

# carla

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

58

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,"<sup>1</sup> 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



59



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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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/>.