he said. “You long to fit in if you’re someone who’s been bullied. You recognize when you’re wearing a pink bandanna or a purple bandanna or a backward cap or an untucked shirt, that means something.”

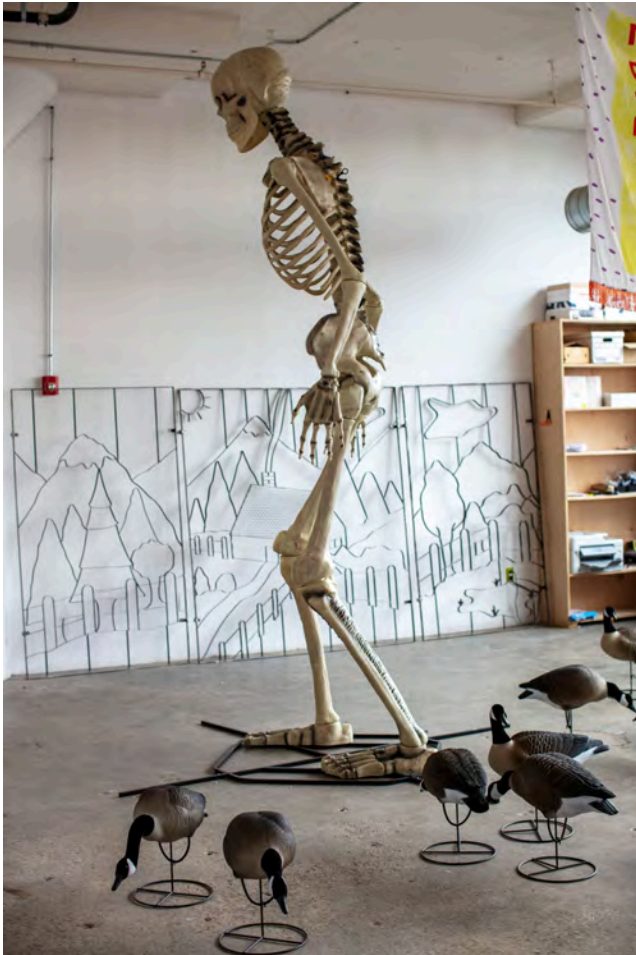
With an earnest affability, Da Corte gives the impression of a man who is keeping his emotions under tight control. He is very private. When I asked him the unavoidable follow-up question — “Were you bullied as a child?” — his eyes misted over. “I don’t want to talk about that,” he said. Sachs has known Da Corte since he transferred to the University of the Arts two decades ago, following his frustrating studies in animation at the School of Visual Arts in New York. “I’ve been to his studio, I’ve had meals with him, but I don’t know his personal life,” Sachs said. “He’s like a poker player. I don’t think he reveals himself.”

Da Corte says he is closest to his large family, which on his mother’s side includes many house painters and carpenters. “I’ve always used my family as the audience I want for my work,” he said. “It’s a way of connecting with them and talking about difficult ideas. I’ve always wanted the work to appeal to so many people, and not to alienate.” He appropriates elements of high and low

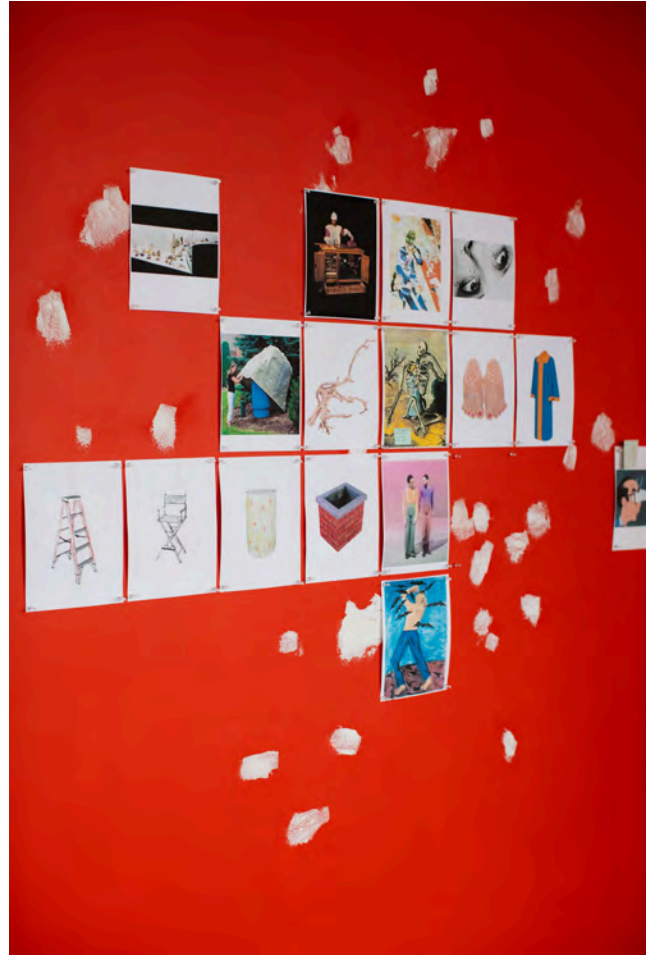


Of the work that goes on in the studio, Da Corte said, “We’re never not making Muppets.” Jeffrey Stockbridge

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A 12-foot-tall skeleton, which will be included in a future video. Jeffrey Stockbridge



Some inspiration on a wall of the studio. Jeffrey Stockbridge

culture with equal affection. “With Alex, it is about the confirmation of the object through personal associations and attachment,” said Shanay Jhaveri, an assistant curator of international art at the Met, who worked with him closely on “As Long as the Sun Lasts.” “That’s where the feeling in the work comes from. It’s an appropriation that comes out of attachment.”

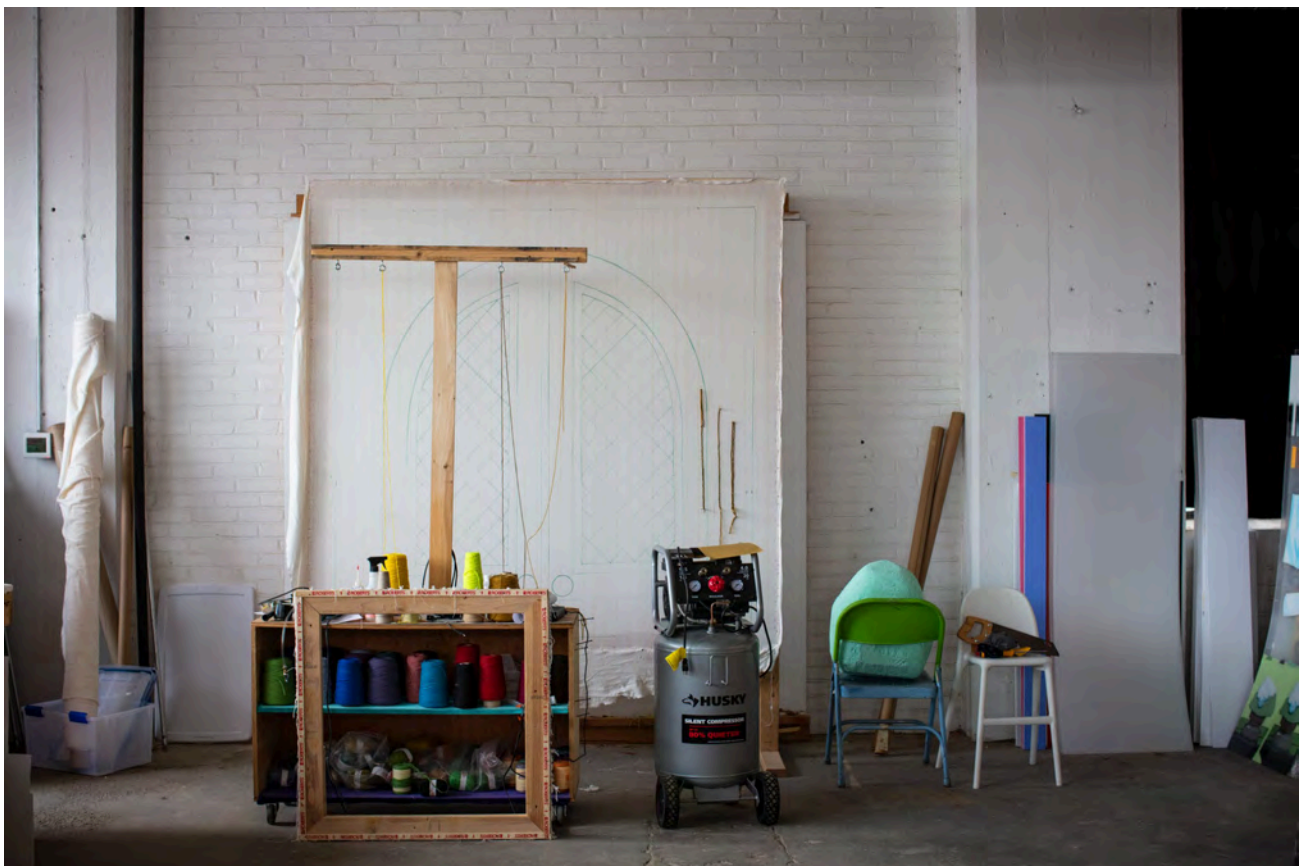
To my mind, his art is strongest when some pain seeps through and the wound is visible beneath the Band-Aid. His earliest video, “Carry That Weight” (2003), named for the Beatles song, shows him lurching down a city street, clutching a soft sculpture of a ketchup bottle that is as tall as he is. While it alludes specifically to a 1966 photograph of Claes Oldenburg struggling with a giant toothpaste tube in London, the work also unmistakably evokes Jesus carrying the weight of the cross. Staggering under his burden, Da Corte is funny and touching at the same time.

In “Slow Graffiti” (2017), a weird, campy and poignant video, he recreated shot by shot Jorgen Leth’s short film “The Perfect Human” of 50 years before, a Danish mock-documentary that examines an elegant man and woman through the lens of a narrator with the dispassionate tone of a zoologist. “Slow Graffiti” replaces the heterosexual couple with a tortured Boris Karloff and the lonely Frankenstein’s monster he embodied, both played by Alex. His frame-by-frame reconstruction is comparable to the painstaking efforts of old-school animators. “You’re looking

into the hours it took, the labor to make it and the labor of looking,” he said. “And you’re looking into your own heart. There’s a kind of joy in it.” A similar transubstantiation takes place when he impersonates Eminem, Jim Henson or the Wicked Witch of the West. “Dressing up as Eminem is the cartoon stand-in for him, or it’s a cartoon stand-in for Jim Henson,” he said. “It’s different from acting. It’s more like a visual replication of the person. That yields a difference in one’s own self, the way you literally move in the world.” He explained: “It’s like walking in someone else’s high heels. It makes for new ways of seeing the world and understanding the world.”

Along with “Free Roses,” a massive remix of his work that was staged in 2016 at Mass MoCA, Da Corte’s most ambitious project to date was his installation at the 2018 Carnegie International in Pittsburgh. Characteristically, he riffed on two beloved icons associated with that city: Fred Rogers, who lived very near the grounds of the exhibition’s setting at the Carnegie Museum of Art, and Heinz ketchup. Through happy coincidence, it was the 57th Carnegie International, encouraging Da Corte to exploit the Heinz slogan, “57 Varieties,” and produce a video over two and a half hours long, “Rubber Pencil Devil,” that contains 57 segments.

Contrasting in length and tone, some of the 57 episodes are saccharine, such as an interminable impersonation of Mister Rogers changing back and forth between dress shoes and navy blue sneakers. But others are edgier: Da Corte as a devilish weatherman, gleefully slapping fire symbols across a map of the United States or dancing orgiastically with a serpentlike yellow pencil; Da Corte



The studio includes a fiber area, stocked with cloth and yarn. Jeffrey Stockbridge

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Much of Da Corte's work makes use of vibrant color. Jeffrey Stockbridge

as a ballet dancer in a Robin Hood outfit, sniffing and licking the shoe of his dance partner; a pretty, smiling blond woman emasculating the antenna of a telephone with a large knife; the eye of a corpse with a happy face on its iris; and, most memorably, Da Corte cavorting as Gene Kelly in “Singin’ in the Rain” to the tune of Dolly Parton crooning “I can see the light of a clear blue morning” while the rain keeps pouring down and, finally, after a pratfall, he lies motionless on the ground.

For the Carnegie International, Da Corte used saturated lime greens, pinks and purples to construct a neon-lit version of the Mister Rogers set, which visitors entered through a large mouse hole in a sealed-up wall, reminiscent of the peephole viewing point of Marcel Duchamp’s scabrous “Étant Donnés” (1946-66), a treasure of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. He blends in high-art references discreetly. And if you don’t pick up on the loftier allusions (for example, the wings of a butterfly in one video segment are patterned after a Frank Stella protractor painting), what you don’t know won’t bother you. “In one video, there’s Sylvester the Cat and in another, the Irish artist Michael Craig-Martin is referenced,” said Ingrid Schaffner, who curated that year’s Carnegie International. Now the curator at the Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas, Schaffner for many years worked at the University of Pennsylvania’s Institute of Contemporary Art, where she championed Da Corte’s work. “For me, Alex’s multiplicity of references is part of network culture, the way we’re a culture of image readers,” she said. “I don’t find much irony in Alex’s work. He genuinely loves the things that he loves, and he wants you to love them, too.” As Sachs observes: “He’s not a minimalist. He’s the exact opposite. He’s layering stuff. He’s always looking for connections.”

Walking me through the studio, Da Corte pointed out the motley group of things that, for various reasons, appealed to him. A “fiber area,” stocked with cloth and yarn, was the birthing place for puppets. “We’re never not making Muppets,” he said. “Something about the simplicity of their initial structures has stood the test of time.” Elsewhere there was a toy ladder, like the one in the Met rooftop sculpture. He related his fascination with ladders to his love of early Buster Keaton movies, and to his cousins’ labor as house painters. A bulletin board held many images he’d clipped from periodicals or plucked from the internet. A marathon runner in a green rotary telephone costume was a particular favorite; Da Corte was pondering how he might use that idea. Some of the props needed a space this large to house them: a small gaggle of goose decoys, for example. “I like the velvet of them, the way they’re flocked,” he said. He plans to incorporate a 12-foot-tall fake human skeleton into a video, in which, dressed in vestments, he will be enclosed in the rib cage.

Taking up part of one wall was a large metal window grate composed of stylized bucolic scenes. It is a reproduction of one that guards a Mexican restaurant near his home that he liked so much he had it replicated. “I was thinking about protecting yourself from the outside with these seemingly peaceful views of nature, and thinking about walls and who is allowed in and who isn’t,” he said.

His art functions like the screen: formally beautiful constructions that shield you from the terrors and horrors of the world, occasionally letting a few through. “I wonder if it’s a kind of reconciling



A few of Da Corte's props. Jeffrey Stockbridge

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A kind of mood board that includes cartoon characters, pop culture figures and general strangeness.

Jeffrey Stockbridge

of actual fear and actual violence, and trying to distance myself from it and see it more clearly and objectively,” he said. “What does a house on fire look like as a form, and less like a house where one actually loses everything? No one likes a house on fire, but how can we think about it without emotion — because it exists in the world.” His soothing art is also self-soothing.

Da Corte’s own metaphor for how he processes pain sounds more Catholic: a taking on of what is troubling or downright evil in the world, soaking it up and releasing it in a distilled, nontoxic form. He is less a screen than a sponge. “The sponge has the capacity to take in, until it doesn’t, and then it lets go,” he explained. “There’s a balance. If I see something or something happens in my life that’s unsavory, there’s a desire to run away. But if you can absorb it and turn it into something good, that’s like a sponge.”

He is an enthusiastic audience for popular music, horror movies, art history, animation traditions and much, much more. In his art, he pays tribute to the efforts of those who inspire him by reproducing, sampling, hybridizing and embellishing their creations. “I think these works have so much emotion in them and so much care and, like, magic,” he said. “Maybe that’s part of realizing these things and making them exist in the world. It is because you want to spend time with the things you love or value, or that scare you. To know them better. To appreciate them.”

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The New York Times

CRITIC'S PICK

On the Met's Roof, a Wistful Fantasy We've Been Waiting For

By Will Heinrich

April 15, 2021 Updated 11:28 a.m. ET

The other day I saw a giant bird perching on a sliver of crescent moon. It was clutching a comically short ladder, and the whole scene — an installation by the conceptual artist and designer of immersive environments Alex Da Corte — was on the roof of the Metropolitan Museum, tucked into a corner of one of New York City's most spectacular patios.

The piece instantly brought me back to my favorite Italo Calvino short story, “The Distance of the Moon,” about the good old days when Earth and its moon were almost close enough to kiss. Rowing out to the point of closest approach, the narrator and his friends would erect a ladder and leap across to the lunar surface, where they frolicked and gathered cheese.

For his 2021 Roof Garden Commission, which opens Friday, Da Corte taps into a similar vein of straight-faced irony. The bird in “As Long as the Sun Lasts” — its title is borrowed from another Calvino story — is a full-size,



“As Long as the Sun Lasts,” Alex Da Corte’s 26-foot-tall installation for the Cantor Roof Garden of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, features a full-size, custom-made, blue but otherwise true-to-life Big Bird. Caroline Tompkins for The New York Times

Heinrich, Will. “On the Met’s Roof, a Wistful Fantasy We’ve Been Waiting For.” *The New York Times*, April 15, 2021.

custom-made, blue but otherwise unmistakable Big Bird, the beloved Sesame Street denizen. Gazing wistfully over the oligarch aeries south of Central Park, it looks torn, unsure whether to climb back down to earth or fly away forever.

Fabricated from stainless steel and covered with 7,000 hand-placed aluminum feathers, the Bird swings gently from one end of a long pole fixed 20-odd feet off the floor. (Its ladder is definitely too short.) Attached to the pole's other end are five brightly colored metal discs, a nod to Alexander Calder's floating mobiles, or at least to their mass-market nursery knockoffs. The installation's base, three interlocking stainless-steel blocks with rounded corners, like modular plastic, are also painted Calder Red.

The Met Roof Commission isn't easy to pull off. The artist competes not only with the breathtaking vista of Central Park, framed by a forest of Manhattan luxury towers, but also with the aura of the treasure house downstairs. Whatever the artist chooses to mount will promptly be Instagrammed to death in an endless summer bacchanal of selfies. So a winsome surefire crowd-pleaser like this, which turns gentle circles without ever getting anywhere, may simply be Da Corte's satirical, if not especially biting, response to the assignment: Why *try* to get somewhere? Why not just give people what they want?

But that wouldn't account for its undercurrent of melancholy, the pathos of an innocent creature in the grips of a big decision. Da Corte has spent his artistic career being other people — dressing up



The installation's base is marked with a mashup of Calder's and Da Corte's signatures.
Alex Da Corte and Metropolitan Museum of Art; Hyla Skopitz



The Bird is covered with roughly 7,000 individually placed laser-cut aluminum feathers.
Metropolitan Museum of Art; Hyla Skopitz



Gazing wistfully over the forest of luxury towers, Big Bird “looks torn, unsure whether to climb back down to earth or fly away forever.” Metropolitan Museum of Art; Anna-Marie Kellen

as the rapper Eminem, even adapting Alexander Calder’s signature on this sculpture’s base — and constructing elaborate installations that give you the sense of having wandered into some other world, brightly colored but eerily unrooted.

(The museum received informal permission for the project from the Calder Foundation and Sesame Street.)

Born in New Jersey, he spent his early childhood in Venezuela, where he watched a Brazilian version of “Sesame Street” called “Vila Sésamo.” That show’s Big Bird equivalent, Garibaldo, is blue. But the characters don’t much resemble each other — if you can overlook their both being anthropomorphic birds — and this Bird’s blue isn’t even the same as Garibaldo’s. What this Bird’s tint really evokes, whether or not you’ve ever seen Garibaldo, is a confused memory, or “jamais vu” — déjà vu’s opposite, the feeling that something familiar is suddenly strange.

Jamais vu must have been the artist’s experience of moving to the United States as an 8-year-old. It’s certainly been unrelenting for everyone this past year, as ordinary life became suddenly impossible and bizarre new habits — wiping down groceries, wearing a mask, or two — cycled in and out of practice. I suspect that most visitors at the Cantor Roof Garden will be asking themselves whether this is really what the place was like *before* the pandemic. (The answer is, not exactly: There used to be a roof garden bar.)



Clutching a comically short ladder, the Bird swings gently from one end of a long pole fixed some 20 feet off the floor. “When the breeze started up and Big Bird began to swing, it was surprisingly thrilling,” our critic says. Caroline Tompkins for The New York Times

A blue Big Bird also brings to mind a disturbing scene in the 1985 children’s movie “Follow That Bird,” starring Sesame Street characters and puppets. Having captured, caged, and painted him the color of melancholy, two carnival grifters force Big Bird to perform a song called “I’m So Blue” — and then rake in the cash. As a metaphor for the artist’s relationship to institutions — with Da Corte, for example, as the sunshiny innocent, and the Met as his captor — the reference would be too easy. But as a picture of the childish innocence that we all learn to keep captive and subject to the crass demands of adult life, it’s kind of heartbreaking.



Attached to the pole's other end are five brightly colored metal discs, a nod to Calder's floating mobiles. Caroline Tompkins for The New York Times

Everything about the piece — from the character itself to the graphic shapes and colors of the Calder-like mobile and the preschool play-set base — signifies whimsy. But recognizing whimsy, as a viewer, isn't the same as feeling whimsical. In fact, it can sometimes feel like the opposite, a regret-saturated reminder that our days of whimsy are behind us. We have bills to pay, products to sell, wars to wage, statements to make, reviews to write. It isn't our fault we can no longer reach the moon. Our ladders are simply too short.

The truth is that "As Long as the Sun Lasts" appealed to me in a visceral way I felt obliged to be suspicious of. Seeing a well-known children's character in a space still dedicated to old-fashioned ideas of high culture made me feel as if someone was getting away with something. But when the breeze started up and Big Bird began to swing, it was surprisingly thrilling. I wanted a ride, myself. I even reached up to touch Big Bird's foot. It was a few inches out of reach.

The New York Times

THE NEW YORK TIMES, SUNDAY, APRIL 4, 2021

AR 13

Art

Taking Big Bird to New Heights

Alex Da Corte will showcase the 'Sesame Street' character, perched on top of the Met.

By TESS THACKARA

PHILADELPHIA — Among the characters that the artist Alex Da Corte has transformed himself into for his video work and installations are Eminem, Mister Rogers and the Wicked Witch of the West. In his Technicolor universe, American cultural icons share screen time with mascots from famous commercials, and even slasher-movie psychopaths are lovingly brought to life, with hours of prosthetics and tender, surgical-like observation. It's a big-tent worldview that he shares, curiously, with "Sesame Street," in which monsters, kids and grouches coexist — and in which he has discovered the subject for his latest artwork.

Jim Henson and the Muppets have been an obsession of Da Corte's for a long time. During the pandemic, though, it is Big Bird, an 8-foot-2 model of



PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRISTOPHER LEAMAN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

The artist Alex Da Corte in his studio in Philadelphia with the assistants Andrew Smith, left, and Carolyn Anello, amid feather samples, color swatches and a prototype of Da Corte's version of Big Bird that will be installed on the roof of the Met.

empathy and earnestness, that has been on his mind. When I found Da Corte, 40, in his Philadelphia studio, he was preparing to give Big Bird perhaps the most elevated stage of its five-decade journey through the American imagination —

A beloved character's feathers turned blue.

the roof of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. (While Big Bird traditionally takes the male pronoun, Da Corte prefers not to impose a gender.) On April 16, Big Bird will ascend to the top of the Met in the form of a sculpture. Titled "As Long as the Sun Lasts," Da Corte's rooftop commission takes its name from Italo Calvino's short story about intergalactic travelers who search for a planetary home as the Sun is first forming in our galaxy.

Da Corte has approached his subject from a similarly existential perspective. On the walls of his studio, a patchwork of

3D-modeled studies and drawings of Big Bird's head show months of deep research into the character's form and essence: the density and directional flow of its plumage, melancholy eyes and long, conical beak that opens into a goofy pink smile. "How do you replicate that softness in a material that is not soft?" Da Corte asked, brushing a long yellow feather pinned to the wall. And how do you capture its weight, I asked, meaning Big Bird's cushiony, pear-shaped mass. "And the cultural gravity," the artist responded.

Gravity is an unlikely word in connection to an oversized Muppet, but in Da Corte's company it's easy to feel moved by the vision of diversity and community that Big Bird and "Sesame Street" represent — especially now. The show recently added two Black Mup-

pets to its multiracial cast, and last year Big Bird and Elmo hosted town halls with CNN to help American families talk about racism and identity. But empathy and the celebration of difference — and the hard work those values demand — have been the show's message all along, with Big Bird serving as perhaps its most openhearted voice.

"When I think of Carol Spinney," Da Corte said, referring to the actor who brought



Big Bird to life for decades, "I think what a selfless labor of love — how beautiful. To do that all of your life. It's difficult to run around with these young people and ask questions and educate them. That brings me hope. That's something I want to be a part of."

Da Corte's Big Bird will be as you know it, but with a twist. The metal and fiberglass bird will appear perched on a crescent moon, like Donna Summer on the cover of her album "Four Seasons of Love" (1976), and suspended on a Calder-inspired mo-



bile that sways and rotates in response to air currents. And Big Bird is not yellow, but blue — a reference to the show's Brazilian version, "Vila Sésamo," which Da Corte watched in Venezuela; this Latin American big bird is blue and called Garibaldo. (Da Corte, born in Camden, N.J., lived in Venezuela until he was 8.)

It's also a homage to "Sesame Street Presents: Follow That Bird," the 1985 film in which Big Bird is coerced by social workers into leaving Sesame Street to live with a suburban family of Dodo birds in Illinois — "his own kind." Having nothing in common with the conventional Dodos except feathers, Big Bird flees back to New York, is kidnapped by traveling circus owners, painted blue, caged and forced to sing a sad song for cash.



“Right now Big Bird is coming across the country in this box, and it’s killing me because it’s so poetic,” Da Corte said. His studio worked with a fabricator in California, making micro adjustments to the bird’s form and detail in video calls and through mailed ephemera — feather samples, “troll blue” color swatches. The sculpture is making the journey to New York from California in the back of a truck. When it arrives on the Met rooftop, it will, figuratively speaking, be set free. Da Corte has placed a ladder in Big Bird’s hands, suggesting the opportunity for transcendence or escape. “We wanted Big Bird to have agency,” Da Corte says. “Will Big Bird stay or go?”

If Da Corte is paying homage to “Sesame Street,” he’s also views it through a critical lens. The Wicked Witch of the West, for instance, has a special place in the Sesame Street pantheon: She was excluded from it. When the actress Margaret Hamilton appeared in an episode as the witch, her character in the “Wizard of Oz,” it drew such vitriol from angry parents, afraid that the show would scare children and promote Wiccan ideas, that the episode aired just once before being taken out of circulation. So Da Corte, who reprised his role as the witch for this New York Times photo shoot, reimagined her cameo alongside Oscar the Grouch in his video “Rubber Pencil Devil,” a series of vignettes and tableaux featured in the 2019 Venice Biennale. The witch, a queer archetype and protector of queer spaces, according to the artist, is also “misunderstood — and she’s got something to say,” he added. “I appreciate her.”

Da Corte’s wide embrace of difference — and interest in dissonant juxtapositions — is matched by his almost feverish use of art historical references and touchstones. As he studied the Met’s catalog in preparation for “As Long as the Sun Lasts,” he gravitated toward the unicorn trapped by a low fence in the museum’s medieval Uni-

corn Tapestries — it evoked Big Bird, trapped behind bars in “Follow That Bird.” And toward Paul Klee’s painting “Miraculous Landing,” containing an ark and a ladder.

Da Corte said he thought about horizon lines in Caspar David Friedrich’s “Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog” (around 1818), in which a romantic figure gazes out over the sublime; and Marisol’s “Self-Portrait Looking at the Last Supper” (1982-84), in which the artist placed a sculpture of herself in front of the biblical scene, like she is “looking at ecstasy,” he said.

In Da Corte’s piece, Big Bird is gazing out to the skies over Central Park, its eyes softly, inquisitively meeting a new frontier, whatever it might hold. The work is dedicated to Da Corte’s father, who came to America from Venezuela as an outsider, an immigrant, to find a new home. “There’s something beautiful about wondering what Big Bird is looking for,” Da Corte said. “Maybe the sunset.”

The various elements of the piece took shape during the height of the lockdown, and Da Corte’s experience of that is baked into this project’s DNA. He sees the work as embodying the transitional state that our culture finds itself in at the tail end of a year-long global shock wave that promises to transform us in ways we can’t yet see. “Developing this project throughout the pandemic has been so intense, because you’re thinking of the state of the world and how heavy it is,” he said, “and how do you even exist outside of yourself to look thoughtfully at what’s happening in the moment?”

Could Big Bird offer us some deliverance — some passage to stable ground? “There’s nothing miraculous about this and there is no landing,” Da Corte said, invoking the title of the Klee painting he was drawn to. “It’s just onward. There’s much labor. There’s much thought. There’s work to be done as long as the sun lasts.”

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THE NEW YORKER

*In an effort to slow the spread of the coronavirus, many New York City venues are closed.
Here's a selection of culture to be found around town, as well as online and streaming.*

MAY 5 – 11, 2021

GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



Allusions to Alexander Calder, Big Bird, and lunar landings converge on the roof of the Met, through Oct. 31, in “**As Long as the Sun Lasts**,” a new sculpture by Alex Da Corte (above, disguised as Jim Henson). An inscription on the base of the piece reads “1969”—but Da Corte made it during the past year. The American artist explains the anachronism in poetic terms: “I wanted to hearken back to the year Jim Henson brought the Muppets to Sesame Street, humans met the moon, and we took steps to a more equitable future.”

PHOTOGRAPH BY BUBI CANAL

“Goings On About Town.” *The New Yorker*, May 10, 2021, p. 4.

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Madsen, Kristian Vistrup. "Eggs in Moonshine." *Frieze*, no. 218, April 2021, cover, pp. 16–17.



Eggs in Moonshine

'SINCE YOU'RE IN THE WORLD now and not in art, play the game by real rules.' So stated Allan Kaprow in his 1966 lecture 'How to Make a Happening', describing the governing logic by which, in his 1962 performance *Chicken*, a live bird was vacuumed on stage at the Gershman Y hall at Philadelphia's University of the Arts, among other antics. Chickens are killed every day, and it was the early 1960s: no reason to be naive about it.

In March 2020, on the cusp of the pandemic, there were no real chickens when Alex Da Corte presented a reinvented version of Kaprow's original performance in the same room at the Gershman Y. Instead, the title role was given over to none other than the moon. 'Come breath it in!' screamed a performer, in circus-like fashion, beating a yolk-yellow toilet brush at the audience. 'Doesn't it make you feel shiny? Doesn't it make you feel bright? My oh my, isn't it great to be WHITE?!' The space was set up like a county fair, where the moon was advertised as the solution to just about anything. One moon purveyor promised that it can make us clean. What about virtuous? Woke? Another vendor reminded the audience that, since humans are '80 percent water, so the moon controls 80 percent of

your life.' It is also the key to curing your ills: 'You're broke? Moon! Bad at sex? Moon! [...] Look at the science!' Each sold some version of a pie in the sky or eggs in moonshine, alleging that you might grasp the ungraspable or, as one of them claimed, 'fold up the sky and put it in your pocket'.

In Da Corte's *Chicken*, the moon is a lot like art in that it can be anything the person on the podium says it is. It made me think that Kaprow's idea of life as art actually did come true but that, rather than art moving out of the frame and into reality, life, politics and the rest entered art. So, let's turn his adage around: since the world has lost touch with reality, play the game by art's rules. To this end, Da Corte appeared in full drag as Kaprow and had decked the space in his usual high-gloss, uber-pop, hyper-real style. If, in Kaprow's work, the artist was in a special position to strip existence of its sheen for the audience to experience more acutely, here he is as immersed in lunacy as the next person. 'Do you want unending joy?' – a performer deliriously cried, spinning a yellow wheel of fortune – 'Do you want a better life?' From the audience, Da Corte-as-Kaprow shrieked as if from the depths of his soul: 'I NEED IT!' ●

Alex Da Corte, *Chicken*, 2020, re-enactment of Allan Kaprow, *Chicken*, 1962. Courtesy: © Alex Da Corte and Matthew Marks Gallery, New York

Kristian Vistrup Madsen is a writer and the recipient of the 2020 Büro BDP Writing Prize. A collection of his essays, *Doing Time* (2021), is published by Floating Opera Press. He lives in Berlin, Germany.

Alex Da Corte is an artist. *As Long as the Sun Lasts*, his Roof Garden Commission for the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA, is on view from 16 April to 31 October.

The New York Times

Alex Da Corte Selected To Enliven the Met's Roof

The artist said he spent months during the pandemic contemplating his installation.

By ROBIN POGREBIN

The Philadelphia-based conceptual artist Alex Da Corte, known for his immersive, tactile installations, has been selected for the Metropolitan Museum of Art's roof garden commission, the Met announced on Thursday.

The artist — who in addition to installation works in film, performance, painting and sculpture — said he had spent the pandemic mulling over the Met project. “What a crazy time to be thinking about artwork at all,” Da Corte (pronounced da-KOR-ta) said in a telephone interview.

The artwork, “As Long as the Sun Lasts,” he said, “has a lot of my heartstrings in it.” It will be on view from April 16 through Oct. 31.

Da Corte, 40, said the project had forced him to think about how to bring the softness of his usual materials — like velvet and the synthetic rubber neoprene — to the rooftop installation's hard surfaces.

His Met work will be made of plastic, stainless steel and aluminum, and Da Corte said he would use his usual riot of color with spray paint or enamel. No other details have been released.

“Alex Da Corte has created a new type of monument in this commission,” Sheena Wagstaff, the Met's chairman of Modern and contemporary art, said in a statement. “In a play of opposites that is spirited, absurd and deadly serious, modern culture is reconfigured into unexpected orbit, evoking a utopian possibility of innocence and play in the face of these times of melancholic collapse.”



ALEX JOHN BECK

Born in Camden, N.J., Da Corte trained as an animator at the School of Visual Arts in New York, then received a bachelor of fine arts in printmaking from the University of the Arts in Philadelphia and a master of fine arts from Yale. His work was in the 2019 Venice Biennale and the 2018 Carnegie International in Pittsburgh.

His solo exhibitions have been at the Prada Rong Zhai (2020), the Kölischer Kunstverein in Cologne (2018), the Secession in Vienna (2017) and Mass MoCA in North Adams, Mass. (2016).

As to how he will manage to make the Met's outdoor space more immersive, Da Corte said the site would take care of that for him. “When you're on the roof,” he said, “you're in the hands of the skyline and the sky.”

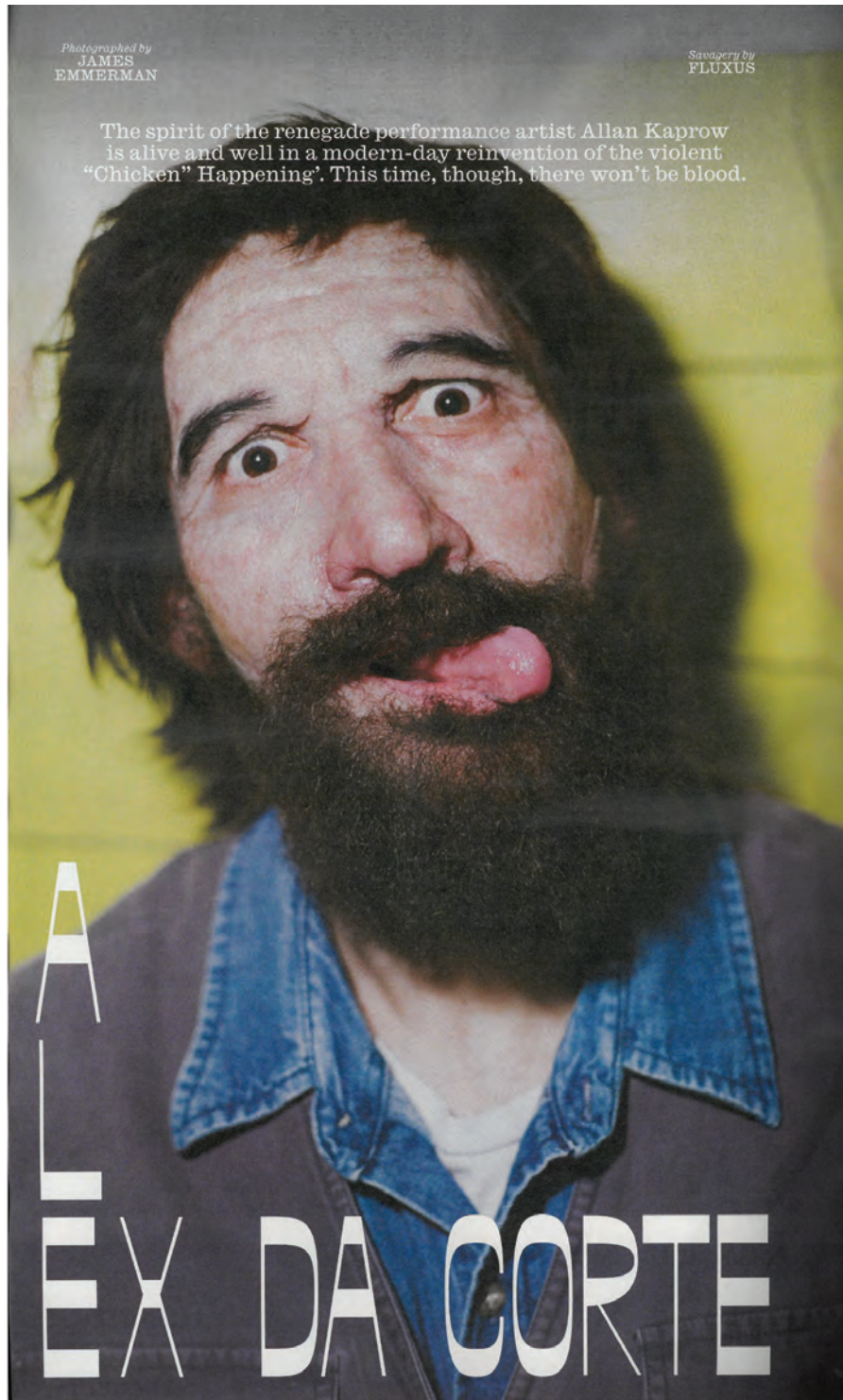
Alex Da Corte's “As Long as the Sun Lasts” will be on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's roof from April 16 to Oct. 31.

‘What a crazy time to be thinking about artwork at all.’

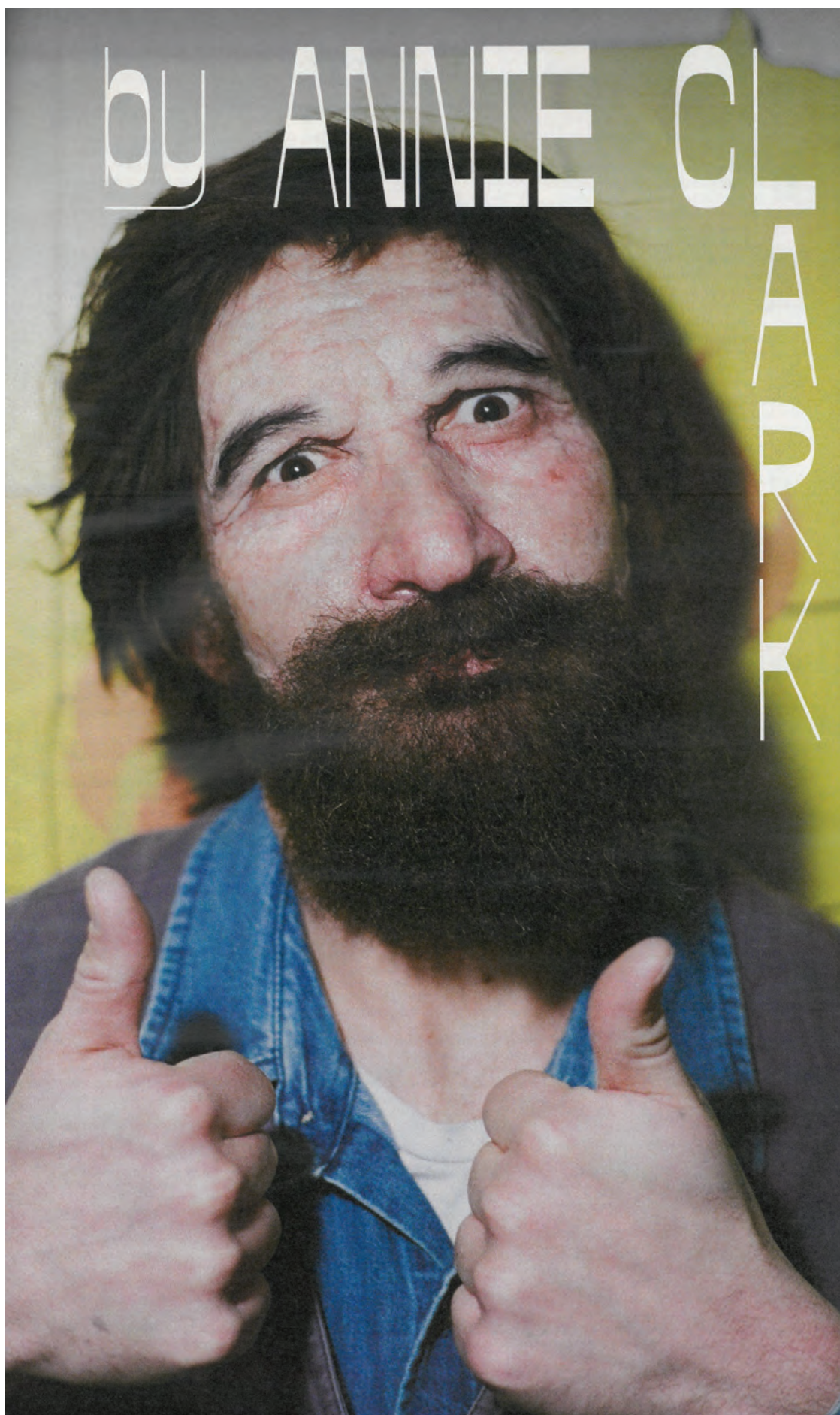
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Interview



Clark, Annie, and Alex Da Corte. "Alex Da Corte." *Interview*, no. 530, March 2020, pp. 174–81.



Clark, Annie, and Alex Da Corte. "Alex Da Corte." *Interview*, no. 530, March 2020, pp. 174–81.

ALEX DA CORTE

This isn't what Alex Da Corte normally looks like. No, this is what Alex Da Corte looks like after eight hours in hair and makeup, after the addition of a prosthetic nose, lips, forehead, cheeks, eyes, and beard, all of which serve to transform the 39-year-old, Philadelphia-based artist into Allan Kaprow, a 1960s art Happening pioneer who died in 2006. In Da Corte's roving, acid-surrealistic, hyper-pop career, he has taken on a diverse range of identities—dressing up in his videos as everyone from Eminem to Mr. Rogers, from the Wicked Witch of the West to Pink Panther. But Kaprow, an iconoclast known for expanding the democracy of arts by inventing the notion of a free, communal, improvisatory art form erupting in the public domain, is a challenging project all its own.

A few years back, Da Corte was approached by a curator with the idea of "reinventing" a particular Happening that took place in Philadelphia during what is largely believed to have been the first East Coast exhibition of Pop Art. On November 7, 1962, Kaprow raised fowl hell with his work "Chicken," which involved a group of performers in a carnivalesque environment doing all sorts of questionable activities with live and boiled chickens and their eggs; at one point, they even set fire to a nine-foot effigy. It was a provocation meant to shock the audience (and perhaps make lifelong vegetarians out of a few of them, especially considering that a live chicken was vacuumed on stage). Now, on March 5, 2020, Da Corte, disguised as Kaprow, will reinvent (not restage, not reenact, not resurrect, not recreate) this Happening for its hour-and-a-half duration in its original site at the Gershman Y at the University of the Arts. This time, instead of molesting and eviscerating live chickens, the performers will have their way with yellow orbs (made of rubber, foam, plastic, and glass) that represent the moon.

Da Corte's performance is no art-world karaoke. Rather, he has found a way to capture the spirit, rebellion, and social critique of Kaprow's per-

formance for our own place and time. And he isn't doing it alone. His collaborators include the artist and choreographer Kate Watson-Wallace, and a team of dancers, performers, writers, and costumers to bring this new incarnation of "Chicken" to life. This past January, as he was feverishly preparing for the event, he spoke to his friend Annie Clark, best known to her fans as the musician St. Vincent, about the trials and treasures of bringing this definitive, difficult performance to life in 2020.

ALEX DA CORTE: Hey, Annie. What have you been up to?

ANNIE CLARK: Well, two nights ago I played with the remaining guys from Nirvana at a charity benefit, and I was so hungover yesterday that I watched about 12 hours of the old Rod Serling episodes of *The Twilight Zone*.

DA CORTE: One forgets that so many narratives and storylines on that show were lifted by other movies. Did *The Twilight Zone* help you recover?

CLARK: You know what? It did. I know this probably sounds privileged in a lot of ways, but sometimes the only thing that will cure too much stimulation for me is when I don't leave a bed for 24 hours. I think it's born of being on tour. On off days you're so tired that you just stay in bed and watch whatever.

DA CORTE: Don't you think binge-watching is comforting? It's like how I don't mind listening to one song on repeat for 15 hours.

CLARK: I kind of know that about you. Over the years you've sent me songs that you were making work to. And it's literally one song. Or, I guess, maybe it's a whole Fiona Apple record.

DA CORTE: Definitely the whole record. But those songs and TV shows do the same thing. It's like a blanket or soup or something.

CLARK: They're deeply restorative. Great music and great films just make everything better. So what are you working on right now?

DA CORTE: It's a reinvention of a Happening that Allan Kaprow made in 1962. I've been cooking it up for a while. Are you familiar with Happenings?

CLARK: Ish.

DA CORTE: In the '50s and '60s and onwards, Kaprow was doing these sort of singular moments where art was taken to the streets, or to the public, outside of the usual capitalist structure. A lot of times his Happenings were allegorical. They were actions to spark one's way of thinking about things, in the round, off the wall. This particular one I'm reinventing was called "Chicken." It was closer to an absurdist play, an hour and a half long with a lot of props and a lot of people involved.

CLARK: How have you been working on that in a day-to-day way?

DA CORTE: I'm making all the props, kind of re-imagining how they might be impactful today versus in 1962. When it was originally performed, they used live animals. It was a slaughterhouse. So that's not happening anymore. I've thought a lot about how I could make something complicated and problematic again, what's the worth in doing that, and what kind of steps I should take to make sure that it stays contemporary.

CLARK: It really comes down, then, to trying to take something and rethink it in a new way.

**“I want to see
something
that feels like a
surprise. I want
to hear a new
sound, or see a
new something.”**

DA CORTE: Yeah, like *The Twilight Zone*. You could probably watch almost any movie or show from that time, and if it hasn't been remade already, it could provide you with some kind of inspiration for something to remake in this time, in an era of replicas.

CLARK: I'm imagining that a part of the original intent behind a Happening was provocation. In these Thought Police-y times, what kind of provocation are you able to do?

DA CORTE: This original performance—I don't even know if you'd call it performance—it was the closest to theater that I think Kaprow got. But it seemed very ad hoc. The score [the term used by Kaprow to describe his

detailed description of a particular Happening] was written ahead of time and functions in a sense to map out the action. It was very clear and rigorous and deeply democratic in that anyone could take it and do it themselves. But of course, the people who watch over his work and estate understand that these things don't always age well. They're not possible to copy. So there's celebration in reinventing it, and an awareness of using that word instead of "remake" or "re-stage." We are reinventing in order to be new now, and I like that because it gives the work a certain kind of attitude that pushes against this idea that we should be checking ourselves at all times.

CLARK: I can't think of a better person to embark on this. Your work manages to combine the absurd with the beautiful, and also has a lot of heart in it. I feel like that's really threading the needle. Very few people can pull all of that off.

DA CORTE: This project is a challenge because it's not something that I would gravitate to on my own. The curator, Sid Sachs, asked me a couple of years ago, and I agreed. I went to the school where this was performed in Philadelphia, so I know the venue and the curator is an old teacher of mine and I was just excited to try it.

CLARK: Say yes and jump in. I say yes all the time, and it's partly over that excitement you just described. You get more excitement out of saying yes to things than saying no, in my experience.

DA CORTE: That's what this curator told me. My work isn't like Kaprow's work, but it's nice water to his oil. He said that there would be conflict, but that the conflict would probably do me good or at least take me out of my comfort zone. This will be my very first live performance. Do you have any tips?

CLARK: I guess just stay excited because there's nothing like feeling, "Okay, the train is running and there's no way to get off.... Here goes." No matter what anybody throws at you, you just have to react honestly. It's a the-show-must-go-on kind of mentality.

DA CORTE: Do you remember your first performance? Maybe it was musical theater? I'm just assuming you've done musical theater.

CLARK: I'm a bit hurt you would assume that, but you are correct. [Laughs] I did musicals as a chorus



Storyboard drawings of the original Kaprow performance by Da Corte's studio fabricator Brooke Kauffman.



Clark, Annie, and Alex Da Corte. "Alex Da Corte." *Interview*, no. 530, March 2020, pp. 174–81.



ALEX DA CORTE

girl. I couldn't dance, so I was always sort of half on stage, half off, you know what I mean? You're kind of dancing behind the curtain half the time. But I definitely remember my first time playing music—getting up there with a guitar and singing. It really is the most terrifying thing. I still get scared. I think there's a distinction between musical theater people—who really want to be the center of attention—and the rest of us who really love making things but aren't necessarily the people who walk into a room and say, "Hey everybody, gather around."

DA CORTE: But you turn it on. I'm thinking of the last tour I saw of yours where it was just you on a gigantic stage. Where does your brain go at that moment?

CLARK: It goes to a place that is like, "Anything is possible. Anything could happen." It's thrilling. It's so scary every time, but it is absolutely thrilling. I can't live without it.

DA CORTE: I'll have a mask on, so that helps.

CLARK: How are you going to deal with the actual chickens in the show?

DA CORTE: I've been working on re-adapting this script with the artist Rosalyn Drexler, who has been making work since the 1960s and is also a playwright. The script is essentially a bunch of people selling chickens or sort of proposing the best ways that a chicken could be used. You have to imagine that this theater is a bit like a carnival or a state fair. And what these people are describing and doing to the chickens is really exuberant but also really violent and problematic. I've taken all mentions of chickens and replaced them with the word "moon" or the word "sky." So now what they're selling is the sky, or the idea of space or ether. Instead of chickens there will be these beautiful yellow spheres. They're like stand-ins for the moon.

CLARK: Oh, I love it.

DA CORTE: In some parts there's this idea about yolk, or Chicken Little. There's still this idea of dealing with something that's commodifiable, something that has a life cycle. But now, 50-something years later, we're at a different place. What

we're trying to commodify has become a war of grasping for the space beyond what we can touch or pull apart or eat. No animals will be destroyed, so that's really great.

CLARK: They loved a little physical violence in the Fluxus movement, didn't they?

DA CORTE: They were always pushing and dragging people around, covered in paint. There was something beautiful about those brief, radical actions that were also largely undocumented and unnamed. I miss that in work now. I want to see something that feels like a surprise. I want to hear a new sound, or see something new. But I also think that can happen without hurting anyone.

CLARK: I'm reminded of Yoko Ono's "Cut Piece," where the audience cut off her clothes. Left to our own device,

"I mean, in a way, this performance is a big fucking mess. But there's beauty in that mess. There's beauty in how deranged and violent it is."

es, humans will utterly destroy one another. It's like the Stanford prison experiment. That was also a performance. They weren't just science experiments. And I think replacing chickens with the moon adds some magic to the work. Maybe *The Twilight Zone* has got me thinking about that particular period of time, but Kaprow's work was made not so long after a major war. And they were living in the specter of the atomic bomb. One could read those fears into that piece.

DA CORTE: I think Kaprow wanted to have a voice that was outside of the galleries asking, "What is life? What's really happening here?" I see that now in different performers who are trying to shake things up and be in the world. I think now the new terrain is the ether. I don't know how one would begin to claim or address that. Not coincidentally, Kaprow's piece was

part of the first Pop Art show on the East Coast. They were looking at this new horizon and this undefinable way of making things using populist goods, and the whole idea of pop. And he was ahead of us saying, "Maybe this is a problem." But that was then. How do you even begin to make something new and vital now?

CLARK: For me, more and more, I think, "What matters is the song." It's not so much about a new sound. The thing I go back to is, "Is it a good song? Does it resonate? Does it mean something?" And that meaning doesn't have to come from a lyric. It could be Dada, it could be absurd, but it just has to feel like something.

DA CORTE: If I had to put it into words, I guess I want this piece to feel strange or free or surprising. Doing the work is like stepping forward but not being clear on where your foot is landing.

CLARK: Do you tend to like when artists reinvent or "cover" a previous work?

DA CORTE: Well, take a Nirvana song. It holds a weight in space. And you could take that and make it new and fresh and hot. I'm thinking of your last album, *Masseduction*, and how you did some covers and remixes of your songs. Then there's someone like Michael Haneke remaking *Funny Games*, first in German and then in English. There's something in there about how even if you tried to do the very same thing the next day it would be different.

CLARK: I think covering anything is a testament to its longevity. A Nirvana song doesn't get old. It still resonates. There is something unsailable about the work, and that's why they survive. But music is different. I can't think of many examples of artists covering other artists.

DA CORTE: Sturtevant made a whole career out of it, remaking works by Andy Warhol and Paul McCarthy and others, sometimes within the same month or year. She even remade the whole Claes Oldenburg store that he did in 1961, as if to ask, "How is this different because I've done it?" It really makes you look at understanding the author and the context and what ground it is you're walking on, along with what has come before you. It was a really defiant thing. Now people cover songs and albums the nanosecond they're

released, and they're sung at karaoke. But you're right, it happens less often and less immediately with art.

CLARK: I want to get back to this idea of provocation. It seems like we're in a strange time where there's an edict to make positive work and write things that are overtly empowering. But the conundrum for me is that, in my experience, in my enjoyment of art, what's empowering is to have someone talk for real about the human condition. And that is ugly and contradictory and messy. So I feel we're in a strange time where there are a lot of good intentions in the name of progress, but...

DA CORTE: Can you bring that heat to the table without having to hurt any animals? How do you bring a complicated, messy, completely fraught portrait of the moment 57 years later that isn't, in a way, any cleaner or wiser, especially when we're on the brink of so many awful and heinous things? How do you mirror that? I think to mirror this world we're in now with digital warfare and buying and selling, you need to make the story using new coats, a new vocabulary. I mean, in a way, this performance is a big fucking mess. But there's beauty in that mess. There's beauty in how deranged and violent it is. But enough about me—what are you working on right now?

CLARK: I'm writing, which I both love so much and fucking hate! Writing really comes back to this idea of covers and everything we were talking about. You have to be able to know a lot of other songs, and take them apart. A lot of writing, for me, is like dissecting frogs. And then there's the other part of it, which is the stumbling upon something good after boiling away all the really embarrassing, bad ideas. How necessary is it for you to always be making work?

DA CORTE: I don't think I've taken a day off in ten years. I don't know if days off are something I even want. I like making work. It's what I want to do with the time I have here. If the ideas are there, I want to chase them down. There's a demon inside me that possesses me to make work into, or try to untangle, whatever is there. ●

Prosthetics: IZZI GALINDO

Prosthetics Assistant: EMILY SCHUBERT



Alex Da Corte in his Philadelphia studio

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SURFACE

ART

In Philadelphia, Alex Da Corte Reinvents an Allan Kaprow Classic

Restaging a storied 1962 happening, the star artist trades chickens for... let's not spoil it.

BY ANDREW RUSSETH

March 12, 2020



Courtesy of the artist, University of the Arts, Sadie Coles HQ, and Karma, NY. Photo by Ian Douglas.

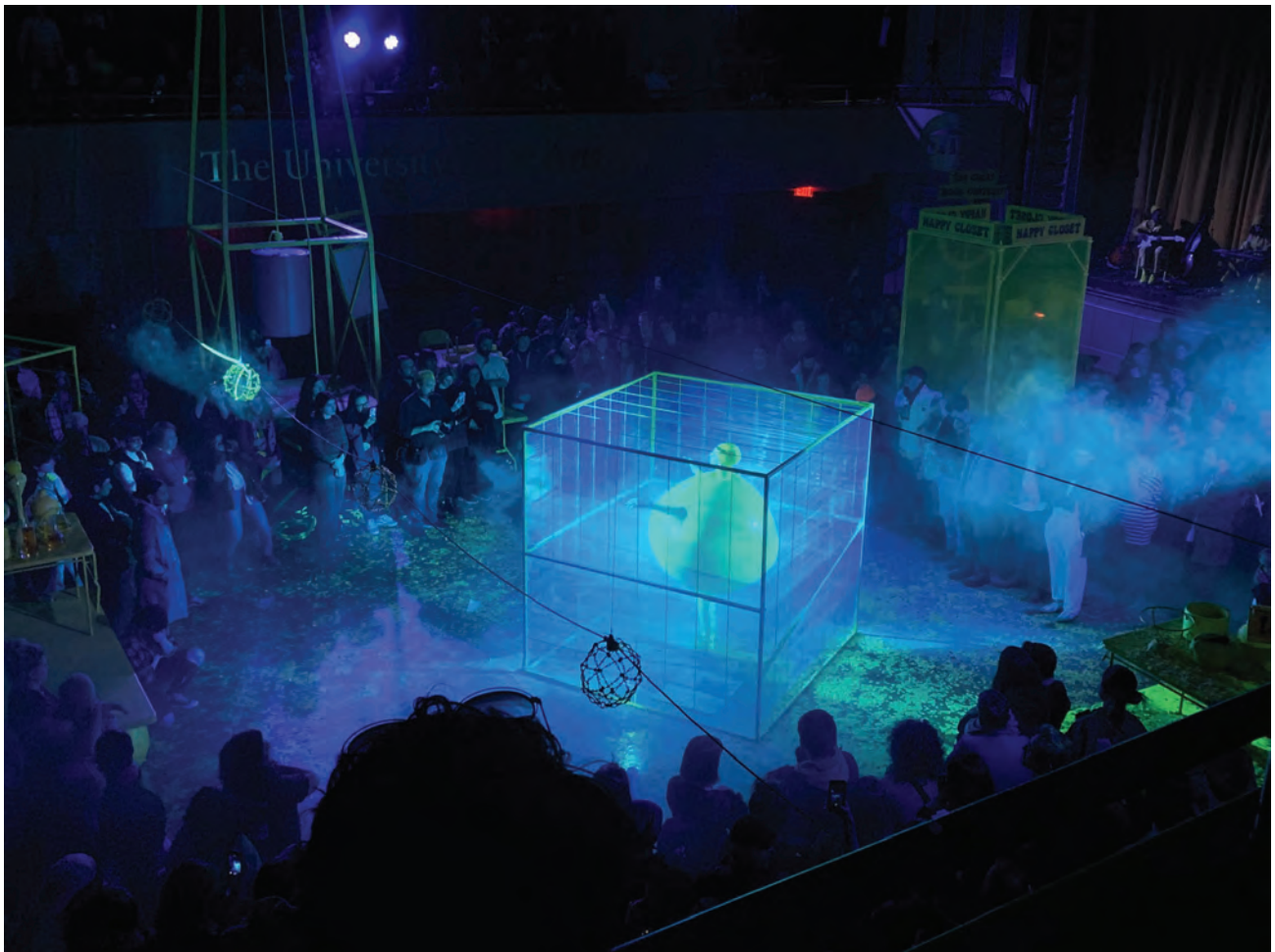
In 1962, a young Philadelphia arts patron named Joan Kron met with the artist Allan Kaprow and asked him to stage one of his infamous happenings on behalf of the fledgling Arts Council she was helping to run. “I’ll give you *Chicken*,” she remembers him telling her, and not, “Do you want *Chicken*?” As Kaprow unspooled what he had in mind, Kron—now 92 and living in New York—`says she realized, “This is going to be trouble.”

Russeth, Andrew. “In Philadelphia, Alex Da Corte Reinvents an Allan Kaprow Classic.” *Surface*, March 12, 2020.

Staged on a November night in the auditorium of the YM/YWHA, *Chicken* had performers brandishing live chickens, dead chickens (Kaprow slung one around his neck with rope), and quite a few eggs. The artist's four-page script mentions a "monstrous chicken," nine feet tall, made of wood, wire mesh, and newspaper, and salespeople, one hawking cooked chicken parts: "Hee y'are! Get ya fresh roasted chicken dinah!" At one point, policemen entered the auditorium and sprayed the giant chicken with fire extinguishers.

"The cleanup was horrible because they were throwing eggs," Kron recalls. The Y's board was not pleased, some Arts Council supporters resigned, and a legend was born. "They were doing these radical things because there wasn't the Institute of Contemporary Art yet," says curator Sid Sachs, discussing the Arts Council. "These women were involved in the arts in some capacity, and they volunteered, and they just got these shows together."

The Kaprow blowout marked the end of one such show, the first-ever Pop Art exhibition on the East Coast. It is only one of many remarkable moments surveyed in "Invisible City," a four-venue exhibition about recent Philadelphia art history running at the University of the Arts there through



Courtesy of the artist, University of the Arts, Sadie Coles HQ, and Karma, NY.

April 4. Organized by Sachs, who runs the school's galleries, with the art historian Jennie Hirsh, it charts the City of Brotherly Love's vital art and design scenes in the years between 1956 and 1976, placing luminaries and lesser-known figures side by side, from designer George Nakashima and architect Denise Scott Brown to artist Bill Walton and the Philadelphia Wireman, whose ingenious, compact sculptures was discovered, abandoned, in 1982.

It's a thrilling exhibition, and last Thursday night, it delivered a reinvention of *Chicken* by Alex Da Corte, the 39-year-old Philadelphia artist whose videos were a starring attraction at last year's Venice Biennale. As the temperature dropped, people streamed quickly into the former home of the Y—now Gershman Hall, a four-story neoclassical brick pile owned by the university—to see what he had created.

Yellow signs labeled "CHICKEN" pointed the way to the auditorium. "If you want to see everything, go to the balcony," an usher advised. "If you want to be in it, go to the ground floor." Inside, the chairs had been removed from the orchestra level, the room was blanketed in yellow light, and a four-piece band was playing gentle drones. Oddly, there were no chickens in sight.

In one corner, a man in a spherical white outfit (Andrew Smith) stood in a cage, reading a blank newspaper. Scattered around the space were six platforms, on which women in yellow outfits sat, accompanied by signs ("A CLEAN MOON FOR A CHANGE!" "MOON ROCKS!") and props (lab equipment, stacked egg cartons). They looked like carnival barkers taking meditation breaks. Audience members peered down from the balcony, giving those down below the distinct impression of being gladiators in a Roman coliseum. It felt like all hell is about to break loose.

And there was Kaprow himself! He was instantly recognizable with his fulsome beard and bushy eyebrows, wearing a vest, jeans, and well-worn brown boots. (It was Da Corte, after hours of makeup work.) Suddenly a spotlight was on him, and he had an announcement: "In the words of the great Joe Brainard, I remember *Chicken*." And with that, the music turned threatening—sawing strings, as in a slasher film's soundtrack—and Kaprow was twirling his index fingers in the air, a bit like a superhero villain orchestrating chaos.

The women took turns selling various moon products with high-energy menace. One (Julia Eichten) fired up a vacuum cleaner, shouting as she dusted a huge white bouncy ball. "Don't you feel shiny?!" she growled. "Don't you feel light?! Isn't it good to be white?!"

"You look sad!" another (Jessica Emmanuel) crowed, liquid bubbling in beakers before her. "You look depressed! You look miserable!" It was the moon's fault, she explained. "If you're broke: moon! If you're lonely: moon!"



Courtesy of the artist, University of the Arts, Sadie Coles HQ, and Karma, NY, photos by Ian Douglas.

A purveyor of moon rocks tossed her products—whole eggs, which splattered all over. “Everybody gets a moon rock today! You get one, and you get one, and you get one!”

The barkers started going at it together, some tossing orbs to the audience. Then a red light hit the stage, and it all was still. A performer glided through the curtains in an angular top and skirt, a wide-brimmed hat, and kitten heels—everything red. It was the dancer Imma, and after slinking down the stairs, they cut through the crowd, scampering to a speedy techno track, pushing over a table stacked with milk crates, unleashing chaos.

Lastly, blue light! The women moved on the man reading the newspaper, pushing his cage to the center. Performers in blue sprayed it with fire extinguishers, the moon man inside shaking slowly. Kaprow was on stage again. “Ladies and gentlepeople, the sky has fallen,” he said, sounding a little forlorn. He suggested that people go home and call their mother, “our lady moonlight, and tell her that you love her. Happy Halloween. And good night.”

The crowd lingered. There had been no chickens, but there had been moments of terrifying salesmanship, dizzying violence, and total pandemonium barely pulled back into order—all very

American things (at the risk of putting too fine a point on it), assembled over one ingenious, harrowing, entrancing hour.

“I’m still in shock,” Da Corte tells me by phone a few days after the show. “I had never done a live performance before.” Processing it all, he’s been thinking about how “it was a punk show, it was a rave, it was a comedy show, it was so many different things.”

No further performances are planned, even though he worked on it for four years, studying the details of the 1962 original. “The only thing I replaced was instead of a chicken it was this orb, the moon,” he says.

“In my imagination, when we think of an egg, we think of the yellow yolk inside,” Da Corte says, explaining how he came to focus on the moon. “There’s a funny slippage that occurs there, where, in seeing the outside of something you’re also imagining the inside at the same time. I think that’s beautiful.”

The veteran Philly artist Rosalyn Drexler penned the show’s treatment, and choreographer Kate Watson-Wallace marshaled performers and charted possibilities for movement. “It was a deeply collaborative effort with so many people,” Da Corte says. About 20 performers brought it to life. Since then, “we’ve been on this text chain discussing it and saying, Jeez, we see yellow everywhere we go,” he says, “really missing each other in this strange moment we’ve created. I think for me it was singularly quite life changing. I still have no words to describe it. It was just deeply moving for all of us.”

One suspects that Kaprow, who died in 2006 at the age of 78, might have understood what they are going through. He certainly would have admired it. In a 1966 lecture, he said, “A happening is for those who happen in this world, for those who don’t want to stand off and just look.” Later, he put it another way, arguing that “happenings have a plan and go ahead and carry it out. To use an old expression, they don’t merely dig the scene, they make it.”

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CULTURED
MAGAZINE

Marathon Man

Alex Da Corte's
colorful contribution
to the Carnegie
International requires
more than
binge-watching.
Cat Kron straps
herself in for the
technicolor ride.

Alex Da Corte cares, really cares, about television. While the artist's video shorts, recognizable by their Pantone color-blocked sets and singular attention to sartorial detail, have prompted comparisons to auteurs from Jean-Luc Godard to Wes Anderson, these works insistently burrow into the less vaunted, existentially humble form of entertainment and squat there, patiently awaiting your gaze. Da Corte's references are not the highly-produced television programming of recent years but rather those of the boob tube and Saturday morning cartoons—the sort one imagines writer, poet and queer icon Eileen Myles refers to in her allusions to the “tee vee” of her childhood. *Rubber Pencil Devil* (2018), the artist's latest work, is a looping, two-hour-40-minute stream of 57 highly stylized videos nestled gemlike in an immersive, open-plan neon funhouse installed at the 57th Carnegie International on view through March 25. These vignettes—populated by performers dressed as life-size versions of characters pulled from vintage popular culture, from the impish brat-

savant Bart Simpson to the petulant, hookah-brandishing caterpillar of 1951's *Alice in Wonderland*—reminded me of Myles's winking unorthodoxy and dissent, evidencing a resistance to the accepted markers of artistic seriousness while remaining utterly sincere in its intent.

Memorable among the shorts are those featuring the artist dressed as the live-action children's television host Mister Rogers. In costume, Da Corte performs a ritual familiar to viewers of PBS's *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*—the taking off of coat and shoes and putting on of sweater and slippers—but Da Corte has recast his host as a slinking, insouciant vamp. In character, he crosses and uncrosses his legs, meeting the viewer's gaze coyly—his deliberate pacing and intent watery gaze identical to that of the beloved personality. As in all of the video segments in this piece, Da Corte has slowed down the video footage to a snail's pace, evoking the plodding pace of children's shows catering to very young viewers. Television, a format memorably described by art



One of 57 scenes from Da Corte's *Rubber Pencil Devil* (2018). Here the artist is dressed as Mister Rogers, just one of the many television characters who make cameos in the piece.



Two stills from *Rubber Pencil Devil*

historian Rosalind Krauss in *A Voyage on the North Sea* as that medium which “differs from itself” (given its lack of a single material support), is a fertile subject for Da Corte, whose work has always evidenced a bent toward the outré and slippery.

Rubber Pencil Devil is dense with queer icons of the past century, from Peter Pan to Dolly Parton—so much that one can become distracted by the impulse to catch the references. (I spent considerable time Googling whether “Live + Let Live,” in which an airbrush gun sprays rainbow bands over a woman’s white panty-clad bottom, was indeed modeled after Mariah Carey’s *Rainbow* tour promo footage, and whether its soundtrack was the bass line from Parton’s single “9 to 5.”) When Mister Rogers debuted

his program in 1968 with a mandate of respect and gentleness toward children, few cultural gatekeepers could get beyond the medium’s schlock associations, and fewer still were convinced by the Presbyterian minister’s mission to make the television set a friend and mentor to his viewers. Da Corte mines this audiovisual repository tenderly, without emphasizing the oversights of its host or the cultural climate in which it was formed. The segment *What Do You Do With the Mad* cites the Mister Rogers’ song “What Do You Do With the Mad That You Feel,” the children’s host’s reflection on frustration, which closes with the lyrics “for a girl can someday be a woman and a boy can someday be a man.” But despite such sentiments that now register as somewhat dated, Da Corte homes in on Rogers’



greater ethos of inclusiveness. In an email from late 2018 he cited the host's foregrounding of respect and empathy for difference. These values, now inscribed in Rogers lore—as in the time he sat in a wading pool with *Mister Rogers* regular François Clemmons (a black, gay-identifying actor who portrayed Officer Clemmons throughout much of the show's run) during a peak moment of racial tension in this country—are here repurposed as playful, if sometimes melancholy, meditations on difference. Near the end of Da Corte's looped video, a slumped player clad from the waist down as Big Bird, pours a drink into a massive stemmed vessel lit by a lone light bulb, as Oscar the Grouch looks on impassively from his trashcan. Turned away from our gaze, his mien channels a morose, drunk Joni Mitchell of

the singer's *Blue* period, ready to "blow this damn candle out/I don't want nobody coming over to my table/I got nothing to talk to anybody about." Yet when the bottle is finally spent, the light abruptly turns on and Oscar The Grouch turns to the camera from his trashcan in wonderment.

Rubber Pencil Devil contains too many cultural references explicit and implied, culled from the annals of 20th-century animation, queer iconography, and campy Americana, to chart here. But what's ultimately underscored is this outmoded vehicle's capacity to convey compassion rather than merely titillate, and the many ways one can embrace the unconventional or out-of-step to express the messy and true aspects of each of our existences.

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The Washington Post

WHAT ARE YOU WORKING ON?

A series of conversations with artists about how they
create



Alex Da Corte being filmed performing as Mister Rogers in his North Philadelphia studio. The artist's careful attention to the weight and feel of color has been central to his work from the beginning.

Making magic

Groundbreaking artist Alex Da Corte pulls inspiration from pop culture, poems and a lot of spilled liquids

By **Sebastian Smee** May 1, 2019

S

omewhere in one of Alex Da Corte's studios — near the clothes rack with handmade Popeye, Pink Panther and Bart Simpson costumes — hangs a disco ball covered in dust.

Da Corte's two vast adjoining studios in North Philadelphia are crammed with brightly colored objects and props for stage sets. One shelf holds a pair of laboriously handcrafted shoes based on those worn by Dorothy in "The Wizard of Oz." In the middle of the room stands a giant Heinz ketchup

Smee, Sebastian, and Alex Da Corte. "Making Magic." *The Washington Post*, May 1, 2019.

bottle.

The artist and his team of young assistants are deeply absorbed in what they're doing; the mood is industrious. But once a day, if the sun is shining, the disco ball catches the light. Someone puts on Donna Summer's 1979 song "Bad Girls" and "between 3 and 4 p.m.," Da Corte says, "it's disco hour."

Da Corte, 38, is from a family of house painters. He was born in Camden, N.J., and raised in Pittsburgh and Caracas, Venezuela, where his parents are from. Tall, with dark, close-cropped, curly hair and labile good looks, he speaks in a courteous, uninflected baritone. His videos, sculptures and in-



The artist in an apple costume with the Richard Scarry-created character Lowly Worm under a weeping willow. All of the artist's costumes are handmade in his studio. (Marvin Joseph/The Washington Post)

stallations come in deep, bright, saturated colors, often neon. They freely riff on pop culture, including children's television, reality TV and cartoons. He studied to be an animator and acts in his own videos, wearing costumes made in his studio.

His works are rich in allusions to art and architecture, and concerned above all, he says, with "the idea of pushing beyond an image or breaking through the screen and actually touching the thing on-screen."

Already the subject of major solo shows in Europe and the United States, Da Corte is putting in a star turn at this year's Venice Biennale, having been selected to show in the prestigious main exhibition. His work provides a critical take on contemporary realities, yet it's also exuberant, funny, sweet and absurd. He is trying, at the heart of it, to make sense of America.

Da Corte's two installations for Venice, which he was trying to finish when I visited recently, will be what he calls "Gesamtkunstwerks": immersive experiences combining video, sculpture, music and architecture, and teeming with references to Mister Rogers, the music of Prince, the reality show "Big Brother," Bart

Simpson, the avant-garde German artist Martin Kippenberger, Allen Ginsberg and much else besides.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Q: What are you working on?

A: The studio is bubbling. I am currently in the midst of making a large Gesamtkunstwerk, made of many moving threads — video, kinetic sculpture, textile, furniture, neon and sound. At the moment, though, I am boiling shampoo for a painting.

Q: Boiling shampoo?

A: I've been thinking about what bad behavior is. You know, we think of soda as well-behaved as long as it's inside this thin container separating it from the outside. But as soon as you release it, it's different. So I have been spilling liquids like soda, Vaseline and shampoo onto the studio floor, as a way to keep behaving badly. When I come back to these spills in the morning, they're different, which I like. Paintings that move in the night keep me on my toes.

Q: You're making this big, multidimensional work for the Venice Biennale. How did it affect you being invited to participate in such a prestigious show?

A: It scrambled my brain, and for a while I couldn't dedicate time to it. I was intimidated by it. My thinking tends to be linear. I have to finish what I'm working on before I can move on to the next project.



Da Corte on set. He is dressed as the Wicked Witch of the West from "The Wizard of Oz," and beside him is Oscar the Grouch from "Sesame Street." (Art21)



Alex Da Corte's "Free Money," an inflatable work at the 2016 Frieze New York in Randall's Island, floats with the New York City skyline in the background. The work took cues from a parade float in Tim Burton's "Batman." (Alex Da Corte)



"A Season in He'll," Da Corte's first solo installation at Art + Practice in Los Angeles in 2016. The exhibition got its name from Arthur Rimbaud's poem "A Season in Hell." (Alex Da Corte)

Smee, Sebastian, and Alex Da Corte. "Making Magic." *The Washington Post*, May 1, 2019.



Featured at Pittsburgh's Carnegie Museum of Art during the 57th Carnegie International in 2018, Da Corte's "Rubber Pencil Devil" is an installation that incorporates video, color and sound. (Alex Da Corte)



Da Corte incorporates aspects of pop culture into his art, such as this reference to Popeye in "Rubber Pencil Devil." (Alex Da Corte)

Smee, Sebastian, and Alex Da Corte. "Making Magic." *The Washington Post*, May 1, 2019.



"Rubber Pencil Devil" features a neon and aluminum house. (Alex Da Corte)



Da Corte's "C-A-T Spells Murder" show at the Karma gallery in New York in 2018. It was inspired by the author R.L. Stine's work. (Alex Da Corte)

Smee, Sebastian, and Alex Da Corte. "Making Magic." *The Washington Post*, May 1, 2019.

Q: Where do your ideas come from?

A: They can start out so flat-footed! I think beginning with your own backyard seems to be where the best ideas reside. There is magic buried in the obvious and banal.

Q: You have a team of assistants. That must involve a lot of delegating.

A: That's so much of it. The work is totally handmade and so going away is difficult, which is why I'm almost never not in my studio. Problem-solving arises as you make. So it's hard to say, "Do X, I'll see you later." Making the work is a conversation the whole way through. It's like making a quilt. There's conversation and jokes around a table, family-style.

Q: You have so many ideas. Is it sometimes difficult for everyone to keep up?

A: They're like, "Oh, my gosh, you change your mind seven times a day!" But it's not because I'm indecisive. It's the same as if you're making a big painting. You have to keep stepping back to see how it's looking. Keep problem-solving. Keep asking questions.

Q: Where does your interest in postmodernism come from?



The artist on set dressed as Carroll Spinney (who played both Big Bird and Oscar the Grouch on "Sesame Street"). Da Corte's attention to detail is connected to his desire to make things seen on the screen as tangible and authentic as possible. (Art21)

A: An awareness that I'm not the first, that the medium is the message, and that there is something valuable to be discovered in everything. I respect history and what's come before me. I want to let the forms of the past wash over me.

Q: I know you can't give too much away, but can you talk about the thoughts and feelings that are feeding into your work for Venice?

A: I have been reading Cookie Mueller's "Walking Through Clear Water in a Pool Painted Black ." Also, Florine Stettinheimer's "Crystal Flowers" and her thoughts on butter, Joe Brainard's memories in "I Remember," and the lyric "the former is red, white, and blue, the ladder is purple, come on and climb" from Prince's "Around the World in a Day" album.

I have been thinking about the hope and empathy in the work of Mister Rogers and the beloved Philadelphian architects Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, who built walls of flowers. I have been thinking about my family in Caracas, the flayed skin of St. Bartholomew, reshaping ideas about kings and princesses, and King Princess. I have been watching steam heat from my window while listening to Alan Vega's "Kid Congo" and the Sneaker Pimps' "Bloodsport." I am currently climbing the purple ladders in my mind.



"I think the work is like a large sandwich of
experience and thoughts, layered and stacked and
stitched together."

Alex Da Corte

Q: Wow. I love it. How would you describe the work, and what you're trying to do with it?

A: I think the work is like a large sandwich of experience and thoughts, layered and stacked and stitched together. If my recent travels have taught me anything, it is that we are very small in this great big world. My hope is that the Gesamtkunstwerk oscillates between a portrait of the macro and the micro and bridges a gap between the two.

Q: You riff on so many things, but especially on TV, including reality TV. Is there a political side to all this?

A: There's comedy in my critique. I suppose I think that if we can have cartoon characters in power making the rules, why not look more closely at the rules in cartoons?

Q: What feels tricky or risky about being in the middle of creating new work?

A: I find that it's tricky and risky leaving the house every day, but I do it.

Q: What has surprised you in the doing?

A: I think I could push the funk more. Be braver. Prince taught me that.



Da Corte in his North Philadelphia studio in an apple costume, with various children's characters. (Marvin Joseph/The Washington Post)

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CURA.



Alex Da Corte
in conversation with
Margot Norton

CURA.29

MARGOT NORTON When I was in your studio the other day, I was struck by a table-top of assembled props for your new work *Rubber Pencil Devil* (2018)—a bottle of Heinz ketchup; a pair of ruby red slippers; a cheerleader’s glittery baton; a McDonald’s Happy Meal container; a replica of the model trolley from *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*. Perhaps it was because these objects were given presentational parity atop the table, of similar size, and isolated from their original contexts, but something about their arrangement struck me as a distillation or deconstruction of your practice—as if they were all the ingredients placed in neat little bowls before the chef tosses them into the blender on the cooking show. I thought that we could start with *Rubber Pencil Devil* since it seems to be a bit of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* if you will, incorporating many of the subjects (icons and symbols of American culture) that have haunted your practice from the beginning. The main subject of this new piece is Mister Rogers, and I was wondering if you could elaborate on what it is about him and his children’s television series that inspired you for this work?

Norton, Margot, and Alex Da Corte. “Alex Da Corte in Conversation with Margot Norton.” *CURA*, no. 29, October 2018, pp. 94–105.

ALEX DA CORTE I like that you compared the table to a cooking show. It has become a bit of a habit for me to arrange objects on makeshift table-tops perched on saw horses. It is the way that I understand the objects, look at them in a void, isolate them and imagine how they may become different or surreal. I borrow this idea from one of my favorite works by Venezuelan artist Marisol, titled *Dinner Date* (1963). In this work, two carved wooden block self portraits sit at a table side by side, enjoying one another's company, about to eat some carrots and peas and do the things one might do on a dinner date. The work always struck me because if you isolate the wooden blocks as individual components, you are left with three pedestals—the two figures and the table, with some objects on top of the lower, table-like pedestal. Similar to a cooking show, the objects that you mentioned seeing in my studio are just pieces of a meal, happy and alone, unbothered to commune, yet in their communion they become something different—a pie, a second course, even hors d'oeuvres. Maybe Mister Rogers is the unbothered ingredient in his home: quiet, contemplative, happy. Perhaps the dessert is in the land of make-believe, and through that trolley tunnel you find something new and remixed—a stage that allows for a different way of thinking...

MN I thought it was so interesting when you said the other day that while Mister Rogers is the voice of most of the puppet characters in the "Land of Make-Believe," he never appears in these segments. In the show, the distinction is always clear between the "real world" and the "Land of Make-Believe" via the sequence with the model electric trolley that enters and exits the Land through a tunnel. In one of the videos for *Rubber Pencil Devil*, you have Rogers appearing together with all of the Make-Believe characters singing *Edelweiss* from Rodgers and Hammerstein's *The Sound of Music* (1959)—a song that Captain von Trapp sings with his family toward the end of the musical as a statement of Austrian patriotism despite the Nazi annexation of their homeland. Something that I find so compelling about this moment in the work, and with your work in general, is the way you combine disparate references, which are oftentimes incongruous (a character, a song, a logo), and remix and subtly manipulate them in a way that seems effortless, yet somehow unearths the eerie and absurd qualities that underlie the seemingly familiar. What does it mean for you to be bringing these disparate worlds together that might otherwise be odd or even taboo to juxtapose, such as the "real world" and the "Land of Make-Believe?"





ADC Again I think of food, specifically sandwiches. Wikipedia says a sandwich is a food typically consisting of vegetables, sliced cheese, or meat, placed on or between slices of bread, or more generally any dish wherein two or more pieces of bread serve as a container or wrapper for another food type. This leads me to *BurgerTime*—a game I played a lot as a kid on ColecoVision. The goal of the game is to stack layers of a sandwich by running across them to make them fall on top of each other; to make disparate worlds collide. I studied animation in the mid-'90s and discovered 19th-century English photographer Eadweard Muybridge. I liked that animators Lotte Reiniger, Frank Mouris, and Muybridge used multiplicity in their work, squashing many elements together or stretching them apart. They got the most out of a piece of paper or plastic, wanting to create more than just a flat image—the illusion of depth, of “life.” It was probably around 1996 when I was thinking of this, concurrent with the release of the movie *Multiplicity* starring Michael Keaton and Andie MacDowell. I think my work does that—it goes in and out, squashes and stretches, replicates “life.” Bringing Mister Rogers into the “Land of Make-Believe” is taboo. It is something that cannot be. He voices the characters and operates the puppets. He cannot be seen singing with them... or can he? Maybe he can if this is *Multiplicity 2*... Maybe seeing this Dale Cooper version of Mister Rogers on the other side of the mirror is what we need right now...

MN Yes! It reminds me of the “man behind the curtain” from the *The Wizard of Oz*—the self-proclaimed “great and powerful” ruler of the Land of Oz who turned out to be an ordinary conman. Speaking of Oz, the character of the Wicked Witch of the West has figured into your work several times: in *Rubber Pencil Devil*, as well as in the wall-work *Haymaker* (2017); as a miniature-version in your 2016 exhibition *A Man Full of Trouble* at Maccarone gallery; as a large hat in *A Season in He'll* at Art + Practice Foundation (2016); in your and Jayson Musson's *Easternsports* (2014); and your 2015 exhibition at Luxembourg & Dayan was titled *Die Hexe* (“The Witch” in German). What does this image of the archetypal witch in all her green glory (perhaps perpetuated by Margaret Hamilton's iconic portrayal in the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz*) mean to you?

ADC Throughout history, the witch has been the outlier, a foreigner in a new land, an immigrant, a loner, and a queer. By those descriptions, this makes me a witch. I think the witch has to reimagine normative systems of power. This is a healthy place to be. It makes for new ideas and new beginnings.



I recently recreated a banned scene from episode 0847 of *Sesame Street* (February 8, 1976). In this episode, Margaret Hamilton appeared as the Wicked Witch of the West in search of her lost broom. There was an overwhelming response from parents that the episode scared children and even promoted Wiccanism. I think it is wild that this episode is still banned from television. I wanted to free this episode from this kind of limbo prison.

There will always be room for resistance as long as there is this kind of othering and my witch costume will always be hanging in my studio ready for a new day.

MN This idea of “reimagining normative systems of power” that you described is something that could be said for many of the symbols in your work, going back to early on in your career. I think of an early work of yours—*Chelsea Hotel No. 2* (2010), which I believe was the first video you made. This work is set to Leonard Cohen’s eponymous song, recorded in 1974, in which he remembers a love affair. There is a great stanza in which Cohen describes his lover (said to be Janis Joplin) reimagining these normative systems: “Clenching your fist for the ones like us who are oppressed by the figures of beauty / You fixed yourself, you said, ‘Well, never mind... we are ugly but we have the music.’” In your video, you tenderly handle everyday objects and perform rituals with them that go beyond their traditional uses, perhaps giving them new life—slices of bread are stacked one on top of the other (à la *BurgerTime*), drops of food coloring swirl into a just-popped-open bottle of soda, wet strawberries are carefully placed onto dirty fingertips... Do you think of these items in *Chelsea Hotel No. 2* (and beyond) as liberated in some way, reimagining traditional ideas of beauty or seduction?

ADC I have been thinking a lot about liberation. Freedom fries. Does Freedom fry? Does it ring? It is relative, I guess, but not everyone expects their Fries and Rings to deliver the way the people in charge say they do. I got all of those materials for *Chelsea Hotel No. 2* at Fine Fare Supermarket on Girard Avenue in Philadelphia in the summer of 2010, when I was extremely depressed and hot and ultimately hopeful things would change for the better. Christian Holstad urged me to make a video for a project Lorca Cohen was organizing around her father Leonard Cohen’s album *New Skin for the Old Ceremony* (1974). I like skin. All kinds. I like both of the versions of *Skins* but the Brits do it better.

Can something have a new skin? Leonard says it could.

Lettuce be done with old ceremonies.

I don’t want to colonize the jar of strawberries I bought from Fine Fare. I want to get to know them—each and every blobby strawberry, one by one. I want to touch them and I want you to feel them too. You say that the strawberries will get all over the floor and your clothes and our hands and there is that rat that has been eating all of my work in the studio. It is hot and you are sweaty and we have listened to this song so many times that we cannot hear the words or care to care about Leonard or Janis or anyone. Are these syrupy strawberries edible? I am hungry. Well what next? There are strawberries on our fingers and coffee on our arms and tin foil and tape in our pockets. What next?

ALEX DA CORTE is an artist living and working in Philadelphia, PA. His work has recently been exhibited at The Whitney Museum of American Art, The Vienna Secession (2017), the Kölnischer Kunstverein (2018) and 57th edition of the Carnegie International in Pittsburgh.

MARGOT NORTON is Curator at the New Museum, New York, where she has curated exhibitions with artists Judith Bernstein, Pia Camil, Roberto Cuoghi, Ragnar Kjartansson, Chris Ofili, Goshka Macuga, Laure Prouvost, Pipilotti Rist, Anri Sala, among others. Norton was also curator of the 8th edition of the Sequences Art Festival in Reykjavík, Iceland.

CREDITS

Portrait by Constance Mensh

All images Courtesy: the artist

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GARAGE



Annie Clark in *The Open Window*. Image courtesy of the artist and Karma, New York

ART | By ERIN SCHWARTZ | Feb 21 2018, 2:43pm

In Alex Da Corte's Spooky New Show, St. Vincent Co-Stars with a One-Eyed Cat

The new horror-tinged works, on view at Karma, New York, explore the darkness behind a placid suburban surface.

Like Marty, the basketball-playing protagonist of the R.L. Stine book that inspired his new show, Alex Da Corte is allergic to cats. In Stine's novel *Cat*, the animal mauls and kills Marty's friends; the Philadelphia-based artist fared better, with one allergy attack while on set with Annie Clark (also known as St. Vincent). Felines are a fitting mascot for *C-A-T Spells Murder*, currently on view at Karma, New York, which thematizes fear and dread; the rot lurking behind a peaceful suburban facade; and the suspenseful, tipping feeling before a domesticated animal turns feral and bites.

Schwartz, Erin. "In Alex Da Corte's Spooky New Show, St. Vincent Co-Stars with a One-Eyed Cat." *Garage*, February 21, 2018.

Outside the gallery, all-seeing neon eyeglasses hang like an optometrist's sign (similar to his recent window installation at the New Museum), and inside, Da Corte has carpeted the gallery with orange plush, painted the walls pink, and installed fluorescent pink lights. The result is an off-kilter, oppressive lushness, like a Creamsicle miasma, as self-contained and claustrophobic as a fun house. On the walls are neat squares of vinyl siding, as if cut and transplanted from a suburban cul-de-sac, with neon windows that broadcast symbols of safety and danger: a steaming pie and a candle; dangling orange spiderwebs and a pair of watching, narrowed eyes. Playing in the back room is *The Open Window*, an 11-minute video starring Clark and a one-eyed cat named Dylan.

A giant cat made of foam and tangerine velvet with a wide, cartoonish, sharp-toothed grimace, almost fifteen feet high, is flipped on its back at the center of the gallery. It's vulnerable—it looks like it's *yowling*—and its shadow is a cut-out wraith of blue carpet. Da Corte told GARAGE that it's a scale facsimile of an inflatable lawn decoration, on sale at Walmart, that he first saw near his sister's house. "Someone put an arched-back, scared cat in the front of their home, essentially saying that the house is afraid to go anywhere. That the people inside the house are afraid of the world. That's wild. That's something I can relate to."

For Da Corte, horror has long been a useful tool for understanding the world around him. "When I was growing up, I watched a lot of horror movies: Alfred Hitchcock, Orson Welles, John Carpenter. And my family tells ghost stories and tall tales, they love to run their mouths and talk about scary, spooky stuff. It's in my nature to think about the macabre as a way of understanding the world."



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND KARMA, NEW YORK

Schwartz, Erin. "In Alex Da Corte's Spooky New Show, St. Vincent Co-Stars with a One-Eyed Cat." *Garage*, February 21, 2018.



SLOW WEB, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND KARMA, NEW YORK

When Da Corte was young, he wanted to become a Disney cartoonist, painting glass cels in an Anaheim workshop. He still considers himself an animator, but of “cartoons in the physical realm, not just behind plastic.” And there is something macabre in the exaggerated liveliness and slapstick violence of animation, the dread of death in the way rubbery limbs spring back after being slammed into the ground and flattened under anvils. Da Corte also sees parallels between cartoons and the eerie calm of the suburbs: “There’s this really crisp line, of Snow White’s hand and an apple, but the back is a big mess. Any kind of reverse glass painting is that way, it’s muddled on the back side. I think that’s a really beautiful metaphor for understanding the suburbs... the front lawn being clean and the inside of the house being not clean.”

In *The Open Window*, Clark, wearing a brunette wig and turtleneck to recreate the cover of R.L. Stein’s *Cat*, cradles a one-eyed cat and stares into the camera, growing visibly uneasy while crickets saw in the background. On the image’s surface, billiard balls decorated with spiderwebs, flowers, smiley faces, are racked and broken; when Clark begins to scream, soundlessly, one sphere rolls, slowly, to cover her mouth. While the video was filmed, Da Corte directed Clark by riffing an improvised horror story: “It was something like, ‘You’re in the house, you’re waiting for your sister to come home, there may be chains, there’s chains, chain noises. Upstairs, I hear a creaking, is it the wind?’” He described it as “a strange poem.”

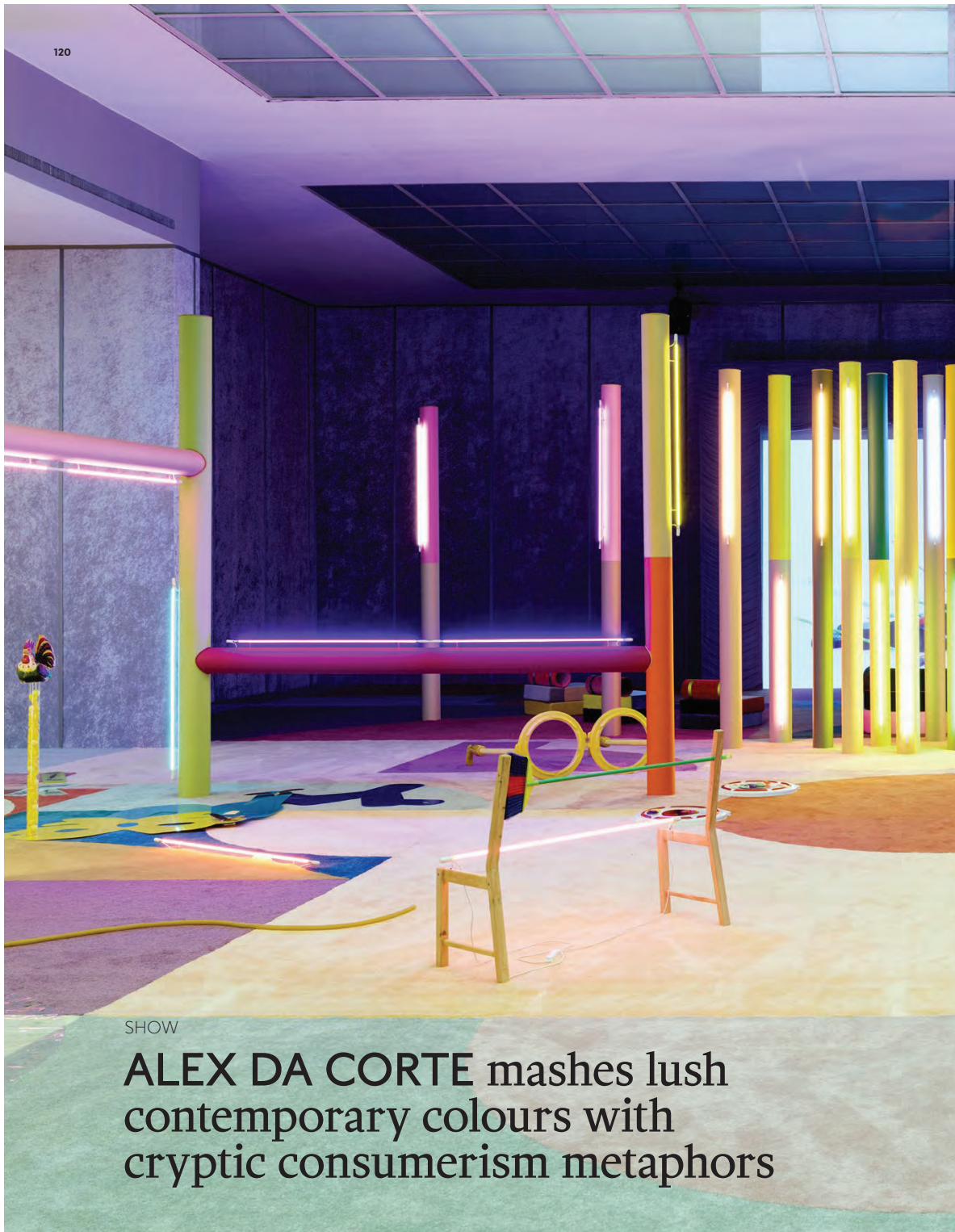
Schwartz, Erin. “In Alex Da Corte’s Spooky New Show, St. Vincent Co-Stars with a One-Eyed Cat.” *Garage*, February 21, 2018.

In the tense, warm room, there's danger in reading the signs wrong: the window with its friendly, steaming pie could be a trap, and the inflatable cat, supine, might spring to life. The works traffic in banality, creating a sense of menace that never erupts into the real threat, the fear of death made more ghastly—and pervasive—through its sublimation, the way it trickles down into the tropes of mass-market horror. “It’s very apt right now. The power of fear, and of politicking in a certain way where fear is used as a tactic, is real,” said Da Corte. “And it yields real results, because we know fear eats the soul.”

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FRAME



SHOW

ALEX DA CORTE mashes lush
contemporary colours with
cryptic consumerism metaphors

S. M. "Alex Da Corte Mashes Lush Contemporary Colours with Cryptic Consumerism." *Frame*, no. 118, September/October 2017, pp. 120–23.



Sophie Thun

S. M. "Alex Da Corte Mashes Lush Contemporary Colours with Cryptic Consumerism." *Frame*, no. 118, September/October 2017, pp. 120–23.

VIENNA – *Slow Graffiti* is populated with a rooster, a single galosh, one generic metal folding chair, an upturned umbrella, a table fan, pink Styrofoam packing peanuts spilling from their bag, a large lemon and a stuffed dog, among other eminently ordinary objects. Items are set at lonely distances from one another in a high-ceilinged, 604-m² room that bristles with slender columns whose smooth surfaces complement walls carpeted in lavender velvet, giving an impression of lush flawlessness. Floor areas are a jigsaw puzzle of shallow shag carpet in fields of pastels that border deep, rusty hues: powder-blue beside burgundy, lemon-yellow and violet, diluted brick-red and an umbrous orange.

The oxidized candy land is on show at Secession in Vienna, which presents contemporary art forms in solo and themed exhibitions. *Slow Graffiti* is the vision of 37-year-old American artist Alex Da Corte, who lives and works in Philadelphia, where he paints and constructs videos, sculptures and scenographic installations that are moody with texture and colour and freighted with the cultural and psychological associations of consumer objects, which he manipulates and decontextualizes.

Tube lighting ranged vertically along the columns calls forth a vague image of a metropolitan skyline – Da Corte means to architect the ‘skeleton of a neon city’ – but

visitors are also unmistakably indoors beneath a broad factory-paned skylight. The scenographic quality of the space is reinforced by an area with cinema-like seating, where an original short film – a shot-for-shot remake of Jørgen Leth’s *The Perfect Human* (1967), starring the artist masked as Boris Karloff’s Frankenstein monster – loops every 20 minutes.

Prefacing the press release for *Slow Graffiti* are lyrics (‘Let me interpret history in every line and scar’) from the 1998 Belle & Sebastian song by the same name, as well as a 1963 quote attributed to Karloff: ‘The monster turned out to be the best friend I ever had. He changed the whole course of my life.’ But there is no sense of a monster in this room, no wrinkles and little history. The connection to the Vienna Secession – an important turn-of-the-19th-century movement that sought to produce art and design eschewing contemporary conservatism and historicism – is unclear. But perhaps that connection lies precisely in the installation’s fertile air of disconnection. What remains is form and feeling, and a tension drawn taut between duplicity and daydream. – SM

Slow Graffiti is on show at Secession in Vienna until 3 September 2017
alexdacorte.com

Da Corte means to architect the ‘skeleton of a neon city’





S. M. "Alex Da Corte Mashes Lush Contemporary Colours with Cryptic Consumerism." *Frame*, no. 118, September/October 2017, pp. 120–23.

T THE NEW YORK TIMES STYLE MAGAZINE

Arts and Letters

Prodigal Son

From 'Rocky Horror' to Alex Da Corte, why Frankenstein's Monster continues to haunt queer art.

BY CHARLIE FOX



LOOKOUT

"I HAVE FOUND IT!" Mary Shelley remembered thinking when she awoke from a fateful nightmare in the summer of 1816 with a thunderclap of inspiration. "What terrified me will terrify others." These terrors provided the raw material for "Frankenstein," which she composed at 19 and published anonymously in London two years later, unleashing one of the great ogres of the imagination into the world. "I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out," she wrote, "and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life." To quote the mad doctor responsible for him in the 1931 Universal Pictures film: "It's alive!" Now, as the 200th birthday of Shelley's Monster — or, really, her monstrous allegory — fast approaches, he remains at large.

But a monstrous allegory for what, exactly? Like all great myths, Shelley's tale shape-shifts to suit any number of freaky interpretations without sacrificing the original's hellacious powers. It could be a 19th-century premonition about the dangers of biotechnology, or a fable about the possibilities of male birth and all the horror such transgressions of the so-called natural invoke. Though "Frankenstein" also remains one of the most savage tales about father-son dysfunction, the Monster is a daddy, too, responsible in some ways for fantastic creations including Marilyn Manson; "The Rise of the Planet of the Apes" (2011), which turns, like Shelley's tale, on the education of an "uncivilized" beast; and Rei Kawakubo's "bump" dresses (1997), recently on view at the Met, which distort the bodies of their wearers to throw monstrous shadows. Yet there's something about this story of unhallowed arts that

makes it darkly resonant for queer artists beyond any other group.

When you're gay and grow up feeling like a hideous misfit, fully conscious that some believe your desires to be wicked and want to kill you for them, identifying with the Monster is hardly a stretch: A misunderstood beast finds solace in the solitude of the woods, but seems to endlessly face the wrath of the torch-bearing, small-minded inhabitants in the world beyond. There have been explicitly queer representations of Frankenstein's creature at least since "The Rocky Horror Picture Show," the camp classic that has been screened more or less continuously since its release in 1975, in which the titular monster (created by transvestite Frank-N-Furter) is a lithe blond male in skimpy gold lamé. (The X-rated "Andy Warhol's Flesh for Frankenstein," a retelling of Shelley that gleefully chronicles the doctor's attempt to create a "perfect" man, predates "Rocky Horror" by about a year.) More recently, on television, "Penny Dreadful" (2014) and "The Cleveland Show" (2011) have starred gay versions of Frankenstein or his Monster.

If vampires occupy a magical role in the erotic life of adolescents as cultivated loners (consider Robert Pattinson in the "Twilight" saga, 2008-12, or everybody in "Only Lovers Left Alive," 2013), Frankenstein's Monster is their nightmarish queer counterpart. He's a misfit child spurned by his father who grows up to be a sensitive oddity, too

strange to be accepted by society or reproduce naturally and forced to seek refuge in seclusion. The artist Richard Hawkins, whose oeuvre could be understood as a complex wrestling match with the meanings of the Monster, and who has

The artist Alex Da Corte in his 2017 work "Slow Graffiti."

painted stitched-together creatures alongside lusty young men, wisely pinpointed the reasons for this queer sympathy as well as whatever divides the zombie from the vampire in a 2009 interview in the book “Of Two Minds, Simultaneously.” As a child he fell for Frankenstein’s Monster “because he’s clumsy, shy and misunderstood; Dracula because he’s dandyish, nocturnal and misunderstood.”

Bill Condon’s 1998 film “Gods and Monsters” created both a kind of queer origin story and creation myth for the Monster’s continuing presence in popular culture. An account of the last days of James Whale, director of the 1931 adaptation of “Frankenstein,” the film begins as a tame biopic but soon mutates into a very peculiar discursion about the seductions and strangeness of flesh. It features Ian McKellen as Whale fighting a naked handyman played by Brendan Fraser, his beefcake head obscured by a gas mask, steamy poolside shenanigans straight from a Honcho magazine dreamscape and evocations of a putrid soldier strobe-lit by lightning strikes. Whale’s unrequited lust for the hunk kinkily inverts the long-ing-loathing dynamics between Monster and Doctor, but a hint of romance still quivers through the proceedings and at its climax, the Monster (or Fraser?) escorts Whale over eldritch moorland to his death. (Condon has been enlisted to direct a new version of Whale’s “Bride of Frankenstein” in 2019.)

HOMOEROTIC SUBTEXT was haunting “Frankenstein” way before “Gods and Monsters,” though: Boris Karloff’s fond nickname for his favorite role was “the dear old monster.” Even in the book, the attacks on the Monster spoken by its creator mimic the rabid noise of a trans/homophobic chorus: “More hideous than belongs to humanity” or “some other species.” It’s also a chronicle of the electric fascination flowing between two men and the accompanying rumbles of repressed desire that destroy them.

For the trans woman writer and theorist Susan Stryker, any identification with the Monster was wrought from Gothic intensities of horror and melancholy. Never flinching from the physical disorientation or gore that sexual reassignment entails, she kicks off her ferocious 1994 essay “My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix” with a description of her own rebirth that makes it sound like one of Frankenstein’s macabre procedures. “The transsexual body is an unnatural body. It is the product of medical science. It is a technological construction. It is flesh torn apart and sewn together again in a shape other than that in which it was born.” Like any trans person, the Monster deals with a vertiginous alienation from his own body and the impossibility of passing as a “normal” person.

If vampires occupy a magical role in the erotic life of adolescents as cultivated loners, Frankenstein’s Monster is their nightmarish queer counterpart.

son. In Shelley’s words, “I had never seen a being resembling me or claimed any intercourse with me ... Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come?” Stryker doesn’t claim that everyone transitioning is doomed to live within a horror movie, but she does suggest that everyone identifying as other can seize the mythology of monstrosity for their own ends, using it to prove they’re nothing like the ordinary folk who chase the Monster out of town. I once asked Lady Bunny, the acid-tongued entertainer and trans superstar, about such matters. She quipped, “I completely identify with



Boris Karloff in 1931. He called the figure he became famous for playing “the dear old monster.”

the character of Frankenstein’s Monster. I wake up, put on makeup and scare people.”

But for the original Monster, being scary is always coupled with being sad. This melancholy is captured in the artist Alex Da Corte’s new film “Slow Graffiti,” which premiered at Secession in Vienna this summer. In the work, the artist roams around a laboratory-like environment seemingly crossed with the interior of Pee-wee’s Playhouse, littered with domestic junk, baubles, fiery torches and food — all the while wearing a deluxe Monster mask, a dead ringer for a fully made-up Boris Karloff. Like Da Corte’s earlier video “Chelsea Hotel No. 2” (2010), “Slow Graffiti” stages an eerie romance between materials, probing how they, too, might be misunderstood. Electrical cable impersonates spaghetti and a black lipstick acts as the lonesome Monster’s cigarette. It wouldn’t be a mad scientist proposition to state that this discombobulating vision of the domestic world — a domain of gooey confusions — relates to queer feelings of alienation from “home,” since that’s where, as the critic and poet Wayne Koestenbaum points out, “we are supposed to learn how to be straight.” Da Corte considers himself a sculptor; he investigates the properties of his body on video, wondering at how it can become a scarecrow, a tribute act, a freak. The Frankensteinish ramifications of all this are electrifying — Da Corte reimagines sculpture (a medium ordinarily dedicated to preserving inanimate material) as alive and bloody, ready to melt.

Staggering somnambulistically around the room or trying to comprehend its mysterious debris, Da Corte recaptures the fact that the Monster’s rage lies in his abandonment and isolation. He’s an embodiment of heartbreak. It is an experiment in empathy for the supposedly unlovable, continuing the queer tradition of sympathy for the Monster that resonates with the moment in Shelley’s novel where he finally speaks of his torment: “Man will not associate with me.” So much of Da Corte’s video fixates on odd dislocations of intimacy — the Monster caresses his face with ham; hands coated with slime touch the back of his neck, that zone where shivers live. “Love me tender, love me true,” a narrator intones in a gloomy voice, as the Monster continues the zombified exploration of the world symptomatic of his loss, slumping on the floor or skewered by a heap of brooms like Saint Sebastian on Halloween. “Why did you leave me?” he asks. “Why are you gone?” There he is, arms outstretched, lovesick, coming for you. ■

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The New York Times

An Artist's Eccentricities, Fueled by a Signature Style



Part of Alex Da Corte's "Free Roses" exhibition at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art.
Nathaniel Brooks for The New York Times

By Randy Kennedy

March 27, 2016

NORTH ADAMS, Mass. — A group of 16 kindergartners on a tour of the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art here stumbled upon a gallery last week where a show was being installed and the children halted in their tracks.

“Look!” said one boy, pointing across a room made eerie by blue and red neon. “Real water! Real ducks!” The water was indeed real, in a shallow white pond where the light made it look like strawberry milk. The ducks were actually swans, motorized plastic ones, circling one another in the water with fake candles rising from their backs.

Kennedy, Randy. “An Artist's Eccentricities, Fueled by a Signature Style.” *The New York Times*, March 28, 2016, p. C1.

If the scene felt like a contemporary-art remake of “Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory,” its creator, the Philadelphia artist Alex Da Corte, didn’t look the part of that top-hatted pied piper. A boyish 35, he was dressed that morning in a threadbare T-shirt and a crumpled Lacoste cap that had been worn nearly to death. He was walking in his socks through galleries where he and a band of devoted friends and assistants had been working for weeks to perfect thousands of tiny details for the most ambitious show of his career, “Free Roses,” which just went on view and continues through January.

The immersive world the exhibition creates can seem Wonka-ish, candy-colored and animated, with deranged elements like mirror-striped floors, flying bats, plastic fruits and vegetables, a giant hoagie made of rubber, and a sculptural rendition of the couch in “The Simpsons.” But Mr. Da Corte, who has become highly sought-after in recent years for a riotous post-post-Pop sensibility, significantly darkens the picture around the corner from the romantic swans, where a video shows a man (Mr. Da Corte’s boyfriend at the time) shooting a syringe-full of Coca-Cola into his arm, drawn from a plastic liter bottle, in a work inspired by Rimbaud’s “A Season in Hell.”

As he once described it, his goal is to challenge the “rules that we have for what is beauty or what is optimism,” moving beyond kitsch and Pop irony into a kind of late-capitalist sublime that can be ravishing and terrifying at the same time.

“If taste is the thing that guides you,” Mr. Da Corte (pronounced da-COR-tah) said in an interview



Alex Da Corte Nathaniel Brooks for The New York Times

Kennedy, Randy. “An Artist’s Eccentricities, Fueled by a Signature Style.” *The New York Times*, March 28, 2016, p. C1.

during an installation break, “then how can you step outside that and try to look at everything every day as if it’s new? To live somewhere up here?” He made a gesture with both hands to the space above his head, and added: “I always like to hope that I have no taste, which is not the same thing as tastelessness.”

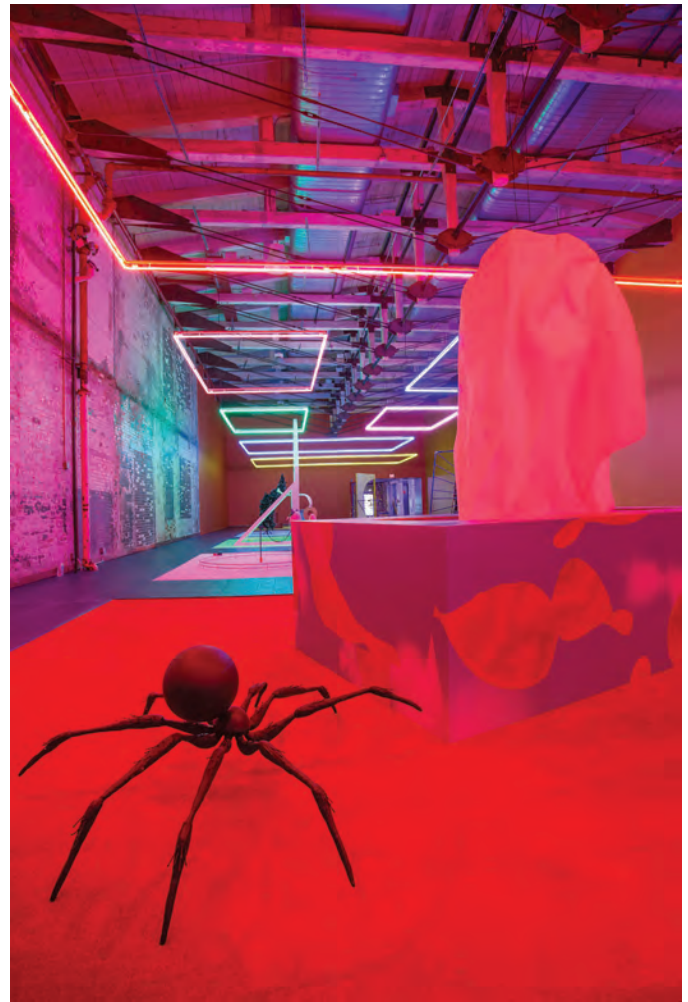
Mr. Da Corte’s art-world reputation as something of a gleefully sinister provocateur is belied in person; he is affable, humble and speaks with great clarity about the art-historical underpinnings of his work. He grew up around Philadelphia in a large, extended, close-knit family and spent several years as a child in Caracas, Venezuela, where his father was born and raised. The electric colors and material exuberance that have become his trademarks derive partly from that South American heritage. “Piñata parties were real,” he said. “They were a very big deal. And I remember waking up every day and seeing mangoes on the ground, which didn’t happen in Pennsylvania.”

After attending the School of Visual Arts in New York with thoughts of becoming a Disney

animator, and later earning an M.F.A. from Yale, he came to notice in the art world fairly quickly in 2010 with a three-minute video inspired by and set to the 1974 Leonard Cohen song “Chelsea Hotel #2.” Mr. Da Corte made the video shortly after his car, with his computer, clothes and all of his studio notes, had been stolen from a street in New York. Depressed, he returned to Philadelphia and went to one of his favorite no-frills supermarkets, Fine Fare on West Girard Street in the beleaguered Ludlow neighborhood, and loaded a shopping cart, mostly with processed food and plastic.

With a cellphone camera and a white backdrop, he took the things he had bought and in only a few hours made the video, a stark poetic progression in which pairs of dirty hands perform a kind of ballet with the cheapest consumer goods — slicing a piece of bologna in half, stacking white bread, crumpling a plastic happy-face bag attached to a fan, pouring purple dish soap into a neon-green clothes hamper.

“Watching it still kind of breaks my heart, because it makes me think that I wish it could always be that easy,” Mr. Da Corte said, sitting on the ground in the hallucinogenic-patterned gallery where the video runs.



An image from Alex Da Corte’s “Free Roses” show. Nathaniel Brooks for The New York Times

Susan Cross, the curator of visual arts at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, who organized the show there, said that when she first became aware of his work in 2011, that video and other pieces fascinated her because “they were so chaotic and so weird and disorienting, but the more time you spent with them the more you saw how formally rigorous they were.”

Like many artists of his generation, Mr. Da Corte sees his work as something fundamentally unstable, as material to be remixed, like music. The show has borrowed pieces from collectors and recombined them to be, at times, almost unrecognizable.

He also sees the lines between his work and the work of artists he admires as blurry at best. In paintinglike works he makes by sandwiching three-dimensional objects between glass and foam board, he sometimes incorporates pieces by friends, like the painter Sascha Braunig and the sculptor Nancy Lupo. A major work in the show here, the three-hour video “Eastern Sports,” is a collaboration with the artist Jayson Musson (known for his invention of the alter-ego art-world scourge Hennessy Youngman). And last year, at the Luxembourg & Dayan gallery on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, Mr. Da Corte created work with borrowed pieces by blue-chip forefathers of postmodern anxiety like Mike Kelley and Robert Gober. Roberta Smith, in *The New York Times*, wrote that last year’s show dazzled “at every turn,” weaving “confounding narratives about innocence and decadence, mass production and eccentricity.”

In an era when mass culture can make eccentricity seem like just another efficiently manufactured product, Mr. Da Corte is well aware of the conundrum he and other Pop-focused artists of his generation inhabit. But in a Beckettian “can’t-go-on-I’ll-go-on” way, he also believes beauty and meaning are still possible, if maybe only harder to find and understand.

“I love big-box stores,” he said, inspecting a work composed of tables with surreal, precisely arranged tableaux of big-box flotsam and jetsam, which also appear in his videos. “To me, these things are like meeting your heroes, like meeting the stars in the movies you’ve just seen. They make me happy.”

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The Boston Globe

ART REVIEW

Stuff and nonsense in spellbinding show at Mass MoCA

By **Sebastian Smee** *Globe Staff, April 8, 2016, 11:57 a.m.*

NORTH ADAMS — It is unreasonable — it is actually mad — to expect as much as we do of objects. We feel them pulsing with possibility in our jeans pockets. We squeeze them until they squirt sauce onto our plates. We slice them and toast them and suck them and cradle them, and all the time we want something from them.

In functional terms, that something is simple. In psychological terms, what we want so far surpasses anything the objects could possibly provide that to reflect on the mismatch is to become humiliatingly aware of a low drone of hysteria inside us.

You'll know what I'm talking about as soon as you enter "Free Roses," a demented, fluorescent, and at times quite brilliant show of sculptures, paintings, videos, and installations by Alex Da Corte at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art.

The show surveys 10 years of work by the 35-year-old, Philadelphia-based artist. Filling several large, contiguous galleries, Da Corte addresses — in a sophisticated but still-developing idiom that feels at once funny and sinister, familiar and fresh — sex, suburbia, symbolism, and stuff.

What kind of stuff? Bright-colored stuff. Food. Plastics. Plastic foods. Food dye. Liquids. Ikea furniture. Beanbags shaped like burgers. Artificial Christmas trees. Acrylic fingernails. Rhinestones. Stuffed dogs. Circling bats. Sliced bologna.



A still from the video "Easternsports," part of Alex Da Corte's "Free Roses" installation at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art.

That's right. It's random. And yet it's all tighter, and smarter, than it sounds. Da Corte's work has roots both in Pop Art (particularly Claes Oldenburg) and Surrealism, and shares a love of material profusion and rampaging symbolism with the likes of Mike Kelley and Jim Shaw.

He is part of a new generation of artists who dabble in traditional media like sculpture and painting, but truly excel at video and wildly theatrical presentation.

Born in New Jersey, Da Corte spent several years as a child in Caracas. He was brought up in a Catholic household, and encouraged to revere both Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel and the art of caricature. As a boy, he wanted to work for Disney.

His discovery of contemporary art in New York coincided with a burgeoning awareness of his homosexuality. Both discoveries, dovetailing, lent his early work power, urgency, and a palpable freedom.

Da Corte's work may be rooted in mass consumer culture, but it is filtered through French Symbolist poetry, modern and contemporary art, and above all, perhaps, Catholicism, with its flair for ritual and theatrics, and its incorrigible eagerness to propose one thing as another.

A similar drive, part mocking, part sincere, underlies all of Da Corte's work. The sheer proliferation of symbols can overwhelm one's desire to decode them — but then, that might be part of the game plan.



Alex Da Corte's "Lightning." JOHN BERNARDO

Smee, Sebastian. "Stuff and Nonsense: Fantastic Universes Unfold in Spellbinding Show at MASS MoCA." *Boston Globe*, April 8, 2016, pp. N1, N4.

The show kicks off with a sprawling ensemble of sculptural tableaux called “Lightning.” It’s inspired, like several other works in the show, by Arthur Rimbaud’s prose poem, “A Season in Hell.”

“Hallucinations are without number,” wrote Rimbaud in that work. Da Corte evidently wants to prove him right.

Two plastic swans with electric candles perched on their heads circle a splashing pool of pink water. A spider stands next to a giant tissue box.

A stuffed dog — a faithful replica of the dog that witnessed Nicole Brown Simpson’s murder — glides around a circular track. Two elongated mannequin arms with hands at both ends pass through the window of a pink house. On the other side are dozens of yellow tennis balls scattered on green carpet.

These and other tableaux are fastidiously arranged on neat squares of plush carpet surrounded by purple floorboards, under rectangular frames of colored neon light. The light lends everything a lurid, untrustworthy atmosphere. Bad things could happen here. They probably already have.

Da Corte regularly uses work by other artists in his installations. Usually it’s work by his peers. But here, in the final tableau of “Lightning,” he has surrounded Joseph Beuys’s “Lightning With Stag in Its Glare” — a cluster of bronze objects that invoke Christianity, socialism, and the spiritual power of nature — with carpet, bathing the whole ensemble in light.

The effect is to create a sense of travesty (the Beuys is usually regarded as a post-war masterpiece, heavy with symbolism). And yet it also reminds us that Beuys’s art was itself based on travesty. He was a myth-monger, an alchemist, a clown, a shaman.

“My life is threadbare,” wrote Rimbaud in “Lightning,” a chapter in “A Season in Hell.” He continued: “All right! Let’s sham and shirk. . . And we will go on enjoying ourselves, dreaming monstrous loves, fantastic universes, grumbling, and quarreling with the world’s appearances. . .”

More succinctly than any formulation I can contrive, those lines describe what Da Corte is up to: shamming and shirking, dreaming monstrous loves, inventing fantastic universes.

His collaged paintings and small sculptural tableaux are, it must be admitted, mediocre art school fare — too arbitrary to hold your attention.

His videos are a whole other thing. Neither as dark and anarchic as comparable videos by Ryan Trecartin and Lizzie Fitch, nor as tightly constructed and brilliantly conceived as those by Mika Rottenberg, they are nonetheless exceptional. Da Corte’s feeling for form and color, and his ability to squeeze a nonchalant poetry out of the most banal-seeming objects, is spellbinding.

His breakthrough work, “Chelsea Hotel #2,” is a sequence of simple actions performed to the strains of Leonard Cohen’s song of the same name.

Hands covered in dirt, flour paste, or aluminum come in and out of the picture frame. They flatten a loaf of sliced white bread; lift a slice of bologna from an upside-down orange bucket; peel a banana with a hoop ring attached to one end; and press back against a plastic bag inflated by a room fan.

A blue chair falls to the floor. A rose stem is wrapped in green plastic bubble wrap. Cherries are painted with red nail polish.

All this is projected on a screen in a room that has a mirrored floor with a red lattice pattern and walls with diagonal red-and-white stripes. At the opposite end is a low platform with a giant sub sandwich made from cast rubber.

The hoagie is fine. But the video is genuinely great. With just a few ingredients, all purchased from a cheap store in a moment of despair, Da Corte invented a private language and forged a visual poem from it. The three-minute video speaks with utmost concision and pathos of sex and love. Cohen's song, by far his greatest, imbues it with the feeling that nothing more could possibly be said.

Da Corte, however, kept speaking — and very eloquently — in subsequent videos, culminating in 2014 with "Easternsports," described as "a three-hour kaleidoscopic video-cum-telenovela."

The four-screen installation, loosely based on Thornton Wilder's play "Our Town," has a philosophical and frequently hilarious script by Jayson Musson, shown in subtitles, and shifting, minimalist music by Dev Hynes.

Da Corte's slow-moving visuals — repetitive actions performed by actors in strange costumes in front of colorful, geometric backgrounds — are at once formally rigorous and kitschily grotesque. There's a great comic undertow to it all.

Taut, camp, blindingly bright, and simultaneously open-hearted and scathing, it's a major work of art, by an artist who doesn't seem short of ideas, and feels dangerously in tune with the *Zeitgeist*.

ALEX DA CORTE: Free Roses

At Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, North Adams. Through Jan. 31, 2017. 413-662-2111, www.massmoca.org

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

Art in America

COMING UP ROSES: ALEX DA CORTE AT MASS MOCA

By Brian Droitcour

May 5, 2016 12:18pm



Alex Da Corte adapts his work to the environments where he exhibits it, developing total installations that respond to the spirit and space of the venue. For “Free Roses,” his first museum survey, the Philadelphia-based artist has absorbed the atmosphere of the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA) and transformed it turn. Like Dia: Beacon or Pittsburgh’s

Droitcour, Brian. “Coming Up Roses: Alex Da Corte at MASS MoCA.” *Art in America*, May 5, 2016.

Mattress Factory, MASS MoCA is an industrial space repurposed for the display of art, and like those other institutions it often shows large-scale Minimalist sculpture. They gravitate toward such work for practical reasons—all that bulky hardware fills warehouse expanses better than dainty paintings—but there’s an aesthetic payoff, too; formal repetition haunts a former factory with the phantom of mass production. Exhibitions in this vein at MASS MoCA include Sol LeWitt’s wall drawings, a permanent installation since 2004, and Richard Nonas’s “The Man in the Empty Space,” on view through September, with new and old works that arrange wooden railroad ties, granite curbstones, and other rugged found materials around a massive stone chair.

No one would call Da Corte a Minimalist. He uses repetition and variation as a generative principle, as Minimalists do. But he ends up at maximalism via his own queer serialism, where iterations are sometimes straight and sometimes twisted. His work isn’t so much about mass production as it is about consumption. There’s a friction between the large-scale structures of manufacturing and distribution behind dollar-store abundance and the unique, unpredictable moments of contingency when shoppers’ tastes and appetites come into contact with individual things, and that’s the tension that animates Da Corte’s work. For his sprawling, multi-part *Lightning* (2015-16), Da Corte has divided the hangar-like second-floor gallery into zones with colored deep-pile carpeting, blocked out again from above with matching squares of neon light. Geometric reason spawns angels and demons. On an orange square, a black widow spider creeps behind a giant Kleenex box that offers up a cloud of a tissue cast in foam. On a pink square, a stuffed dog in a dog mask rides a circular track, and there’s more kinetic movement on a glossy pink rectangle where twin plastic swans with



Droitcour, Brian. “Coming Up Roses: Alex Da Corte at MASS MoCA.” *Art in America*, May 5, 2016.

artificial candles in their necks swim around a pond dotted with lily pads and pancakes with syrupy pats of butter that mimic the lilies. On a corner of the yellow carpet at the installation's edge, the quadrilateral geometry that organizes the floorplan mutates into a weedy growth: miniature plastic models of foodstuffs and other random items crawl on towers built from K'Nex construction toys that recall LeWitt's cubed structures. Through juxtaposition, "Free Roses" plays up the theatricality of Minimalism in the other, more sober installations—turn around a wall at one end of "Free Roses," and you find yourself in a stairwell eerily lit red; a door at the bottom deposits you at a sideways view of "The Man in the Empty Space."

MASS MoCA's worn brick walls fade into oblivion in the haze of color. The colored light saturates the sculptures, too, making details hard to discern. This can feel like a misstep—like when a chef overwhelms the complexity of his ingredients by adding too much sauce. The wall texts and accompanying brochure include Da Corte's account of the materials that comprise the exhibition; these inventories read like a Rabelaisian litany made deadpan by the format of the caption. But the totalizing elements—which include sound and smell as well as color and light—set Da Corte apart from other artists who work by aggregating readymades. His results are a fantastic permutation of the thrift-store or dollar-store environments where his work begins, the straight shelves that host a riot of odds and ends, all awash in wan fluorescent light. He exaggerates that logic to reproduce it as his own. A purple patch of carpet in *Lightning* swarms with everything pumpkin—a deflated Halloween decoration, a plastic pumpkin, an actual gourd, transparent bottles of orange shampoo and lotion that probably carry the scent of pumpkin spice—and above it all leans a decorative



Droitcour, Brian. "Coming Up Roses: Alex Da Corte at MASS MoCA." *Art in America*, May 5, 2016.



window grate. The central circle with thin spokes radiating out to the rectangular frame suggests the plump ridged sections of a pumpkin growing outward from its round top, flattened in metal.

Da Corte works by analogies where the terms of comparison can change. This method is most apparent in a side gallery of four tabletop sculptures. The surfaces sit on sawhorses; two are mirrored panels, others are Ikea shelves still in wrapping. They hold objects that imply, variously, skins, sheathes or coatings; in *Brown and Mercer* (2013), a fiberglass foot stands opposite a laptop cover pierced by a rubber snake. The tableaux appear to be conceived as a series, but they are different sculptures, made between 2012 and 2015, united here by their similarities, and by a mechanical bat that inscribes the space from above as it flies around on a circular track, red eyes flashing.

Some of the tabletop tableaux, or other arrangements like them, were used in a 2012 series of videos. Video is an important part of Da Corte's work because it shows objects in movement, that these things are not static but part of a trajectory of possibility, an encounter. In *A Season in Hell* (2012), an athletic young man with a clean-cut hairstyle and attire takes a black egg from its perch in a white vase and cracks it, spilling its innards on a shiny table the color of watermelon flesh. Then he takes an orange tube capping a fountain pen and uses it to snort the raw yolk, which drips from his nostril as he straightens himself and returns the tube to its place. Slow motion draws out the action, giving you time to guess where it's headed, and the punch line could satisfy or confuse you. A simpler video, *Chelsea Hotel No. 2* (2010), comprises short clips of the artists'

hands touching objects. A flour-dusted hand stacks slices of white bread, then smooshes the tower down. It squirts blue shampoo into a wastebasket with green plastic weaving imitating wicker. Red-stained juicy hands snip slices of baloney along a diagonal. The video is set to the eponymous song by Leonard Cohen, a sad, soulful waltz with an ambling but insistent bass line that dances around the inevitability of diatonic chord progressions. Cohen's ragged voice sometimes lands on the beat, sometimes just off it or after it, the way that the objects in the video meet expectations in some moments and defy them at others.

The appearance of pop songs in art often seems like a cop-out, as if artists exploit their emotional impact to compensate for a lack of the same in their own work. But Da Corte's use of the Cohen song in *Chelsea Hotel No. 2* is so precise. Elsewhere he uses more abstract electronic compositions, and he's worked with composer and producer Dev Hynes to make soundtracks, including the solemn tones that envelop the far end of *Lightning*, which rearranges its namesake, Joseph Beuys's *Lightning with Stag in its Glare* (1958-85), a permanent installation at MASS MoCA. There are bronze casts of fecal forms, and a tripod and a cart with lumpy heads approximate animals grazing around them. At the center is the lightning strike, petrified in a ziggurat of loam. The pieces of Beuys's installation usually take up more space in the gallery, but Da Corte has tightened them into a circle of bare floor, surrounded by green shag carpet and bathed in green light. On the wall he's hung a plastic sword piercing a monochrome painting—a gesture to European mythology to heighten the primal mystery of the Beuys.

Beuys makes a fascinating foil for Da Corte. Both use food in their work. Beuys used blocks of lard, real and cast, and the canned food and packaged sausages of postwar Germany's meager diet, mixing them with totemic symbols to evoke a connection between the storage of caloric energy and its activation in the body, and the symbolic power of objects that animates the life of the soul. Da Corte uses potable liquids and real spices for their olfactory effects. But his sculptures usually incorporate more durable plastic food, the kind found at party supply stores: the stuff of sustenance already copied as decoration. Beuys found the magic of Tatar shamanism and medieval mysticism transmuted in modernity, and Da Corte picks up where Beuys left off; in contemporary America's more motley world of consumption, he finds magic in encounters among things, tastes, and desires.

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MODERN PAINTERS

NORTH AMERICA // NORTH ADAMS, MASSACHUSETTS //

SAN FRANCISCO // LOS ANGELES // PORTLAND, OREGON // HOUSTON

EUROPE // LONDON // BERLIN

REVIEWS



Alex Da Corte
Installation view of
Lightning, 2016.

NORTH ADAMS, MASSACHUSETTS

Alex Da Corte

Mass MOCA // March 26, 2016–January 31, 2017

THOUGH “FREE ROSES” posits itself as a short survey of the last decade of Da Corte’s short career, thinking about his work chronologically presents challenges. For one, the distinctions are blurry—he constantly remixes objects and ideas, often incorporating older works into newer installations, and so on. Indeed, such distinctions are almost irrelevant, his democratic approach toward all objects ultimately resisting any kind of

hierarchical schema.

The oldest complete work in the show is perhaps the most central to its understanding. *Chelsea Hotel #2*, 2010, is a three-minute-long video wherein familiar objects are rendered unfamiliar through close focus and strange actions performed by anonymous sets of soiled hands: a lily is rolled in bubble wrap, a stack of white bread is depressed by an open palm. Nail polish-painted cherries, bologna cut by scissors:

Written out, it’s poetic, much like the beautiful Leonard Cohen ballad that plays in the background. It’s also sad, the soundtrack imbuing the surreal situations with a sense of loss.

A series of three videos from 2012 picks up where *Chelsea Hotel #2* left off, exploring violence and the sensuality of food, but doing so to more disturbing ends. *A Season in He’ll*, *Bad Blood*, and *The Impossible* are all named after sections in Arthur

REVIEWS



Alex Da Corte

FROM TOP:
Still from
Easternsports, 2014.
Three-channel
digital video.

Still from *Chelsea
Hotel No. 2*, 2010.
Digital video, 3 min.

Installation view of
Cold War, 2011.



Rimbaud's 1873 prose poem "A Season in Hell." It is Rimbaud's opus, a hallucinatory reflection on the author's struggles with love, drugs, and homosexuality. In Da Corte's trilogy, the drama is all self-induced: a man, who appears in all three videos, injects soda, snorts an egg, and punches himself in the face with brass knuckles.

Outside the video rooms, collections of Da Corte's previous works are compiled into ad hoc installations and re-creations of previous exhibitions. Carpets crawl up the walls on which his paintings appropriating album covers lean in stacks, as if in a record store bin. Nearby there's *Easternsports*, 2014, a four channel video collaboration which mixes elaborate scenery by Da Corte, a faux-poetic text by Jayson Musson (a.k.a. Hennessy Youngman), and a dreamy soundtrack by Dev Hynes. The video is impressive, but at nearly three hours long is a lot to take in. Its discordant parts result more in an indulgent formal experiment and self-conscious joke than a cohesive statement.

But it's the newest work in the show that is the most striking. *Lightning*, 2015–16, is a sprawling, site-specific installation that occupies the entire 100-foot-long, 30-foot-tall gallery space on the second floor. Its title is a reference both to another section of Rimbaud's poem and to one of Mass MOCA's most famous pieces, Joseph Beuys's *Lightning with Stag in its Glare*, 1958–85. Like "A Season in Hell," the piece is modular, divided into sections. The first eight are delineated by color and loose thematic imagery. Each "scene" is vaguely domestic, from a loose mash-up of the living rooms from *The Simpsons* and *Singin' in the Rain*, to the façade of the house from *Beetlejuice*, to a reference to the dog who witnessed Nicole Brown Simpson's murder. It's theatrical, even cinematic, invoking David Lynch and Tim Burton as much as it does Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy—two of the artists to whom Da Corte is most often compared.

Finally, *Lightning* concludes in the room adjacent to the main one, where Beuys's *Lightning with Stag in its Glare* is permanently installed. Da Corte, who frequently includes other artists' work in his exhibitions, brilliantly incorporates the Beuys sculpture. He wanted to add onto it, but the Beuys estate would not allow it. So instead, Da Corte installed green neon lights around it, surrounding but not touching it, and turned off all other sources of light, subsuming the museum's

most iconic artwork in a punkish fashion that would have made Beuys himself proud.

Da Corte's sculptural language is built from everyday commercial items that once promised a better life, but instead amount only to cheap and shiny stuff: tangled Apple headphones, American Apparel tights, unwrapped Ikea shelves. They're sad, in a way, the speed of consumerism having left them obsolete or forgotten. One could imagine an entire warehouse of these old objects, things used once or twice and then thrown away—not a bad image alongside "Free Roses," especially since the show is installed in an industrial building haunted by the ghosts of mass-manufacturing past.

In Da Corte's world, cheap objects have the same value as canonical works of art. And despite all its playfulness, Benetton colors, and cartoon references, it's ultimately a pretty gloomy place to be.

—Taylor Dafoe

MODERN PAINTERS

INTRODUCING // ALEX DA CORTE

Inorganic Matter

Layering space to explore family history

BY THEA BALLARD

"THE FIRST THING I started working with was plastic fingernails."

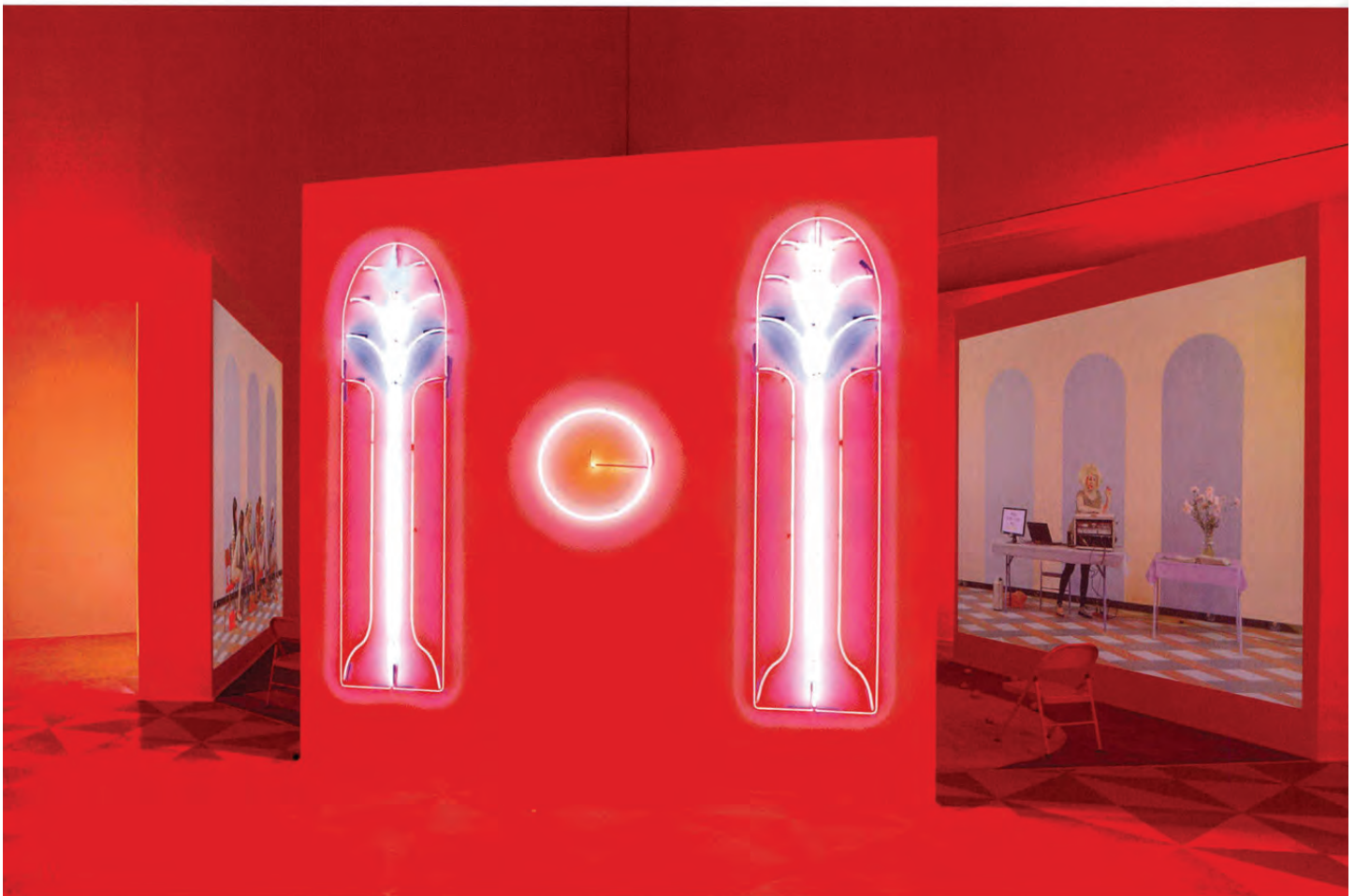
Alex Da Corte is describing the early trajectory of his career, after studying animation as an undergraduate. "I had always loved objects and wanted to work with them, but I didn't understand metal or wood or any of that stuff," he recalls. "That kind of craft is beyond me, and it felt like it was about being a heroic white male. A plastic fingernail is a lot like Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc*:

It's a really nice monument, it's strong, and it signifies something like armor."

A decade or so later, the artist's northwest Philadelphia studio—a windowless, unheated room with high ceilings in a now-empty factory, accessible via a garage door—remains populated by numerous plastic accoutrements, fragments of a practice that incorporates video, painting, and sculpture, often mixed together in an intensely colorful immersive installation format. A salon-

style arrangement of objects into an ad hoc mood board along one wall indicates that Da Corte's elevated view of such inorganic cultural scraps is very much still present: There's a bright-yellow upside-down plastic bag bearing the image of the very tan pro wrestler Hulk Hogan alongside a trio of Swiffer mops, a nose mounted on a reflective gold disk, a hanging wig, and several smallish collage-style paintings, including a Ouija board decorated with images of Miley Cyrus.

Installation view of *Easternsports*, a 2014 collaboration with Jayson Musson at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia.



There's a careful geometry to the arrangement, but it's far from pristine. The 3-D sketch "cannibalizes," to use the artist's term, both found items and leftovers from completed projects (the Swiffers, for example, are but three of many more that appeared in Da Corte's 2014 collaboration with Jayson Musson, the film installation *Easternsports*). Drawing from the impulsive organization of this wall is "like surveying a crime scene or something," Da Corte says. "You start to investigate whodunit."

The artist, a longtime Philadelphia resident who was born in nearby Camden, New Jersey, and lived for a period in Caracas, Venezuela, finds both questions and clues in the circuitous relationships within such groupings—recalling, as he points out, Haim Steinbach's readymades, transformed through juxtaposition, except in Da Corte's case "these things are touching one another or have changed in a way. They become new equations for stuff." For his ambitious first solo show with Luxembourg & Dayan, opening this month, he will extend his spatially minded approach to the entirety of the gallery's New York town house. "I had been fantasizing about that town house for over a year, how it would be fun to make it a haunted house," he says. Once he was asked to show in the space, this idea morphed into re-creating his grandmother's house in Camden. "My work often deals with memory, and how objects change when they pass through different hands," he explains. "My grandmom made everything in her house—she was very meticulous and crafty. But over the past year or so she's developed dementia, and I thought it would be a nice moment to marry her house to the gallery, in hopes of preserving what isn't lost yet." The artist is fabricating objects himself, such as individual braided rugs for every stair, based on his grandmother's description. The aim of this process, it's worth noting, is not necessarily sentimentality—the settings Da Corte is handcrafting will be marked by his off-kilter sense of humor and affinity for campy sci-fi and horror references. At one point, he addresses one of his flannel-shirted assistants, who is crafting a large mock-up of vertical bars: "Wow, that's a big jail cell—I mean, that's a big window!" Turning to me, he explains: "That's going to be a neon sculpture for when you first walk into the town house, which will be black with a candle over the window, with a brass door knocker with a woman's hand on it. When you get inside, you realize that

you're in jail. Have you ever seen the movie *The Cell*, with Jennifer Lopez?"

Also folded into the installation will be borrowed pieces by artists Da Corte admires, including Robert Gober and Bjarne Melgaard. "Thinking about Luxembourg & Dayan as a secondary-market gallery, I became interested in

are layers or skins of spaces. I'm interested in what moves between objects, and how space is a fossil of these exchanges, and how this is separate from nostalgia."

Taste becomes a key factor in the negotiation between these skins, as the artist marries the staunchly middle-class, suburban details of his personal life to

"Plastic is really comforting to me. If everything uptown is glass, then everything in my house is plastic."

using other people's work in my own, relearning or rediscovering it, and maybe disassociating it from its context," he says. "So if the context is my grandmom's house, how it would be humorous or horrific if you were to stumble upon, say, a Gober sink drain in the foyer." The result is less a re-creation of space than a layering, Da Corte explains: "It's important to me that there are—I wouldn't say ghosts, but that there

the socioeconomically loaded space of an Upper East Side gallery. "Something that proposes that you're fancy or luxe could be deemed really low uptown," he says. "And a knockoff scarf in your grandmom's house isn't seen as a knockoff. But the sentiment of the entire show is trying to disengage from your own taste, and revisit yourself. It's the opposite of déjà vu—*jamais vu*, seeing something for



Da Corte in costume as his grandmother in a promotional image for his upcoming show at Luxembourg & Dayan.

THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE: ALEX DA CORTE

ABOVE:
*The Moon
 Gone Dark* (with
 Eugene Von
 Bruenchenhein),
 2014. Anodized
 metal frame, ribbon,
 digitally printed
 nylon, sequin pins,
 spray paint, images
 from Eugene Von
 Bruenchenhein's
 1998 *Works in
 Clay* catalogue,
 foam, and
 tape, 56 x 64 in.

RIGHT:
 Da Corte as Eminem
 in a promotional
 image for the
 September 2013
 exhibition
 "1000ISLAND"
 at Joe Sheffel in
 New York.



the first time." As an artist with a marked interest in plastic, as seen in the Hulk Hogan bag, or an in-progress arrangement incorporating a plastic vessel filled with Christmas ornaments and a particularly inscrutable green piece of Ball jar packaging, Da Corte is frequently subject to the complication of socially loaded associations, be they with low cultural signifiers or Pop art. "I went recently to a couple of shows in Europe," he recalls, "and their idea of America or the suburbs just made me giggle, because I think they saw my work as really low. I don't think of it that way because I grew up in that environment—plastic is really familiar to me, and comforting. If everything uptown is glass, then everything in my house is plastic. But it's shiny, it's colorful, it doesn't break—all of these things, to me, make it seem really royal and luxe."

Da Corte possesses some aesthetic and social overlap with other young artists plumbing the imagery of contemporary consumer culture, but the sincerity of his relationship to these materials lends weight to his middle-class references

that's lacking in the urbane detachment of, say, K-Hole or DIS magazine. His video *True Life*, 2013, in which he stares at the viewer while eating a bowl of cinnamon Life cereal in character as Eminem (color contacts and all), has a comic veneer, and plays with racial signifiers as a form of adornment; it's also, however, an empathetic performance—stepping into the embattled rapper's costume to see how it feels. The 2014 *Easternsports*, too, has a stylized veneer: It consists of four channels replete with good-looking actors and humorous references (beer pong, a spray-tanned woman doing yoga, and a chain-smoking witch among them), not to mention the setting in which it's viewed, lit in fuchsia neon. But filmed at half speed and narrated by subtitles relating an epic, and often hilarious, poetic treatise written by Jayson Musson, the piece—projected as a four-hour loop—is designed to be experienced in no particular order and revisited, coaxing the more attentive visitor into a somewhat alien viewing rhythm, one that works in tension with the rhythms by which we under-

stand objects in contemporary culture.

Da Corte's evident affection for advertising or a supermarket palette might suggest to the viewer that he or she should rapidly consume the work, but he emphasizes a perhaps counterintuitive intimacy in its pacing. "It's slow, and antitechnology in some ways," he says. "It's slower than what people assume it might be. It does have a feeling of supermarket fast flash to it, but it's very much about the psyche." For context, he offers some family history, uncovered while working with his grandmother for this project. "My American grandfather was a grocery store stockist for McCormick spices," he says. "For some reason, it just never occurred to me, but my *abuelo* on my father's side started a conglomerate supermarket when he moved from Portugal to Caracas. It's a strange parallel, with my grandfathers on opposite ends of this food chain, occupying two very different roles of power. That collision of class is very much embedded in all of my work." And, as he points out, this emerged through a process of revisiting the systems that make up his personal and familial history. "It comes from seeing if the set of systems that you grew up with is a given, or a puzzle—how you can be constantly reanalyzing it," he explains.

And while Da Corte's work reflects social realities, critiquing class rituals and containing a narrative of the artist's own history, it also uses these same materials to reach toward another space. "I'm drawing from the hyper-flat space of animation, from the days when ink and paint were reverse-painted to a cel, and what it means to live on the other side of that plastic sheet; it seems like plastic is the best way to speak that language," he says. "Plastic is the interstitial space between the real and the glossy, some parallel kind of world." MP

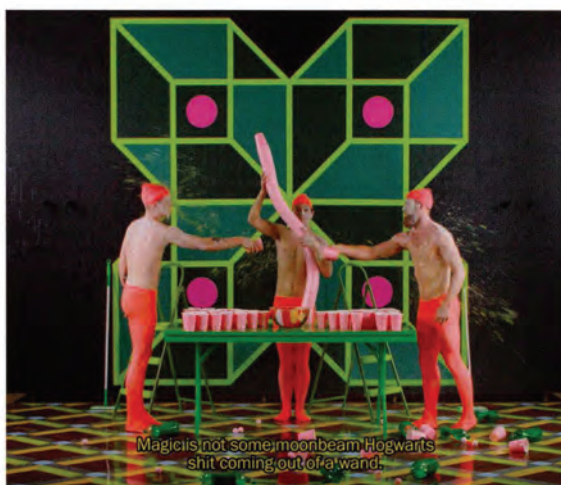


Art in America

PHILADELPHIA ALEX DA CORTE AND JAYSON MUSSON Institute of Contemporary Art

Easternsports (2014) is a collaborative installation by Alex Da Corte and Jayson Musson with two and a half hours of atmospheric video on four channels, and a disjointed essay-poem of tens of thousands of words running through the subtitles. Any account of its content aspiring to comprehensiveness would be as big as the work itself. Easier to describe is the palette. Mustard, lavender, avocado, ochre and a spectrum of pinks and reds color the costumes, props and sets. All these hues seem as if they'd be sharper and more vibrant if it weren't for the fuchsia glow filling the gallery and filtering the projection beams. The same light dulls the clash of rust and hot pink in the geometric pattern of the shag carpet, littered with dead oranges, connecting the open room of four drywall slabs that catch the projections. If an interior decorator uses warm tones to create intimacy in an airy space and cool tones to expand a tight one, the palette of *Easternsports* reverses these effects—its compromised heats evaporate in a coolly receding haze.

The colors of *Easternsports* function as formal properties as they always do in the work of Da Corte, who is known more for sculpture than video. Like so many sculptors now, he aggregates readymades, but unlike most, who thread their jumble with an inscrutable network of references, he delights in the abstraction of detail. The rhyming parts of a sculpture's pieces cohere in a singular impression, as can be seen in the sets of *Easternsports*, multiplied across the channels and put in motion. Da Corte frequently collaborates but he isn't promiscuous with his vision. He swallows other artists in it, as if they were readymades too. So it is with Musson, who wrote the subtitles. His contribution, like most of his work, is a joke about the art world. The effect of his text is to mimic highbrow video art, a touch of self-aware humor to relieve an ambitious project of its own seriousness. It works, but the more substantial contribution to *Easternsports* is Dev Hynes's soundtrack, lush with vibraphones, inflected



Alex Da Corte and Jayson Musson: *Easternsports*, 2014, 4-channel video installation, 152 minutes; at the Institute of Contemporary Art.

with the obsessive insistence of Philip Glass or John Adams, as invasively immersive as the pink light.

Neither subtitles nor soundtrack align with the video's parallel processions of slo-mo tableaux. Here's a description of one: a man uses peanut butter as mortar to build a brick wall that's used as a puppet theater during his smoke breaks. Da Corte's scenes blend menial tasks and artistic activity in a playbor—both play and labor but neither—an aestheticized analogue to, say, scanning BuzzFeed at the office, where the operation of mouse and keyboard do work for a paying employer and BuzzFeed's data farmers alike as the body is entertained and bored. *Easternsports*, perhaps more than his earlier works, presents Da Corte's sculptural method as a beautiful echo of urban and online vistas where content's abundance has less to do with communication than with form.

Postscript: A month after *Easternsports* opened, the Gap released a YouTube ad—a Hynes music video directed by Da Corte. Short, with singing and vivid color, it's easier to consume than the art, yet anyone who saw *Easternsports* would recognize it in the video's reds and purples, striped to offset each other's power, and the use of a mop as both tool and prop to put chore in choreography. It speaks to the scalability of vision of an artist who can also function as a platform.

—Brian Droitcour

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Flash Art

FEATURE

Plastic Spiritualism and Nice Hair

Laura McLean-Ferris on the art of Alex Da Corte

72 — MARCH / APRIL 2015



McLean-Ferris, Laura. "Plastic Spiritualism and Nice Hair." *Flash Art*, no. 301, March/April 2015, pp. 72–79.



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McLean-Ferris, Laura. "Plastic Spiritualism and Nice Hair." *Flash Art*, no. 301, March/April 2015, pp. 72–79.

The beautiful people of this world wear their spandex leggings high-waisted and tight. The women wear their gleaming artificial hair with exquisite poise, and twirl it around their fingers often. They are, after all, the beautiful people. The spaces that they inhabit and move through have a total, all-over aesthetic, decked out like sets for kids' TV shows, well-behaved nightclubs, or concept stores for useless items. The décor is precise and graphic, whether in rooms that are painted in princessy shades of violet and lemon, or in those covered in patterns and brights reminiscent of the high postmodernist style associated with the Memphis group. This world is *EasternSports* (2014), a series of videos created by Alex Da Corte and Jayson Musson, and scored by Devonté Hynes. The melancholic scripts, mostly delivered in French in order to playfully acknowledge the philosophic "depthiness" often attributed to this language in an anodyne, shallow-seeming environment, are subtitled onscreen, and feature several ruminations on existential emptiness, though they are regularly comedic. "Are you an artist? My condolences if you are," read the words on screen, as we watch a model dressed in a tight green onesie gets a haircut. In terms of action, *Easternsports* features a number of slow-motion set pieces: a female figure with a deep orange tan and yellow-blond hair dives into a cage full of balloons before entering into a meditative state; three shirtless men in red swimming caps and matching leggings carefully set up, and then play, a game of beer pong with what appears to be de-labeled bottles of Mountain Dew; a mummy croons a sermon on love songs to a congregation of chattering, pretty women. Hynes's music, composed in response to Da Corte's palettes, is constructed from repeated piano-based motifs, other percussive instruments and the sad synths of a curiously touching video game. Indeed, owing to Hynes's color/sound based synesthesia, color is a point of convergence between the two artists.

In *Easternsports* we are offered a long, detailed view of Da Corte's installations as a complete universe. The artist's exhibitions are often constructed as though they are stage sets or studios, such that viewers are often positioned as uneasy actors. Particular props tend to reappear across the artist's installations — brightly colored shampoo bottles, soda drinks, mops, ladders, paper cups, balloons, bouncy balls, often arranged by color. There's an equalizing energy at play in the artist's treatment of his objects and products. In one of the *Easternsports* videos we see a woman walking through several spaces, taking several such items from display shelves, as a male attendant assists her, and placing them unceremoniously in a shoulder bag without a second thought. She's an aesthetic shopper with no need for money, in a world in which every object is banal and Ikea-like, all part of the same holistic or all-encompassing brand.

We arrive in the rooms that Da Corte constructs for his exhibitions as though we have travelled down a corridor into a kind of "off-world" where normal rules do not quite apply. The apartment in Rainer Werner

Fassbinder's *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* (1972), a film that the artist has made reference to more than once in his work, presents this kind of hystericized space, a closed box for drama connected to the rest of the world only tenuously. The red room in the finale of David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* (1990–91), in which dwarves and dead women speak a somnambulistic backwards-speak, might be another example, or the red jewel box theater from the same director's *Mulholland Drive* (2001). Sceneography, as witnessed in Da Corte's work, is a way of looking at spaces and objects in a way that is time-based and inherently theatrical: occasionally we are explicitly directed by the viewer. For a recent exhibition, "Delirium 1" at David Risley in Copenhagen, for example, the gallery spaces were described in the exhibition texts as "Scene 1" and "Scene 2." Both areas, one with a red color scheme and the other with a purple one, had mirrored floors with an Escher-like tile pattern on them, backdrops for objects, mirrors, fabric works and photographs. From "Scene 1": "The viewer (you) enters the room. The smell of Calvin Klein's Obsession lingers. There is an acrylic tiled floor. Its pattern is a lattice-type grid; the spaces in between the lattice lines are mirror. It appears as if you might have to walk only on the lines for fear of falling into nothingness. There is a green mirror shelf on the wall. As you enter you see yourself in green. You are comforted. You think of money." The exhibition, as well as the narrative, unfolds in the nonsequitous way that dreams and nightmares do, inciting feelings of responsibility, guilt, pleasure or unease.

As Da Corte explains in an email exchange: "Working with stages, or theater in a sculptural sense, actively implicates the viewer's subjectivity if there are no other players on the given stage. The viewer is the player, the star. There is a sense in these scenes that the camera is on you, but always behind your head, and there is no audience but you." Given the developments that have occurred in the current technological age, in which we can have little expectation that our every movement is not being recorded by a security camera, an algorithm or the iPhone of a stranger or a friend, a sensation of being potentially observed has become familiar to us. However, it's the unnerving emptiness, proppiness and artificiality of Da Corte's installations that drive this skewed form of solo performativity. We are simply performing for an audience of one: ourselves. "Any gesture of performance, even just looking in the space," explains the artist, "is one that activates the stage and gives new purpose to the special effects to disengage or reengage your psychological state. But the experience is completely yours. In a moment when we are all dancing for the camera, I think of these sculptural void spaces as ones that exist beyond the fourth wall, a place with no exit and no entry. A free place." He adds an afterthought: "It's funny to think of a place with no exit or entry as free."

Da Corte's attentiveness to scenes, staging and context has not stopped with his own work, and he has often turned to creating display systems for the

Page 73:
Borderland State (Pink Pavor Nocturnus) (2014)
Courtesy of the Artist and David Risley Gallery, Copenhagen

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"A Night in Hell"
Installation view at Carl Kostyal, Stockholm (2014)
Courtesy of the Artist and Carl Kostyal, London/ Stockholm

Page 75:
Alex Da Corte and Jayson Musson, *Easternsports* (video still, 2014)
Courtesy of the Artists: Fleisher/Ollman Gallery, Philadelphia; Joe Sheftel Gallery, New York; and Salon 94, New York

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"Die Hexe"
Installation view at Luxembourg & Dayan, New York (2015)
Courtesy of the Artist and Luxembourg & Dayan, New York. Photography by John Bernardo



work of others, even embedding works of artists such as Nancy Lupo, Brendan Smith and Alex Ebstein into his own *Plastic Paintings* (2013), which he displayed in a pink carpeted environment at the Institute of Contemporary at Art Maine College of Art, inviting visitors to rearrange the plastic panels as they chose. His next project, “Die Hexe” at Luxembourg & Dayan’s townhouse gallery space in New York, will create a linked series of densely atmospheric, cinematic environments for displaying works by Haim Steinbach, Robert Gober, Bjarne Melgaard and Mike Kelley. These are artists who share Da Corte’s attentiveness to the politics and atmospheres of display, and for the exhibition he theatrically positions them as “father figures.” Kelley’s work will be shown in a gingham room; Steinbach’s in a pantry smelling of spices in which the older artist’s signature shelves will be virtually indistinguishable from a number of other shelves. As one ascends the stairs, the environments become increasingly synthetic, less vital, the atmosphere ominous.

Color also clearly augments the emotional responses of Da Corte’s environments. He describes his first childhood experiment, conducted aged eight, which was to record the responses of his schoolmates when asked how a range of different colors made them feel. “Color is everything and communicates far better than my mouth,” writes da Corte. “In the scenes that I create, color is a way of introducing time into the

experience of looking. When greeted by a blood-red wall, you may feel alarmed or have a sense of urgency while looking at the rest of the space, even if the red does not accompany you.” The suburban familiarity of many of the objects, too — VO5 shampoos, Swiffer — is another shortcut into the subconscious of the viewer, being mid-range, mass-produced products that are available at most supermarkets and delis. Stripping them of their branding, however, renders them strangely toothless, and perhaps more absurd. Volumizing shampoo is orange, moisturizing is pink, anti-dandruff is blue — choices that make a kind of sense when accompanied by logos, imagery and branding, but which seems babyish and absurd without. They speak to a culture that is spoon fed products and easily manipulated by basic visual sweeteners. I mention to Da Corte that his stripped products remind me of children’s television shows (I grew up in Britain, where the BBC are not allowed to show any brands, so de-labeled products were common on shows with craft or cooking projects.) “I like that you mention a children’s television show,” he writes back. “This reminds me of blurred-out logos in rap videos as well. The absence of labels creates a free space, one with no context or class, a place from the future. The familiar utilitarian objects of an American suburban class look extremely strange but regal in these voids. Removed from the bathroom closet, a purple WetJet

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“Delirium 1”
Installation view at David
Risley Gallery, Copenhagen
(2014) Courtesy of the Artist
and David Risley Gallery,
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Untitled (Tinky Winky:
Mysterious Skin (from
The Reckoner and The
Reckoning (for St.
Bartholomew)) (2014)
Courtesy of the Artist and
Carl Kostyal, London/
Stockholm



Swiffer can be transformed from a cheap mop into a regal purple staff that connotes Crown Royal and velvet and Prince. Most of the objects I use are typically utilized for cleaning, and cleaning is one way of exercising control. A space with no cleaning tools is a space with no control, and with no control comes the reinvention of control, class and power."

In other words, Da Corte's work gives us access to an airy spiritual world that we already partake in as dreaming consumers. We build our identities around branded scents and various seductive consumer products, and fill spaces vacated by previous forms of labor or spirituality. "We are living in a moment where there is a plethora of new idols, some of which are plastic, and the lines that define our spiritual lives in relation to these idols are blurry," ends the artist's e-mail. "*East-ernsports* was guided by this fracture between one's understanding of self and what the self actually wants or needs. It referenced the spiritual only in that it was a play about lifestyles and the sport of fetishizing the unattainable." Looking at a sweet-smelling, hygienic dream in which everything is always clean and your hair is always perfect, you realize that it's also a form of nightmare.

Alex Da Corte (b. 1980, USA) lives in Philadelphia.

*Solo shows: Luxembourg & Dayan, New York; Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia (with Jayson Musson); White Cube, London; David Risley, Copenhagen; Carl Kostyál, Stockholm; Joe Sheftel Gallery, New York; Institute of Contemporary Art, Portland (ME).
Group shows: Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York; Higher Pictures, New York; American Contemporary, New York; Rachel Uffner Gallery, New York; Rod Barton, London; American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center, Washington; Studio Museum, New York; Zach Feuer, New York.
Upcoming shows: Giò Marconi, Milan (solo).*

Laura McLean-Ferris is Flash Art US Editor.

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ARTFORUM

OPENINGS: ALEX DA CORTE



View of "Alex Da Corte: *Die Hexe*" (The Witch), 2015, Luxembourg & Dayan, New York.
Act 2, Scene 1 (rocking chair), 2015. Photo: John Bernardo.

ONE OF THE MOST ICONIC THEFTS in postwar cinema might also be the most subtle—not a spectacular heist but a scene in Robert Bresson’s classic *Pickpocket* (1959), in which a disembodied tangle of larcenous hands pilfer wallets by replacing them with folded newspapers of similar weight and dimension, leaving their victims unaware of the cunning substitution. I was reminded of this transactional choreography of intimate dipping and reaching among bodies—its erotics of voyeurism, violation, and immersion, as well as its logic of exchange—as I climbed through “*Die Hexe*” (The Witch), Alex Da Corte’s kinky Merzbau of an exhibition, at Luxembourg & Dayan in New York this past spring. It was one of the latest in a series of immersive environments, begun in 2013, that the artist has constructed at venues such as White Cube in London, David Risley Gallery in Copenhagen, Oko

and Joe Sheftel Gallery in New York, and Gió Marconi in Milan. Each one reaffirms the artist's fetish for high production values, his attention to craft, and his tendency to revel in trouvailles, as well as his fixation on the myriad interplays between desire and presence, memory and perception, and, more broadly, the virtual and the real that have come to define visual and consumer culture.

Da Corte's installations are intricately constructed from an improbable range of objects and references: John Carpenter B-movie horror schlock, party-store costumery, handmade reproductions of the artist's family heirlooms, cheap commercial products (Goya juices and VO5 shampoos), and other people's art—all metastasizing into a preternaturally photogenic fever-dream cosmology. Distinctions between the actual and the constructed are often surreptitious: Trompe l'oeil pranks abound. Da Corte often plays, too, with the olfactory, in sensory sleights of hand. Entering *Easternsports*, 2014, a video installation the artist made in collaboration with Jayson Musson at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, for example, we encountered oranges scattered on a pink carpet, accompanied by the sickly sweet fragrance of overripe fruit. But the oranges were actually hollow plastic shells and the scent was synthetic: citrus air freshener. Unlike Bresson's pickpocket, Da Corte gives us both originals and copies, keepsakes and trifles, disturbing and disrupting our assumptions about the objects with which he confronts us.

"*Die Hexe*" began and ended with a drain. You might have missed the first, Robert Gober's *Untitled*, 1993—an exact replica of a drain rendered in chrome-plated bronze—as it was visible only through a peephole in a locked door, behind which it occupied a mirrored *mise en abyme*. This secret cavity was built into the gallery's ground-level space, which had been transformed into a gothic antechamber, soaked with dank black light that barely illuminated a series of handcrafted wicker baskets, LED candles, a costume witch nose, and rubber candy apples. The artist describes many of these trappings as citations of objects belonging to his amnesiac grandmother, but they also seemed chosen for their smugly reflexive references to the haunting promised by the installation's title. A hallway, clad in digitally printed gingham wallpaper, led visitors into a jaundiced-orange sitting room in which a replica nineteenth-century Pennsylvania Dutch rocker, motorized by Da Corte, quietly lurched to and fro. Mike Kelley's afghan *Arena #8 (Leopard)*, 1990, was layered over a hand-braided rug (a copy of one belonging to the artist's grandmother) in a gesture that both amplified and recast Kelley's own thesis about the complex psychology of our relationship to domestic objects.

The next space was a surreal cinematic riff: a kind of outré rec room decorated with an enormous blown-up detail of Nicolas Poussin's painting *Midas and Bacchus*, ca. 1630, a reproduction of which also decorated the title character's bedroom in Rainer Werner Fassbinder's 1972 melodrama *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*. This mural formed the backdrop for a stripper pole and a Bjarne Melgaard remake of an Allen Jones work—a woman on all fours supporting a glass table—festooned with bongs fashioned out of Avon perfume bottles and costume jewelry. It's a clever marriage of two displays of irrepressible artifice: the savage, bawdy excesses of Melgaard (who has also made his name through flagrant appropriations) and the claustrophobic extravagance of Petra, Fassbinder's shape-shifting narcissist, who obsessively changes wigs throughout the film. On the third floor was a pallid drop-ceilinged pantry whose floor was lined with linoleum geometries reminiscent of Peter Halley paintings. This space was filled with campy curios, a bottle of piss, and nonperishables poised



Alex Da Corte, *TRU3 LIFE*, 2013, HD video, sound, 3 minutes 44 seconds.

on Haim Steinbach—inflected plastic-laminate shelves, which obscured the inclusion of Steinbach’s own *Absolutely Silent*, 1987, a gray Formica wedge hosting ready-made carvings of a whale and an owl. The culminating room, also on the third floor, was a bile-hued morgue where, beside a still life composed of fake pears, a taxidermied dove, and *Friday the 13th* hockey masks, there were three mirrored cadaver drawers (their neon-green handles cannibalized from Swiffer mops). One of the last was thrown open, revealing a small ocean of antiseptic-*cum*-acid-smelling Listerine pooled above a precise replica of Gober’s drain.

This double play on Gober is exemplary of the most radical aspects of Da Corte’s work. His modes of repurposing depart from the shock logic of Sherrie Levine’s and Richard Prince’s violations of authorship via copies and fakes, yet they also stray from Sturtevant’s more patient tactics of holistic replacement. Da Corte smuggles the work of others into his so that the borrowed objects (in the case of “*Die Hexe*,” drawn from private collections) remain intact, even auratic, yet he muddies their effect by juxtaposing them with his own artworks or knockoffs.

Indeed, while Da Corte makes swift work of linking his efforts to those of his (neo-)Conceptual forebears by subsuming them within this project, it would be reductive to pose his practice as some recapitulation of endgame investigations of the commodity-as-sign (it’s too messy and sentimental) or discourses of abjection (it’s too campy). Moreover, the artist is too caught up in the haptic and the mnemonic in ways that respond to contemporary modes of production, distribution, and consumption, which bleed across physical and virtual space, toggling between materiality and immateriality. Da Corte’s retooled take on appropriation translates into physical space the ways in which authorship is challenged, flattened, and reconceived in the digital era, in which procedures of

editing, selecting, and modulating are second nature to artists and Instagrammers alike. Yet his work also troubles our assumptions about the digital. By incorporating personal narratives and idiosyncratic logics and attending to the ways in which objects persist in the material world—inviting our tactile response and persistently collecting traces of how they have been touched and where they have been—Da Corte asserts these subjectivities as counterpoints against the supposed dominance of all-pervasive immaterial networks.

By replicating and arranging everyday things, Da Corte also explores the ways in which the self is formed through the commodities it covets, often reaching an extreme in which subjectivity itself is dissolved into a series of cultural references or commercial associations. In the 2010–12 performance *Fear Street*, the artist read eighty-three novels from R. L. Stine’s teenage horror-fiction series before hand-making a mask of the kind worn by the character Michael Myers in Carpenter’s 1978 cult horror classic *Halloween*. He then donned the disguise and stood in the bushes outside his family’s home in Haddonfield, New Jersey, spying on his mother and father as they cooked dinner and his sister as she watched television. For the video *TRUE LIFE*, 2013, he bleached his hair and put in blue contacts to become a strange avatar of Eminem, menacingly staring down the camera as he performs the mundane task of eating a bowl of Cinnamon Life cereal. He reprised this role for the *Artforum* ad on the occasion of his 2013 exhibition “1 O O O I S L A N D”: He sits on a plush couch, smoking a bong jury-rigged from a salad-dressing bottle. In each of these performances, it seems that by physically immersing himself in another subject, Da Corte is trying to short-circuit the equations of desire that regulate our interactions with pop and consumer culture, structuring complex relations between the familiar and the unfamiliar, fear and longing, fantasy and reality.



Alex Da Corte, *Chelsea Hotel No. 2*, 2010, HD video, color, sound, 3 minutes 4 seconds.

It is perhaps a similar impulse that has motivated Da Corte to articulate an erotics of cut-rate products—dollar-store tchotchkes, acrylic nails, cheap carpeting, off-brand soda. Rather than parodying these objects or even engaging them metaphorically, he wrestles with their materiality, reworking and recasting them to draw out their latent aesthetic dimensions. Take, for example, an ongoing series of paintings begun in 2010, which the artist produces by pouring scented shampoos onto glass and mirrors (see *Kiwi Lavender* and *Untitled [Apricot Breeze]*, both 2012), allowing the pastel sludge to seep and spread according to its own wayward logic. Or a three-minute video from 2010, *Chelsea Hotel No. 2*, in which the frame is cropped tightly on disembodied hands variously coated in clumps of flour, ground coffee, or maraschino syrup and pictured against a white ground. These hands perform uncanny, impenetrable rituals: stacking slices of white bread, painting an unripe cherry red with nail polish, severing a slice of bologna with rusty scissors—acts that are confounding but sensual, even libidinous. “I need you,” Leonard Cohen coos in the background, “I don’t need you.” Traces of white dust or leaking juice transfer from hand to object until the crisp products are sullied. These mundane things, wrested from the poverty of their quality by Da Corte’s affections, become, if not objects of desire, then something that could pass for objects that might warrant desire, like a folded newspaper slipped into a breast pocket.

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mother's
tankstation
limited

ALEX DA CORTE
A SEASON IN HELL
NOVEMBER – DECEMBER



Alex Da Corte A Season in Hell Digital video 5:04 minutes 2012

Blount, Mai. "Conditioned Ecstasy." In *Mother's Annual 2012*. Dublin: Mother's Tankstation Limited, 2012.



Blount, Mai. "Conditioned Ecstasy." In *Mother's Annual 2012*. Dublin: Mother's Tankstation Limited, 2012.

CONDITIONED ECSTASY

The gallery is dark. By the time the exhibition *A Season in He'll* opens each day, the winter sun has set, and no light comes in from the skylights overhead. Three films are projected onto three different gallery walls, in sequence, one after another, a quarter turn to the right. Three stools are positioned ready; a theatre before curtain up. Three vignettes, three stages set for three similar scenes. The same figure appears in each film, a young man standing behind a table, in front of a plain backdrop, with a variety of objects laid out before him. At the point each video begins, he and the materials are assembled in position, ready. In slow motion, he engages in an act that resembles the rituals of drug-taking, while the static camera and his expression reciprocate a lack of emotion. Despite the remove they set, the wet viscosity of what we are being shown overwhelmingly provokes an instinctual repulsion. But what really can be seen?

The first video projected, *A Season in Hell* (2012), takes its title from Rimbaud's narcotic-infused poem. In the disrupted version of the exhibition title, it is transformed into a potential – an agent with an action to do. The visual simplicity and immediacy of the standard format used throughout the filming of this trilogy suggests we will find an answer to that question: the point at which the 'he' does what ever it is he is going to do. As the first video begins, and the man within the frame stretches his neck like an athlete before movement, the sense that all is about to be revealed is intense, and the tension itself is mesmeric. Staring directly out at the viewer,¹ the man is aware of the camera and is as frank a part of the display set forth for viewing as the objects on the table. Like them, however, we can not clearly tell what his role is, or very definitely ascertain what he is doing – definitions on every level become fuzzy round the edges. One reason for this is the quality of digital video, projected on the wall so that the man is practically life-size, resulting in an image that is far from razor sharp. In fact, it refutes both the expectation that any digital imagery must offer the clarity of the hyper-real everyday of HD televisions, and the assumption that a sharper image is a superior image. While the details are unclear, they remain crucially important – hence, the egg that the man picks up from what appears to be a small, decorative vase is black. He cracks the egg and neatly returns the broken shell. Then using the available straw, he snorts it up. The slowed motion stretches the moment at which the viewer doubts what they are really seeing, a technique of prolonging disbelief that is repeated in all the films. Also throughout, the necessity of each item laid out on the table to their respective processes, carefully placed within arm's reach, suggests an inexplicably studied preparation (such as the pre-painted egg). This extends the time frame beyond the limits of the temporal suspension that we witness: back into an inevitable past, where all this has been planned; and, by implication, forward into a future where the mess must be cleaned up. First impressions might suggest that everything is clear to us – from the display-like action on screen to the signposts to a catalogue of anti-heroic romantic references, the borrowed titles being the most direct link to a raft of nineteenth century poètes maudits. There is humour bordering on insolence in the subversions of these solitary male idols: however seriously and with what reverence the task is undertaken, it is nonetheless an egg that he inhales, and that then

drips from his nose. The videos revel in a fairground presentation of the grotesque, yet there is a lack of exploitation. The man in the videos is less a freakshow curiosity and more a business-like presenter on a home shopping channel.

Presentation is certainly key. The composition of colours within each film is one of the most intensely striking features of the trilogy. The man's uniform of button-down shirt and smart trousers goes through three different colour options, just as the background colour is altered in each film, and the colour of the table, which also has an extra surface of colour on top of it. In the second video of the sequence, *Bad Blood* (2012), this results in colour fields of purple, peach and coffee, brown and green. The large watermelon on the table has a section removed to reveal the bright red within and on the right, in the midst of a green platter of grapes a red liquid passes up a curled tubing as the man sucks. Then, taking the black object of this scene,² a knuckle knife, he punches the side of his face, and the red liquid spurts out his mouth to the opposite side from the impact. Colours become an essential feature of the narrative: here the moving red, up the tube and then flying from his mouth; in *A Season in Hell* the yellow yolk leaves a stain of colour across the table; in each, liquid colour is consumed. Even the movement of these colours is orchestrated, an integral part of the pre-ordained plan. Such a dominant use of colour to shape composition links Da Corte to an obvious art historical heritage,³ his choice of zingy candy shades an acknowledgement of his pop-cultural fascination. While every object and colour may seem to be overtly referential, the fact that both lend themselves so strongly to the linear, self-contained narrative of each video shifts the emphasis away from knowing cliché to short story.

Yet the narrative is surreal, and the surreality is cinematic. In the longest film, *The Impossible* (2012), the most unnatural of ingestions is suggested: the man appears to use a syringe to inject his arm with cola. Here the fuzziness of the image deliberately distorts our understanding of what is going on. This film marks most firmly the difference between what is being shown and what is seen. There is a lingering idea of falsity in the whole set up – in short, that the viewer is being set up just as carefully as the stage has been set for filming. Despite the apparently full picture presented to us by the direct, static camera, it denies us a close up of needle to skin, and it is impossible to tell what is in the bottle from which he draws the liquid. Everything exists as it appears to us. The exhibitionism of bodily functions balances against contrived provocation. The viewer's wincing reaction to it is as much a part of what the artist has coordinated as the visual presentation. The stimuli on screen and off are unorganic and controlled, especially the use of sound, an aspect that Da Corte exploits fully. The musical soundtracks are not simply an accompanying background, rather they direct an emotional response to the films, building tension as subtly as any B-movie horror. The synths and beats are sinister, revelling in the macabre, rhythmically echoing the action. Slow distortion pulsates loudly through the gallery, dominating our perceptive faculties and creating an additional frame through which we see what is happening. The lack of noise from what is being filmed separates us even further from the action, which combined with the highly individualised colours, makes it impossible to place the videos within a real, reachable world.

Drug use, of the kind imitated with non-stimulants here, is often a ritual performed alone, reverently, or in private groups. Presentation of such ceremony in public throws into sharp relief the shadows of quasi-religious sentiment that accompany such methodical practices. Nothing shown is illegal, but there is an apparent degree of self-sacrifice: ostensibly for the self-pleasure of our protagonist, but realistically, since these are ingestibles empty of high, at the behest of the artist, and for the sake of the viewer. In an age of constructed-reality television shows, where viewers knowingly buy into a false picture of the intimate, while celebrities over-expose themselves via twitter and other instantly accessible media, Da Corte traces a history from the Dr Franksteins who put their life, to their doom, into their work. From the vibrancy of the colour schemes to the scenarios themselves, there is something inherently shocking about what is being shown to us. It has a confrontational value, mediated for us by the guiding hand of the artist, placing the action a solid step away from us, within its own bubble of sound and colour. The value of the objects is at a remove too – whether as kitsch ceremonial tropes or as symbols, stand-ins for the hard stuff. The biggest distance is the temporal one, between the speed at which we view, and the mannered control of the implied habit that we are seeing. In the dark of the gallery, we stumble upon an island inhabited by a solitary lotos-eater:

“In the afternoon they came unto a land/In which it seemed always afternoon...
And deep asleep he seem’d, yet all awake/And music in his ears his beating heart did make.”⁴

The spectacle of Da Corte’s protagonist explores the tension between a communal morality and an isolated, indulgent escapism. By placing him within a spatially distant, exotically coloured box, we are free to place judgements upon the man and his actions, his existence liberated from our world and any of its logic. He is a strong, almost physical, presence, while not operating within any physical or temporal reality that we can touch. We are forced to stand back from him, outsiders within this sensually immersive experience, conditioned in our response and kept in our seats by the ringmaster who is even more elusively present and absent: the artist himself.

“Conditioned to ecstasy, the poet is like a gorgeous unknown bird mired in the ashes of thought.”⁵

Mai Blount

¹ Except when he moves his gaze unhurriedly to focus on the task in hand.

² There is a significant black object in each film: the egg, the knife and, in the final film, the totemic candle

³ Sweeping together artists from Matisse to Rothko from the twentieth century alone.

⁴ Alfred Lord Tennyson, *The Lotos-Eaters* (*Poems*, 1832)

⁵ Henry Miller, *The Time of the Assassins: A Study of Rimbaud* (New York: New Directions, 1962 (1946))



Alex Da Corte *The Impossible* Digital video 11:00 minutes 2012

Interview

62/ART

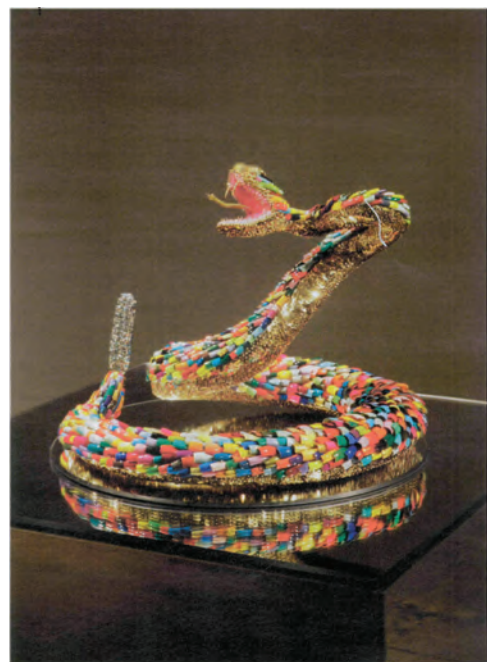
ALEX *Da Corte*

BELOW: ALEX DA CORTE'S JGMAFC, 2008. RIGHT, FROM TOP: BIRDLAND, 2009. ACCESSORY (PRINCESS), 2008. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST
→SEE THE WORK OF ALEX DA CORTE ON INTERVIEWMAGAZINE.COM

Just gave
me a
fucking chance!



Unquestionably, 29-year-old artist Alex Da Corte is an heir to the American school of pop. But Da Corte, who was born in Camden, New Jersey, also lived in Caracas, Venezuela, until he was eight, and some of South America's appreciation for bright, lysergic colors, swirling surfaces, and celebratory life-and-death imagery can be seen in his ram-bunctious multimedia productions. "There is a certain decorative motif to Latin American culture that inspires me," he says. "Like the festive nature of the Day of the Dead and the life-size piñatas with lots of sequins and glitz." Da Corte, who is currently at Yale University getting his M.F.A. in sculpture, seems to revel in that kind of gleeful explosion of candy and papier-mâché. His sculptures operate partly as high aesthetic comedy—one of his first serious works was a hand-sewn 15-foot-long ketchup bottle made of vinyl—and more recent projects have included stuffed-



animal snakes, rattlers made of crystals and acrylic fingernails, and homemade batches of cola repurposed on the floors of P.S. 1 as dried, minimalist grids.

Nevertheless, this pop appeal doesn't come without an ensuing punch in the stomach. Many of Da Corte's sculptures turn mournful or macabre—or just plain heartbreaking—right in the center of the party. In one work, a Christmas tree appears almost strangled by the extension cord that allows a second tree to be illuminated. In others, a bouquet of flowers is on fire, happy lightbulb faces are mixed with frowns, and declarations of love are amended with slurs like “so much it makes me sick.” “The idea for a work trickles down from everything I see, watch, and collect,” Da Corte says. “I take one idea and I want to add to it, flip it, or just turn it on its head. That's how it mashes into my own.” Currently, for his thesis, Da Corte is building an elaborate sculpture based on Rainer Werner Fassbinder's cult classic film *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* (1972) that includes a fur island and the figure of Petra floating in the center and holding a hose that shoots out soda. “It's her choice,” Da Corte explains. “She can leave the island or stay, but the soda that is pouring out is slowly cutting her off.” It is an image that neither Fassbinder nor the ad execs at Coca-Cola might have ever envisioned, but it is one that says everything about consumption and self-destruction—the interchangeable anthems of Da Corte's work. —CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN