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ALEX DA CORTE IN CONVERSATION WITH KIM NGUYEN

by Kim Nguyen



Alex Da Corte

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WITH KIM NGUYEN

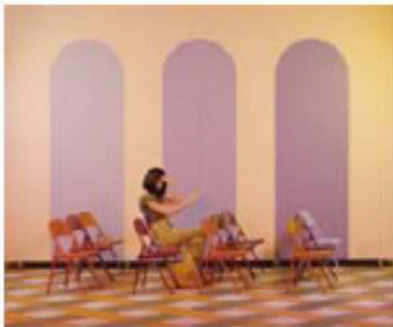
cura.

Kim Nguyen Do you think the fantastic and the real are becoming one and the same? Does this worry you?

Alex Da Corte I like that they are blending. I don't think that standards – real or fantastical – are worth advocating, but I think pushing against what you are comfortable with is completely healthy.

(K.N.) There's a scene in *Blade Runner* where Harrison Ford is using a videophone in a phone booth. The video bit is right, but no one in 1982 predicted that phone booths would no longer exist. In a similar way, we're being dragged into your imagination, and it's out of time, a space with objects but no shape. Or the shape is shifting from underneath our feet. Do you think you're putting mystery back into things that are familiar to us? Is something being taken away in this process?

(A.D.C.) I'd like to think that, yes. I like to think that all of these works are paintings of a mind. Maybe mine. Maybe yours. I actually don't know what is being absorbed. I want to believe the sponge is fully capable of moving beyond the familiar. But sponges are best used



to level, to stay a safe distance, to keep an even temperature and analyze from the outside. When you take, what do you do with it? Where do you transfer it, and what becomes of that exchange? Is it sad that the answer may be nothing, or nothing apparent to the human eye?

(K.N.) It's obvious that many of the objects you use are found in dollar stores and thrift shops but I think that this sometimes diminishes the intelligence of the materials, beyond the references that are imbued within them. That Acne bag comes from a purchase, somewhere. It's in your hands maybe because you bought a pair of Acne jeans. Or maybe someone you know bought Acne jeans. Or maybe you found it in a garbage bin because we want to believe in the romance of "finding things" through chance. But you have luxury and desire and sex and you also have cheap and disposable and mass-produced. The real and the fantastic, and the lost and lust all at once.

(A.D.C.) The notion of found is funny. I recently read that the entire *Big Brother* cast is not chosen

at random, but selected based on who looks good and who could promote the product beyond the show. I get it, it makes sense, but I'd like to think that even Hollywood is democratic in their castings. Similar to Acne jeans choosing pale pink for their plastic bags – pale pink is exotic and soft and twee and reminds you of pigmented venetian plaster and Wes Anderson movies, even if you don't care too much about either. But it is a lifestyle that people are willing to pay money to absorb and to bring them from one class to another, even if that transport is only in one's mind. The trips we take in our minds dictate the objects I find, as my mind is always looking to vacate its taste.

(K.N.) Can you talk a bit more about vacating taste? Does it become replaced? Or evacuated of all taste?

(A.D.C.) When I think about vacating taste or to take a vacation from taste, I think of *Big Brother* again. For the contestants, they leave their lifestyles and familiar surroundings to enter a zone that



is potentially challenging to their psyche, their ethics, and sometimes their taste. Have you seen the way the sets are decorated? Large ants on the walls, photo-printed wallpaper everywhere, awkward furniture. When I make new ideas and objects, I hope to enter the void that is the *Big Brother* house – an unfamiliar place that pushes my perception of my world to a new level.

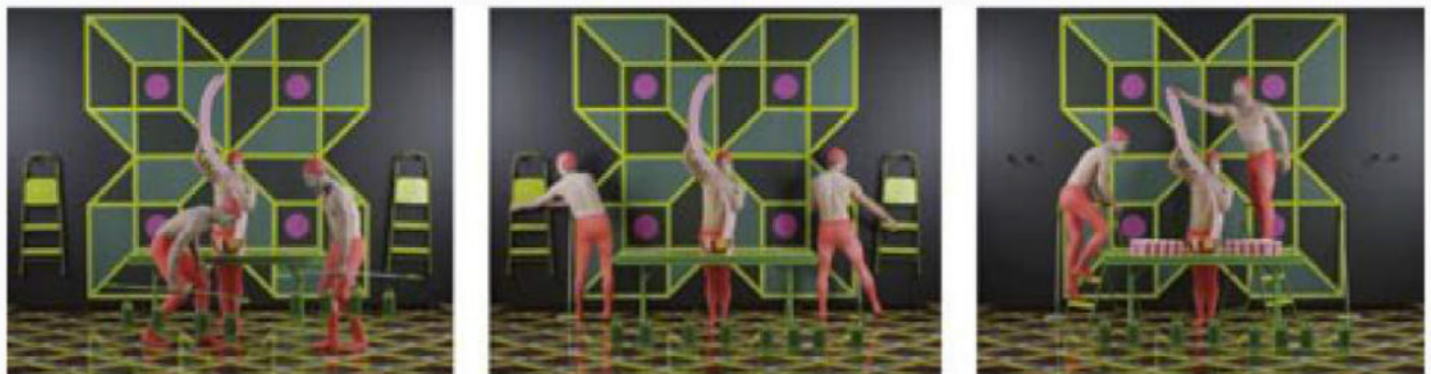
(K.N.) What disappoints you?

(A.D.C.) Nothing disappoints me. Disappointment points to totality or completeness. It points to a frame and ideals, which I don't think I rely on. I am a fluid person who bends when heated and changes lanes when necessary. I constantly want to be free of something as "total" or as formal as sadness, anger, or happiness. I want to be anonymous like plastic.

(K.N.) How do you position your work in this anonymity? To be free of totality, to escape from formalizations or defined categories – how does this work?

(A.D.C.) The framework I am born into determines my decisions, so I can never fully be free of it. But it doesn't mean I stop trying to complicate it. The Eminem works, *True Life* and *1000 I S L A N D*, speak to this yearning for anonymity and uniformity – how identity can be an illusion and we can dissolve it and become another by absorption or proximity to that which we desire. This escape from the frame is in my work a lot, whether it's Martin Brest escaping from *Gigli* or Halle Berry escaping Catwoman, escaping her cat burglar past. Even *Season in Hell*, Rimbaud's descent into Hell, is a series of stages that take him from within himself and his grief to an uncanny place, beyond his own making and control. I'd like to think that participating in their escapes by rewriting or proposing new histories is a way of bending my own history.

(K.N.) Many, if not all of these works feel like portraits. Shampoo that fades away with only the frames left, hats without heads, pants flat as the floor. All these characters, slipping away, fading from our memories. All we have are the pieces, and the



filled with tactile materials that alienate due to their anonymous plastic packaging or the vapors of other people's grime. I want the touch to manifest itself in the future, not the present, by way of a chill up your spine.

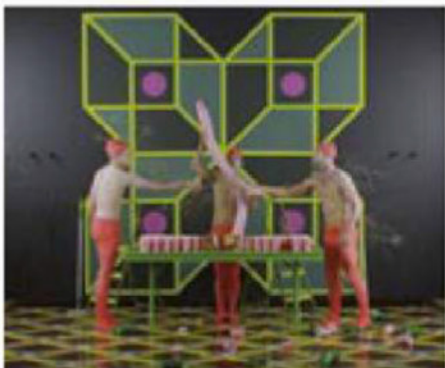
(K.N.) When you appear in your own work you are often in costume, the dancing mummy or the witch wielding a knife. This character becomes a bit of a trickster, at times. Can you talk more about these "masks" you take on?

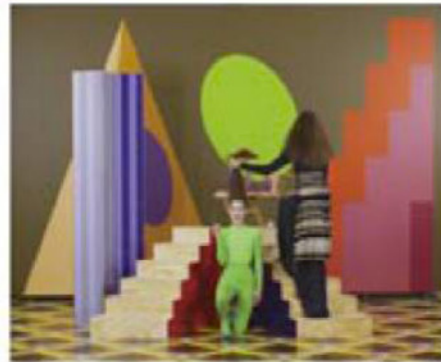
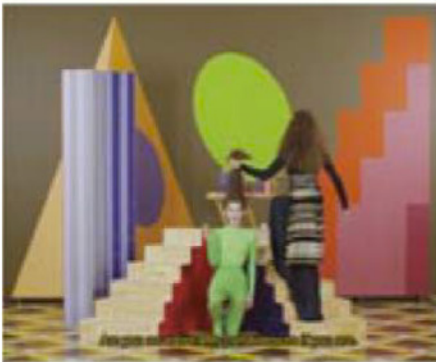
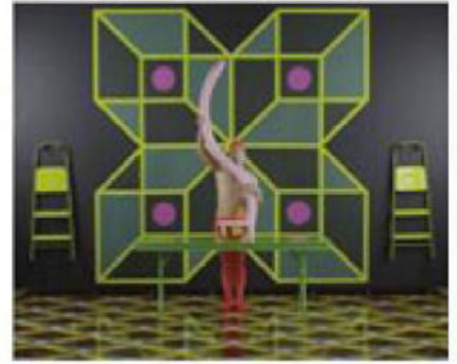
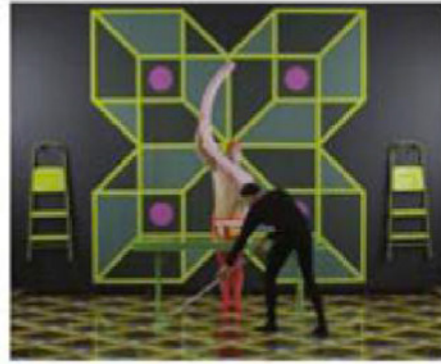
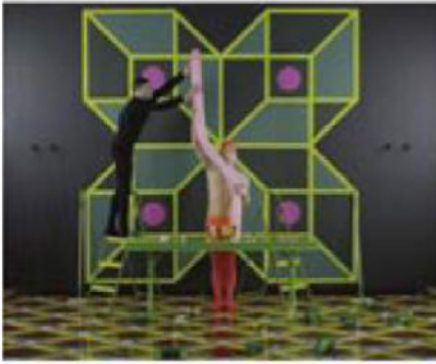
(A.D.C.) I've never been one to be in front of the camera or on a stage – it's not really my personality to do so, but sometimes a body is needed for the part and I'm scary enough to fill it. The masks I choose, like many of the objects I work with, are icons. Things we trust or understand to be as they have always been. Archetypes. Aspirational even. I like to peel those apart, erase them and restage them. The scene in *Halloween* (1979) in which Jamie Lee Curtis unmask Michael Myers ruined me. I want to be Jamie but I'm actually Michael. The trickster is in the shadows, behind the camera,

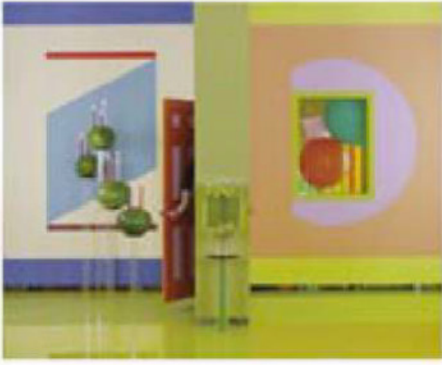
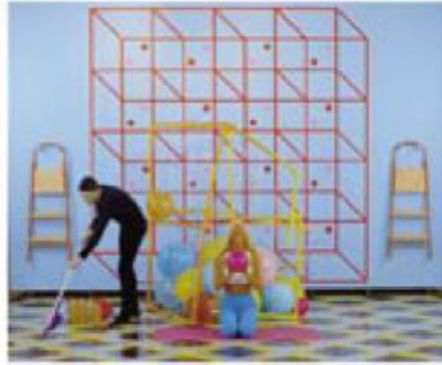
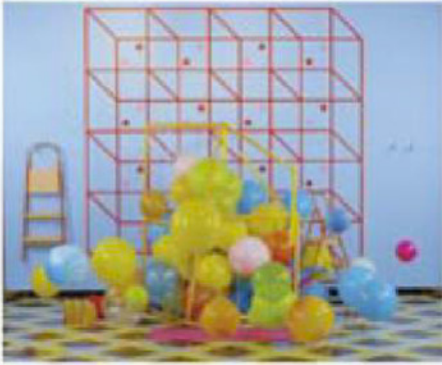
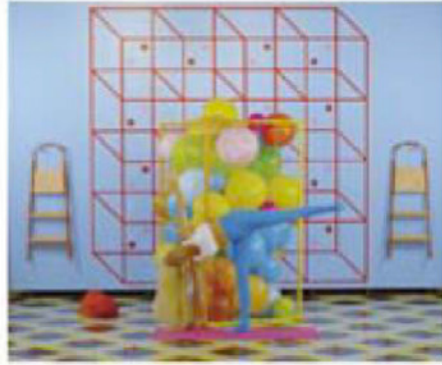
subverting the situation, off stage before the main players arrive on the scene. The bloody footprints are the work. By wearing the mask and redirecting where the fourth wall is, the mask becomes a smeared palimpsest.

(K.N.) Kim Kardashian is releasing a new book entirely of selfies, called *Selfish*. She is famous simply for being famous, a contemporary celebrity that is adept at shilling her greatest commodity: herself. How do selfies fit into your investigation of images and the creation of identity – or masks – through popular culture?

(A.D.C.) She has a really great mask. It keeps changing for each season, as it should. When you first entered my show, *White Rain*, you encountered a photograph of a girl with a white mime face, sitting on a white Pantone chair while taking a crying selfie. I imagined that the exhibition – whose title is taken from a shampoo – was the backstage of that photograph, or the inner cerebral stage of this sad, crying, selfie-taking mime. For this girl, the fantasy of the selfie, and the exotic







promise of the shampoo and the chair have become unraveled. The selfie is a mask we apply in order to brand and understand the lifestyle we are participating in. When our eyes fail us and the images of our cute selfie eyes deceive others, what are we left with? To what end do we push beyond seeing to enter an arena of delusion in order to keep our masks in the right place and our lifestyle in check?

(K.N.) Are portraits and selfies one and the same? How do you define the selfie in relationship to the rest of your work, if you consider them all to be portraits?

(A.D.C.) They are absolutely one and the same. If this is a portrait of a sad, crying selfie-taking mime, I am that mime. The work is a reflection of our mind, or my mind, and consciously or subconsciously, my desires seep out. If Edna Andrade, the early Op artist, painted grids and shapes as a reflection of our mind, based on systems and math, then I imagine the same can be done with the objects we consume and the rooms we reside

in. Sometimes the portrait is one I participate in, even if the experience that inspired it is one absorbed by proxy, or through oral tradition. If a selfie is a way of seeing ourselves outside of our own bodies, the installations share a similar way of seeing – experiencing things from outside of the familiar.

(K.N.) Would you align your work with Andrade's?

(A.D.C.) She came up in the company of artists like Bridget Riley but was overlooked because her work embraced the decorative, and I can relate to that a bit. Much of my work isn't necessarily decorative, but it takes cues from that sensibility in hopes of subverting it. But this can be troubling. It's hard to upend the sublime. Her use of systems and math parallels the ways in which I chart and map culture.

(K.N.) Do you think this work is like a stream of consciousness?

(A.D.C.) It's a stream of consciousness in the sense



that I am actively following and responding to intuition paired with what I research and see as I move through the world. I am constantly watching and calculating how and why things connect, through what avenues have these experiences travelled to end up funneling into my vision, and what does that mean for me? How does this measure my experience locally and globally? What political and cultural implications are identified because I have found a particular piece of rubber trash in a second-hand store in North Philadelphia? *Easternsports*, the show I am currently working on with Jayson Musson, is concerned with this kind of cultural mapping, the push and pull of a flâneur and how what we seek out defines us and inevitably shapes our lifestyles, our communities, and the output of both.

(K.N.) You often note the influence of cinema in your work, whether in production methods, as a structure for narrative, or as an icon for popular culture. The set, behind and in front of the lens, it's all playing with this porous wall between visual and verbal. Can you talk more about this?

(A.D.C.) I feel like the porous walls of the visual and the verbal, or the real and the imagined, are the walls that my work is constantly straddling. If the porous wall is the mask, then you know how I feel. The camera is that wall too, and the thin film that the camera creates is where I live. The thing about balancing and tension that is denied by the camera gets back to the Derridean idea, one in which the relic is where the stage begins. But I don't exist in the past, so my place must always be scratching the fifth wall. I don't think this is a race against time, because time is fluid and constant, but holes can be made anywhere.

(K.N.) People are always talking about you being a collector. I *guess* you are. But it's not as though you are some sort of hoarder. You're kind of closer to this TV repairman from my hometown. You would bring him a TV set knowing full well that you wouldn't get it back for months, until he had collected enough technological refuse to fix your TV, eventually sending you home with some sort of Frankenstein.



(A.D.C.) I just thought of Ellen Burstyn from *Requiem for a Dream* and her fixation with the TV. I think about how the TV is the hoarder of us. It collects what we can't because it is moving with a force that is much more than a single human can move with. It sets out its collections in the forms of *Big Brother*, *Jersey Shore*, or *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*, displaying the quirky and strange found objects of American culture. If I am the TV repairman, I am taking a set system of things and reversing them, electrocuting myself and penetrating the slick surface of the HD in order to see the backstage, beyond the veneer. I recently discussed with Michael Banks Christoferson the idea of language as the found object, and my work being slang. I think like slang, I move fast and carry no moss. I am a sieve or a filter and transform as I form. No hoarding allowed.

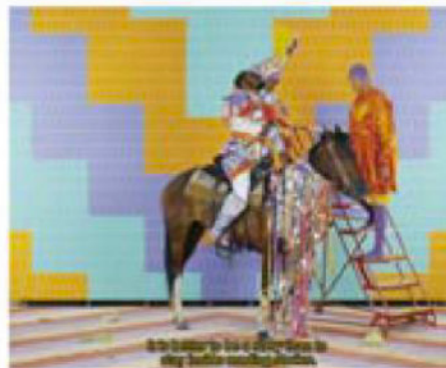
(K.N.) How important is the space between things?

(A.D.C.) Space is special. I have always tried to respect space, and how energy lies and shapes our choices. I grew up with severe OCD, but I wasn't

able to define it as such. My parents didn't understand it either, and it commanded my psyche. Space burdened me. I wanted to control it, to quantify it because when you cannot use language you rely on your body to do the talking. I would measure everything with my hands and legs and feet. *This room is twenty-two hands wide*. This was my way of shaping my world as though it were clay. I am over the OCD only because I actively push against it, but addressing space remains one of my main concerns. To address space is to engage the viewer, and push and pull at other people's neurosis, in hopes of pulling away their masks too.

(K.N.) Although you make a conscious effort to work against this obsessive compulsion, do you consider yourself to have a consciously disciplined or undisciplined creative impulse?

(A.D.C.) Obsessive compulsion is still my work. I track, search, and map systems until the logic is so twisted in on itself that a new slang grows from it. This persistence is the spark that moves my work



forward, but restraint and a concentrated attempt to rally against what comes naturally to me, is how I keep my brain in unknown territory. Safety plateaus the work, even if risk to me is skipping a day of measuring my studio one hand at a time.

(K.N.) Within the installations there are moments of inhalation and restraint and exhalation and excess – a few scattered rubber balls, the shadow or the stain. What absence can we enrobe ourselves in, to feel these limbs again? How much can be removed, before we forget the limbs entirely?

(A.D.C.) Erasure is a big part of making for me. To remove or relocate an object is to reevaluate the present, and contemplate the future. What if this wasn't here? What if this was always there? Erasure or multiplicity are ways of exposing the present as fraudulent or fragile. Refrain or fear from doing can sometimes be the death of us. Restraint is good but for whom? Who are we considering when we do, who will let us know the right percentage of restraint, or allow us the right amount of cobranding to arrive at just the right place? I am

happy to embrace the deluded and the queer and the peanut butter high.

(K.N.) Multiplicity as a strategy to expose reminds me of how these days we're awash with political correctness and we need countless categories to navigate, particularly on a cultural, racial level. The discussion of race in your work isn't a linear one, and it's going back to the TV repairman, exposing the wires from behind. The space between the wires that is anything but neutral.

(A.D.C.) I'd also like to talk about race. It's hard and no one wants to discuss. This may be something we can't discuss because the world isn't ready to acknowledge grey areas unless its fifty shades of vanilla sex. I want to talk more about this but don't think I should digress into some personal anecdote...but maybe in time. I feel like it's the one mask I keep on.

