

CURA MAGAZINE

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ALEX DA CORTE IN CONVERSATION WITH MARGOT NORTON



MARGOT NORTON When I was in your studio the other day, I was struck by a table-top of assembled props for your new work *Rubber Pencil Devil* (2018)—a bottle of Heinz ketchup; a pair of ruby red slippers; a cheerleader's glittery baton; a McDonald's Happy Meal container; a replica of the model trolley from Mister Rogers' *Neighborhood*. Perhaps it was because these objects were given presentational parity atop the table, of similar size, and isolated from their original contexts, but something about their arrangement struck me as a distillation or deconstruction of your practice—as if they were all the ingredients placed in neat little bowls before the chef tosses them into the blender on the cooking show. I thought that we could start with *Rubber Pencil Devil* since it seems to be a bit of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* if you will, incorporating many of the subjects (icons and symbols of American culture) that have haunted your practice from the beginning. The main subject of this new piece is Mister Rogers, and I was wondering if you could elaborate on what it is about him and his children's television series that inspired you for this work?

ALEX DA CORTE I like that you compared the table to a cooking show. It has become a bit of a habit for me to arrange objects on makeshift table-tops perched on saw horses. It is the way that I understand the objects, look at them in a void, isolate them and imagine how they may become different or surreal. I borrow this idea from one of my favorite works by Venezuelan artist Marisol, titled *Dinner Date* (1963). In this work, two carved wooden block self portraits sit at a table side by side, enjoying one another's company, about to eat some carrots and peas and do the things one might do on a dinner date. The work always struck me because if you isolate the wooden blocks as individual components, you are left with three pedestals—the two figures and the table, with some objects on top of the lower, table-like pedestal. Similar to a cooking show, the objects that you mentioned seeing in my studio are just pieces of a meal, happy and alone, unbothered to commune,

yet in their communion they become something different—a pie, a second course, even hors d’oeuvres. Maybe Mister Rogers is the unbothered ingredient in his home: quiet, contemplative, happy. Perhaps the dessert is in the land of make-believe, and through that trolley tunnel you find something new and remixed—a stage that allows for a different way of thinking...

MN I thought it was so interesting when you said the other day that while Mister Rogers is the voice of most of the puppet characters in the “Land of Make-Believe,” he never appears in these segments. In the show, the distinction is always clear between the “real world” and the “Land of Make-Believe” via the sequence with the model electric trolley that enters and exits the Land through a tunnel. In one of the videos for *Rubber Pencil Devil*, you have Rogers appearing together with all of the Make-Believe characters singing *Edelweiss* from Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *The Sound of Music* (1959)—a song that Captain von Trapp sings with his family toward the end of the musical as a statement of Austrian patriotism despite the Nazi annexation of their homeland. Something that I find so compelling about this moment in the work, and with your work in general, is the way you combine disparate references, which are oftentimes incongruous (a character, a song, a logo), and remix and subtly manipulate them in a way that seems effortless, yet somehow unearths the eerie and absurd qualities that underlie the seemingly familiar. What does it mean for you to be bringing these disparate worlds together that might otherwise be odd or even taboo to juxtapose, such as the “real world” and the “Land of Make-Believe?”

ADC Again I think of food, specifically sandwiches. Wikipedia says a sandwich is a food typically consisting of vegetables, sliced cheese, or meat, placed on or between slices of bread, or more generally any dish wherein two or more pieces of bread serve as a container or wrapper for another food type. This leads me to *BurgerTime*—a game I played a lot as a kid on ColecoVision. The goal of the game is to stack layers of a sandwich by running across them to make them fall on top of each other; to make disparate worlds collide.

I studied animation in the mid-’90s and discovered 19th-century English photographer Eadweard Muybridge. I liked that animators Lotte Reiniger, Frank Mouris, and Muybridge used multiplicity in their work, squashing many elements together or stretching them apart. They got the most out of a piece of paper or plastic, wanting to create more than just a flat image—the illusion of depth, of “life.” It was probably around 1996 when I was thinking of this, concurrent with the release of the movie *Multiplicity* starring Michael Keaton and Andie MacDowell. I think my work does that—it goes in and out, squashes and stretches, replicates “life.” Bringing Mister Rogers into the “Land of Make-Believe” is taboo. It is something that cannot be. He voices the characters and operates the puppets. He cannot be seen singing with them... or can he? Maybe he can if this is *Multiplicity 2*... Maybe seeing this Dale Cooper version of Mister Rogers on the other side of the mirror is what we need right now...

MN Yes! It reminds me of the “man behind the curtain” from the *The Wizard of Oz*—the self-proclaimed “great and powerful” ruler of the Land of Oz who turned out to be an ordinary conman. Speaking of Oz, the character of the Wicked Witch of the West has figured into your work several times: in *Rubber Pencil Devil*, as well as in the wall-work *Haymaker* (2017); as a miniature-version in your 2016 exhibition *A Man Full of Trouble* at Maccarone gallery; as a large hat in *A Season in He'll* at Art + Practice Foundation (2016); in your and Jayson Musson’s *Easternsports* (2014); and your 2015 exhibition at Luxembourg & Dayan was titled *Die Hexe* (“The Witch” in German). What does this image of the archetypal witch in all her green glory (perhaps perpetuated by Margaret Hamilton’s iconic portrayal in the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz*) mean to you?

ADC Throughout history, the witch has been the outlier, a foreigner in a new land, an immigrant, a loner, and a queer. By those descriptions, this makes me a witch.

I think the witch has to reimagine normative systems of power. This is a healthy place to be. It makes for new ideas and new beginnings.

I recently recreated a banned scene from episode 0847 of *Sesame Street* (February 8, 1976). In this episode, Margaret Hamilton appeared as the Wicked Witch of the West in search of her lost broom. There was an overwhelming response from parents that the episode scared children and even promoted Wiccanism. I think it is wild that this episode is still banned from television. I wanted to free this episode from this kind of limbo prison.

There will always be room for resistance as long as there is this kind of othering and my witch costume will always be hanging in my studio ready for a new day.

MN This idea of “reimagining normative systems of power” that you described is something that could be said for many of the symbols in your work, going back to early on in your career. I think of an early work of yours—*Chelsea Hotel No. 2* (2010), which I believe was the first video you made. This work is set to Leonard Cohen’s eponymous song, recorded in 1974, in which he remembers a love affair. There is a great stanza in which Cohen describes his lover (said to be Janis Joplin) reimagining these normative systems: “Clenching your fist for the ones like us who are oppressed by the figures of beauty / You fixed yourself, you said, ‘Well, never mind... we are ugly but we have the music.’” In your video, you tenderly handle everyday objects and perform rituals with them that go beyond their traditional uses, perhaps giving them new life—slices of bread are stacked one on top of the other (à la *BurgerTime*), drops of food coloring swirl into a just-popped-open bottle of soda, wet strawberries are carefully placed onto dirty fingertips... Do you think of these items in *Chelsea Hotel No. 2* (and beyond) as liberated in some way, reimagining traditional ideas of beauty or seduction?

ADC I have been thinking a lot about liberation. Freedom fries. Does Freedom fry? Does it ring? It is relative, I guess, but not everyone expects their Fries and Rings to deliver the way the people in charge say they do.

I got all of those materials for *Chelsea Hotel No. 2* at Fine Fare Supermarket on Girard Avenue in Philadelphia in the summer of 2010, when I was extremely depressed and hot and ultimately hopeful things would change for the better. Christian Holstad urged me to make a video for a project Lorca Cohen was organizing around her father Leonard Cohen's album *New Skin for the Old Ceremony* (1974). I like skin. All kinds. I like both of the versions of *Skins* but the Brits do it better.

Can something have a new skin? Leonard says it could.

Lettuce be done with old ceremonies.

I don't want to colonize the jar of strawberries I bought from Fine Fare. I want to get to know them—each and every blobby strawberry, one by one. I want to touch them and I want you to feel them too. You say that the strawberries will get all over the floor and your clothes and our hands and there is that rat that has been eating all of my work in the studio. It is hot and you are sweaty and we have listened to this song so many times that we cannot hear the words or care to care about Leonard or Janis or anyone. Are these syrupy strawberries edible? I am hungry. Well what next? There are strawberries on our fingers and coffee on our arms and tin foil and tape in our pockets. What next?

ALEX DA CORTE is an artist living and working in Philadelphia, PA. His work has recently been exhibited at The Whitney Museum of American Art, The Vienna Secession (2017), the Kölnischer Kunstverein (2018) and 57th edition of the Carnegie International in Pittsburgh.

MARGOT NORTON is Curator at the New Museum, New York, where she has curated exhibitions with artists Judith Bernstein, Pia Camil, Roberto Cuoghi, Ragnar Kjartansson, Chris Ofili, Goshka Macuga, Laure Prouvost, Pipilotti Rist, Anri Sala, among others. Norton was also curator of the 8th edition of the Sequences Art Festival in Reykjavík, Iceland.