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ALEX DA CORTE'S CARNEGIE INTERNATIONAL CONTRIBUTION TESTS TELEVISION'S CAPACITY FOR COMPASSION

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STILLS FROM THE 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.

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 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.