

ALEX DA CORTE: 'DIE HEXE'

by Roberta Smith



An installation view of Alex Da Corte's "Die Hexe" (2015), at Luxembourg & Dayan. Credit John Bernardo/Luxembourg & Dayan, New York

Alex Da Corte's "Die Hexe" ("The Witch") is a labor of love. That probably describes most works of art, but when expressed with an elaborate environment that takes over interior surfaces of a brownstone gallery — that's walls, ceiling and floors on two and a half floors, including stairs and hallways — and dazzles at every turn, it gains force.

In a sequence of five environments that move from dark to light and from gothic to gothic surreal, with stops for old and new-school Americana, it sustains an impressive, even Koonsian sense of detail and beauty. This work recalls immersive environments by Mike Nelson and the team of Justin Lowe and Jonah Freeman, but lacks their realism. Mr. Da Corte (pronounced da-KOR-ta) opts for a kind of abstraction that wows the eye with color, pattern and texture. For example, velvet walls; gingham wallpaper that gradually shades from black and white to pink and pink; quilt-patterned linoleum floors.

But in addition to various scents (spices, Listerine), there are riots of found objects, cheap materials and bottles of unlabeled foodstuffs. These weave confounding narratives about innocence and decadence, mass production and eccentricity. Furthermore, each setting contains an actual artwork by someone else — here Mike Kelley, Bjarne Melgaard, Robert Gober and Haim Steinbach. And there are countless asides to high, low and high-low. In the final room — a morgue Dalí would have loved — a mirrored wall conjures Warhol's Factory, while a platinum wig evokes the animatronic dancer that Jordan Wolfson showed at David Zwirner last spring. A bottle blonde, she also wore a black half-mask with a witch's beaked nose.

Mr. Da Corte's piece can read as a rather obvious apotheosis of appropriation art, Neo-Geo and art-about-art, but craft, color and unrepentant beauty increase its potential.