

ARTFORUM

MAY 2018

ALEX DA CORTE

by Jeffrey Kastner



Alex Da Corte, *Hot Pie*, 2018, neon, vinyl siding, laminate, plywood, epoxy clay, house paint, hardware, 72 x 79 x 5 3/4".

Over the past dozen years, Alex Da Corte has developed a highly distinctive practice, one focused primarily on fashioning (and/or refashioning) overripe bits of commodity culture and then putting conceptual pressure on them until whatever uncanniness they contain starts leaking out. Da Corte is both a maker of boldly strange objects and a designer of the psychically disorienting immersive settings in which he presents them. He's also crazily prolific: In the past half decade, he's mounted some twenty solo shows featuring sculpture, video, and installations for which he created the lighting and decor. A taste of all these media was on offer in his recent exhibition at Karma, which the artist transformed into a kind of Day-Glo rumpus room carpeted in orange, bathed in pink light, and hung with cartoonish neon pieces that made the space hum with a goofy yet oddly malevolent energy.

On the weekday midafternoon I visited, the vibe Da Corte had created certainly seemed to have found its audience. The gallery was occupied by a dozen-odd teenagers snapping selfies in front of the calculatedly garish wall works. That the show found traction with an after-school crowd was perhaps no coincidence. "C-A-T Spells Murder," as the exhibition was called, took its name from the cover copy of *Cat* (1997), a thin paperback volume in the "Fear Street" series by the best-selling young-adult horror author R. L. Stine. Though it was less influenced by the book's specific content than by its sense of adolescent melodrama, Da Corte's show was nevertheless structured by feline-related dread. The gallery's front room was dominated by *Bad Cat* (all works 2018), a massive, coral-hued, stuffed-toy-like sculpture featuring the eponymous creature flipped on its back with claws and teeth bared, while the back room was anchored by *The Open Window*, a wall-size video projection starring musician Annie Clark and an improbably placid one-eyed tom.

As with much of Da Corte's work, it was difficult to put one's finger on just how this gaily lit space and the gaucheries it contained managed to produce disquiet. In the eleven-minute video, Clark (better known as the inventive songwriter and guitarist St. Vincent) is be-turtlenecked like the woman illustrated on the cover of Stine's book. Billiard balls, decorated in the manner of a middle-schooler's notebook with smiley faces, flowers, and cobwebs, are racked, broken and played over the image of her face as she performs a silent, tongue-in-cheek impersonation of a B-film scream queen. Clark seems about as scared as the floppy cat she cradles in her arms, but there's something about the entire production—its soundtrack of low-volume wellings and skitterings, the way the balls occasionally come to rest over her eyes and her mouth, and, crucially, the way in which the artist keeps torquing light until it begins to seep dark—that lends the video an air of anxious menace despite its fundamental absurdity.

The same effect governed the six neon wall pieces, each of which depicted an open window—the horror-movie portal for all manner of perils both real and imagined that, Da Corte has said, was another inspiration. Each is set into a six-foot-square surface covered with vinyl siding, and each invokes a trope for a certain kind of threat: a billowing curtain, a spider web, a pair of shifty eyes peering out from between half-closed shutters. Within the show's affectual space, even Hot Pie, in which the ostensibly homey dessert of the title gives off a wisp of white neon smoke as it cools on the sill, evoked hazardous Grimm-like enticements as much as cozy domesticity. Of course, there was nothing really remotely scary about any of it. But, like so much of Da Corte's work, everything had an irresistibly grotesque charisma to it, one shot through with carefully considered illogic. Neurobiology suggests that while the adult brain is typically controlled by the rational judgment center of the prefrontal cortex, an adolescent answers to the call of the limbic system, or emotional brain. Perhaps the crowd of fangirls and fanboys was not just a sign of the work's obvious Instagrammability, but also a symptom of Da Corte's general methodology, one that seeks out that part of us that remains sensitive to the campily creepy and gleefully lights it up.