

IN ALEX DA CORTE'S SPOOKY NEW SHOW, ST. VINCENT CO-STARS WITH A ONE-EYED CAT

by Erin Schwartz



Courtesy of the artist and Karma, New York

A giant cat made of foam and tangerine velvet with a wide, cartoonish, sharp-toothed grimace, almost fifteen feet high, is flipped on its back at the center of the gallery. It's vulnerable—it looks like it's yowling—and its shadow is a cut-out wraith of blue carpet. Da Corte told GARAGE that it's a scale facsimile of an inflatable lawn decoration, on sale at Walmart, that he first saw near his sister's house. "Someone put an arched-back, scared cat in the front of their home, essentially saying that the house is afraid to go anywhere. That the people inside the house are afraid of the world. That's wild. That's something I can relate to."

For Da Corte, horror has long been a useful tool for understanding the world around him. "When I was growing up, I watched a lot of horror movies: Alfred Hitchcock, Orson Welles, John Carpenter. And my family tells ghost stories and tall tales, they love to run their mouths and talk about scary, spooky stuff. It's in my nature to think about the macabre as a way of understanding the world."

When Da Corte was young, he wanted to become a Disney cartoonist, painting glass cels in an Anaheim workshop. He still considers himself an animator, but of "cartoons in the physical realm, not just behind plastic." And there is something macabre in the exaggerated liveliness and slapstick violence of animation, the dread of death in the way rubbery limbs spring back after being slammed into the ground and flattened under anvils. Da Corte also sees parallels between cartoons and the eerie calm of the suburbs: "There's this really crisp line, of Snow White's hand and an apple, but the back is a big mess. Any kind of reverse glass painting is that way, it's muddled on the back side. I think that's a really beautiful metaphor for

understanding the suburbs... the front lawn being clean and the inside of the house being not clean.”

In *The Open Window*, Clark, wearing a brunette wig and turtleneck to recreate the cover of R.L. Stein’s *Cat*, cradles a one-eyed cat and stares into the camera, growing visibly uneasy while crickets saw in the background. On the image’s surface, billiard balls decorated with spiderwebs, flowers, smiley faces, are racked and broken; when Clark begins to scream, soundlessly, one sphere rolls, slowly, to cover her mouth. While the video was filmed, Da Corte directed Clark by riffing an improvised horror story: “It was something like, ‘You’re in the house, you’re waiting for your sister to come home, there may be chains, there’s chains, chain noises. Upstairs, I hear a creaking, is it the wind?’” He described it as “a strange poem.”

In the tense, warm room, there’s danger in reading the signs wrong: the window with its friendly, steaming pie could be a trap, and the inflatable cat, supine, might spring to life. The works traffic in banality, creating a sense of menace that never erupts into the real threat, the fear of death made more ghastly—and pervasive—through its sublimation, the way it trickles down into the tropes of mass-market horror. “It’s very apt right now. The power of fear, and of politicking in a certain way where fear is used as a tactic, is real,” said Da Corte. “And it yields real results, because we know fear eats the soul.”