

ARTFORUM

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OPENINGS: ALEX DA CORTE

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View of “Alex Da Corte: Die Hexe” (The Witch), 2015, Luxembourg & Dayan, New York. Act 2, Scene 1 (rocking chair), 2015.

ONE OF THE MOST ICONIC THEFTS in postwar cinema might also be the most subtle—not a spectacular heist but a scene in Robert Bresson’s classic *Pickpocket* (1959), in which a disembodied tangle of larcenous hands pilfer wallets by replacing them with folded newspapers of similar weight and dimension, leaving their victims unaware of the cunning substitution. I was reminded of this transactional choreography of intimate dipping and reaching among bodies—its erotics of voyeurism, violation, and immersion, as well as its logic of exchange—as I climbed through “Die Hexe” (The Witch), Alex Da Corte’s kinky Merzbau of an exhibition, at Luxembourg & Dayan in New York this past spring. It was one of the latest in a series of immersive environments, begun in 2013, that the artist has constructed at venues such as White Cube in London, David Risley Gallery in Copenhagen, Oko and Joe Sheffel Gallery in New York, and Gió Marconi in Milan. Each one reaffirms the artist’s fetish for high production values, his attention to craft, and his tendency to revel in trouvailles, as well as his fixation on the myriad interplays between desire and presence, memory and perception, and, more broadly, the virtual and the real that have come to define visual and consumer culture.

Da Corte’s installations are intricately constructed from an improbable range of objects and references: John Carpenter B-movie horror schlock, party-store costumery, handmade reproductions of the artist’s family heirlooms, cheap commercial products (Goya juices and VO5 shampoos), and other people’s art—all metastasizing into a preternaturally photogenic fever-dream cosmology. Distinctions between the actual and the constructed are often

surreptitious: Trompe l'oeil pranks abound. Da Corte often plays, too, with the olfactory, in sensory sleights of hand. Entering Easternsports, 2014, a video installation the artist made in collaboration with Jayson Musson at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, for example, we encountered oranges scattered on a pink carpet, accompanied by the sickly sweet fragrance of overripe fruit. But the oranges were actually hollow plastic shells and the scent was synthetic: citrus air freshener. Unlike Bresson's pickpocket, Da Corte gives us both originals and copies, keepsakes and trifles, disturbing and disrupting our assumptions about the objects with which he confronts us.

"Die Hexe" began and ended with a drain. You might have missed the first, Robert Gober's Untitled, 1993—an exact replica of a drain rendered in chrome-plated bronze—as it was visible only through a peephole in a locked door, behind which it occupied a mirrored mise en abyme. This secret cavity was built into the gallery's ground-level space, which had been transformed into a gothic antechamber, soaked with dank black light that barely illuminated a series of handcrafted wicker baskets, LED candles, a costume witch nose, and rubber candy apples. The artist describes many of these trappings as citations of objects belonging to his amnesiac grandmother, but they also seemed chosen for their smugly reflexive references to the haunting promised by the installation's title. A hallway, clad in digitally printed gingham wallpaper, led visitors into a jaundiced-orange sitting room in which a replica nineteenth-century Pennsylvania Dutch rocker, motorized by Da Corte, quietly lurched to and fro. Mike Kelley's afghan Arena #8 (Leopard), 1990, was layered over a hand-braided rug (a copy of one belonging to the artist's grandmother) in a gesture that both amplified and recast Kelley's own thesis about the complex psychology of our relationship to domestic objects.

The next space was a surreal cinematic riff: a kind of outré rec room decorated with an enormous blown-up detail of Nicolas Poussin's painting Midas and Bacchus, ca. 1630, a reproduction of which also decorated the title character's bedroom in Rainer Werner Fassbinder's 1972 melodrama The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant. This mural formed the backdrop for a stripper pole and a Bjarne Melgaard remake of an Allen Jones work—a woman on all fours supporting a glass table—festooned with bongs fashioned out of Avon perfume bottles and costume jewelry. It's a clever marriage of two displays of irrepressible artifice: the savage, bawdy excesses of Melgaard (who has also made his name through flagrant appropriations) and the claustrophobic extravagance of Petra, Fassbinder's shape-shifting narcissist, who obsessively changes wigs throughout the film. On the third floor was a pallid drop-ceilinged pantry whose floor was lined with linoleum geometries reminiscent of Peter Halley paintings. This space was filled with campy curios, a bottle of piss, and nonperishables poised on Haim Steinbach-inflected plastic-laminate shelves, which obscured the inclusion

of Steinbach's own *Absolutely Silent*, 1987, a gray Formica wedge hosting ready-made carvings of a whale and an owl. The culminating room, also on the third floor, was a bile-hued morgue where, beside a still life composed of fake pears, a taxidermied dove, and Friday the 13th hockey masks, there were three mirrored cadaver drawers (their neon-green handles cannibalized from Swiffer mops). One of the last was thrown open, revealing a small ocean of antiseptic-cum-acrid-smelling Listerine pooled above a precise replica of Goyer's drain.

This double play on Goyer is exemplary of the most radical aspects of Da Corte's work. His modes of repurposing depart from the shock logic of Sherrie Levine's and Richard Prince's violations of authorship via copies and fakes, yet they also stray from Sturtevant's more patient tactics of holistic replacement. Da Corte smuggles the work of others into his so that the borrowed objects (in the case of "Die Hexe," drawn from private collections) remain intact, even auratic, yet he muddies their effect by juxtaposing them with his own artworks or knockoffs.

Indeed, while Da Corte makes swift work of linking his efforts to those of his (neo-)Conceptual forebears by subsuming them within this project, it would be reductive to pose his practice as some recapitulation of endgame investigations of the commodity-as-sign (it's too messy and sentimental) or discourses of abjection (it's too campy). Moreover, the artist is too caught up in the haptic and the mnemonic in ways that respond to contemporary modes of production, distribution, and consumption, which bleed across physical and virtual space, toggling between materiality and immateriality. Da Corte's retooled take on appropriation translates into physical space the ways in which authorship is challenged, flattened, and reconceived in the digital era, in which procedures of editing, selecting, and modulating are second nature to artists and Instagrammers alike. Yet his work also troubles our assumptions about the digital. By incorporating personal narratives and idiosyncratic logics and attending to the ways in which objects persist in the material world—inviting our tactile response and persistently collecting traces of how they have been touched and where they have been—Da Corte asserts these subjectivities as counterpoints against the supposed dominance of all-pervasive immaterial networks.

By replicating and arranging everyday things, Da Corte also explores the ways in which the self is formed through the commodities it covets, often reaching an extreme in which subjectivity itself is dissolved into a series of cultural references or commercial associations. In the 2010–12 performance *Fear Street*, the artist read eighty-three novels from R. L. Stine's teenage horror-fiction series before hand-making a mask of the kind worn by the character Michael Myers in Carpenter's 1978 cult horror classic *Halloween*. He then donned the disguise and stood in the bushes outside his family's home in Haddonfield, New Jersey, spying on his mother and father as they cooked dinner and his sister as she watched television. For the video *TRUE LIFE*, 2013, he bleached his hair and put in blue contacts to become a

trange avatar of Eminem, menacingly staring down the camera as he performs the mundane task of eating a bowl of Cinnamon Life cereal. He reprised this role for the Artforum ad on the occasion of his 2013 exhibition “1 O O O I S L A N D”: He sits on a plush couch, smoking a bong jury-rigged from a salad-dressing bottle. In each of these performances, it seems that by physically immersing himself in another subject, Da Corte is trying to short-circuit the equations of desire that regulate our interactions with pop and consumer culture, structuring complex relations between the familiar and the unfamiliar, fear and longing, fantasy and reality.

It is perhaps a similar impulse that has motivated Da Corte to articulate an erotics of cut-rate products—dollar-store tchotchkes, acrylic nails, cheap carpeting, off-brand soda. Rather than parodying these objects or even engaging them metaphorically, he wrestles with their materiality, reworking and recasting them to draw out their latent aesthetic dimensions. Take, for example, an ongoing series of paintings begun in 2010, which the artist produces by pouring scented shampoos onto glass and mirrors (see *Kiwi Lavender* and *Untitled [Apricot Breeze]*, both 2012), allowing the pastel sludge to seep and spread according to its own wayward logic. Or a three-minute video from 2010, *Chelsea Hotel No. 2*, in which the frame is cropped tightly on disembodied hands variously coated in clumps of flour, ground coffee, or maraschino syrup and pictured against a white ground. These hands perform uncanny, impenetrable rituals: stacking slices of white bread, painting an unripe cherry red with nail polish, severing a slice of bologna with rusty scissors—acts that are confounding but sensual, even libidinous. “I need you,” Leonard Cohen coos in the background, “I don’t need you.” Traces of white dust or leaking juice transfer from hand to object until the crisp products are sullied. These mundane things, wrested from the poverty of their quality by Da Corte’s affections, become, if not objects of desire, then something that could pass for objects that might warrant desire, like a folded newspaper slipped into a breast pocket.