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### MAKING MAGIC

By Sebastian Smeed



Alex Da Corte being filmed performing as Mister Rogers in his North Philadelphia studio. The artist's careful attention to the weight and feel of color has been central to his work from the beginning.

Groundbreaking artist Alex Da Corte pulls inspiration from pop culture, poems and a lot of spilled liquids

Somewhere in one of Alex Da Corte's studios — near the clothes rack with handmade Pop-eye, Pink Panther and Bart Simpson costumes — hangs a disco ball covered in dust.

Da Corte's two vast adjoining studios in North Philadelphia are crammed with brightly colored objects and props for stage sets. One shelf holds a pair of laboriously handcrafted shoes based on those worn by Dorothy in "The Wizard of Oz." In the middle of the room stands a giant Heinz ketchup bottle.

The artist and his team of young assistants are deeply absorbed in what they're doing; the mood is industrious. But once a day, if the sun is shining, the disco ball catches the light. Someone puts on Donna Summer's 1979 song "Bad Girls" and "between 3 and 4 p.m.," Da Corte says, "it's disco hour."

Da Corte, 38, is from a family of house painters. He was born in Camden, N.J., and raised in Pittsburgh and Caracas, Venezuela, where his parents are from. Tall, with dark, close-cropped, curly hair and labile good looks, he speaks in a courteous, uninflected baritone. His videos, sculptures and installations come in deep, bright, saturated colors, often neon. They freely riff on pop culture, including children's television, reality TV and cartoons. He studied to be an animator and acts in his own videos, wearing costumes made in his studio.

His works are rich in allusions to art and architecture, and concerned above all, he says, with "the idea of pushing beyond an image or breaking through the screen and actually touching the thing on-screen."

Already the subject of major solo shows in Europe and the United States, Da Corte is putting in a star turn at this year's Venice Biennale, having been selected to show in the prestigious main exhibition. His work provides a critical take on contemporary realities, yet it's also exu-

berant, funny, sweet and absurd. He is trying, at the heart of it, to make sense of America.

Da Corte's two installations for Venice, which he was trying to finish when I visited recently, will be what he calls "Gesamtkunstwerks": immersive experiences combining video, sculpture, music and architecture, and teeming with references to Mister Rogers, the music of Prince, the reality show "Big Brother," Bart Simpson, the avant-garde German artist Martin Kippenberger, Allen Ginsberg and much else besides.

Q: What are you working on?

A: The studio is bubbling. I am currently in the midst of making a large Gesamtkunstwerk, made of many moving threads — video, kinetic sculpture, textile, furniture, neon and sound. At the moment, though, I am boiling shampoo for a painting.

Q: Boiling shampoo?

A: I've been thinking about what bad behavior is. You know, we think of soda as well-behaved as long as it's inside this thin container separating it from the outside. But as soon as you release it, it's different. So I have been spilling liquids like soda, Vaseline and shampoo onto the studio floor, as a way to keep behaving badly. When I come back to these spills in the morning, they're different, which I like. Paintings that move in the night keep me on my toes.

Q: You're making this big, multidimensional work for the Venice Biennale. How did it affect you being invited to participate in such a prestigious show?

A: It scrambled my brain, and for a while I couldn't dedicate time to it. I was intimidated by it. My thinking tends to be linear. I have to finish what I'm working on before I can move on to the next project.

Q: Where do your ideas come from?

A: They can start out so flat-footed! I think beginning with your own backyard seems to be where the best ideas reside. There is magic buried in the obvious and banal.

Q: You have a team of assistants. That must involve a lot of delegating.

A: That's so much of it. The work is totally handmade and so going away is difficult, which is why I'm almost never not in my studio. Problem-solving arises as you make. So it's hard to say, "Do X, I'll see you later." Making the work is a conversation the whole way through. It's like making a quilt. There's conversation and jokes around a table, family-style.

Q: You have so many ideas. Is it sometimes difficult for everyone to keep up?

A: They're like, "Oh, my gosh, you change your mind seven times a day!" But it's not because I'm indecisive. It's the same as if you're making a big painting. You have to keep stepping back to see how it's looking. Keep problem-solving. Keep asking questions.

Q: Where does your interest in postmodernism come from?

A: An awareness that I'm not the first, that the medium is the message, and that there is something valuable to be discovered in everything. I respect history and what's come before me. I want to let the forms of the past wash over me.

Q: I know you can't give too much away, but can you talk about the thoughts and feelings that are feeding into your work for Venice?

A: I have been reading Cookie Mueller's "Walking Through Clear Water in a Pool Painted Black ." Also, Florine Stettheimer's "Crystal Flowers" and her thoughts on butter, Joe Brainard's memories in "I Remember," and the lyric "the former is red, white, and blue, the ladder is purple, come on and climb" from Prince's "Around the World in a Day" album.

I have been thinking about the hope and empathy in the work of Mister Rogers and the beloved Philadelphian architects Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, who built walls of flowers. I have been thinking about my family in Caracas, the flayed skin of St. Bartholomew, reshaping ideas about kings and princesses, and King Princess. I have been watching steam heat from my window while listening to Alan Vega's "Kid Congo" and the Sneaker Pimps' "Bloodsport." I am currently climbing the purple ladders in my mind.

Q: Wow. I love it. How would you describe the work, and what you're trying to do with it?

A: I think the work is like a large sandwich of experience and thoughts, layered and stacked and stitched together. If my recent travels have taught me anything, it is that we are very small in this great big world. My hope is that the Gesamtkunstwerk oscillates between a portrait of the macro and the micro and bridges a gap between the two.

Q: You riff on so many things, but especially on TV, including reality TV. Is there a political side to all this?

A: There's comedy in my critique. I suppose I think that if we can have cartoon characters in power making the rules, why not look more closely at the rules in cartoons?

Q: What feels tricky or risky about being in the middle of creating new work?

A: I find that it's tricky and risky leaving the house every day, but I do it.

Q: What has surprised you in the doing?

A: I think I could push the funk more. Be braver. Prince taught me that.