

FREE ROSES

PRESTEL, NEW YORK, 2016.

FREE ROSES

by Susan Cross

Desire and temptation are at the heart of Alex Da Corte's work—the inextricable pull of late capitalist culture is manifest in his manipulations of familiar consumer products, advertising, and the reflective surfaces of retail display. His vibrant works merge the banal *stuff* of our everyday lives with the sophisticated visual languages of modern design and abstraction. Into these unlikely amalgams, he injects pop culture references, personal narrative, and art historical allusions like a vivifying serum, as bewitchingly liquid as the shampoo and soda reductions he has mastered as material for art. Da Corte is influenced by a range of artists from Duchamp to Ellsworth Kelly (whose 1959 work *Charter* he directly references), along with Andy Warhol, Marisol, Edna Andrade, and Robert Gober, to name just a few. Candy-colored and meticulously composed, his works are organized with a rigorous formal logic and often presented in (and as) sumptuous environments. Staging various interiors designed to comfort or entice—a New York diner, a suburban teenage bedroom, a Vegas casino, a shopping mall, or an upscale strip club—Da Corte recasts every surface in order to transport both his works and his viewers into a space of fantasy. This is true of his exhibition at MASS MoCA, where he transformed the industrial interior with carpeted, patterned, and mirrored floors, painted walls, and colorful neon lighting that bathes the spaces in an electric glow. This simultaneously seductive and disorienting backdrop for his paintings, sculpture, and videos offers viewers an intensified, “fortified” image of reality—cooked and concentrated through the artist's imagination.

The strange, seductive world of *Free Roses* is a survey exhibition that features a selection of works made over the last ten years, along with a major new project. Da Corte has mixed and restaged past installations—sometimes only including a small detail—in an immersive *Gesamtkunstwerk* that connects all of his production while provoking new narratives and new associations. He cites as an important influence Norman Klein's book *The Vatican to Vegas: A History of Special Effects*, which articulates how scripted spaces, from Baroque churches to supermarket aisles, cajole and lead their users, stupefying them with visual thrills while selling whatever it may be—ideology to ice cream. Whereas consumer culture has a long history of co-opting the radical innovations of the avant-garde, Da Corte reverses the relationship, appropriating mass-produced consumer products and special effects associated with mainstream capitalism for his own alchemical purposes. Rather than just replicating the spectacle, Da Corte generously returns some agency, some *soul*, to the consumer—the artist himself being one of us.

The purple hue of a particular Alberto VO5 shampoo bottle, the sinuous arc of a pink plastic watering can, the dynamic curve of a Swiffer broom handle:

the artist is attracted to these mass-produced objects for their unexpected formal appeal. But, also, he is drawn to their powerful emotional and libidinal associations. For Da Corte the tchotchkes and cleaning products he incorporates in his works are not only producers but reflections of intimate desires and aspirations—receptacles or matrixes for memories, both his own and others'. In an interview, the artist Robert Gober once remarked that he is “invariably asked who my influences are. Not what my influences are, but who. As if the gutter, misunderstandings, memories, sex, dreams, and books matter less than forebears do. After all...it is as much the guy who mugged me on 10th Street, or my beloved dog who passed away too early...”¹ Invariably related to the Pop artists, Da Corte could respond in the same manner, citing among the influences for his provocative works the pool from his childhood in Venezuela, the poisonous spider that bit his boyfriend, the priest who read him last rites in his twenties. Yet, the world Da Corte creates is open to interpretation, its familiar forms acting as touchstones for a wide audience.

Making regular trips to bodegas, big-box retail stores, and flea markets, Da Corte notices how objects are arranged, how they speak to us and to each other. He has explained that he often uses materials in his work that do not reflect his own taste; instead, he is interested in capturing the aura that an object takes on when it is loved and touched by someone. The objects that Da Corte works with—plastic chairs, rubber balls, glass figurines, and so forth—often live in his studio for years before he incorporates them into his work. He is an anthropologist of a kind, documenting the material culture of a generation while examining how particular objects may become markers of taste, class, race, gender, and sexuality. He attempts to free them from these associations and their perceived value, simultaneously revealing and transcending their coded meanings. With Da Corte's magic, cheap fake fingernails become a bejeweled rattlesnake like one might find under glass at Cartier [see *Accessory (Classic)*], and an Hermès scarf becomes a gaudy costume [see “The Foolish Virgin Quilts”]. Da Corte's sculptures enact the transformations that these products themselves offer. They become performers, characters in the stories the artist tells.

At MASS MoCA, the coiled red snake and several of “The Foolish Virgin Quilts” are shown together in a darkened space, along with three videos based on separate chapters of Arthur Rimbaud's 1873 poem “A Season in Hell.” These works are part of an ongoing series of projects adapting the nine chapters of Rimbaud's work. The evocative, drug-fueled poem articulates the young poet's struggles with the loss of his lover and his difficulties resolving his identity and homosexuality with his Catholic upbringing, religious family, and stifling bourgeois values of the day. Da Corte translates Rimbaud's images of a hellish descent into the self into a contemporary narrative. In the artist's colorful videos, a young man enacts drug-related rituals using a number of objects and foodstuffs set on a table before him—snorting an egg through a straw, shooting up Coca-Cola with a syringe. Ominous music, reminiscent of a horror film soundtrack, sets a disturbing scene. The intense, repetitive lattice pattern on the purple floor—first shown in the exhibition *Delirium I*—heightens the feeling of unease. It appears that eggs have been thrown on the wall and floor, a clue to some sort of recent incident or intrusion. Leaning against the

wall, a cutout image of Drew Barrymore from the movie *Scream* seems to watch the scene as she screams into a phone, her would-be killer on the other end of the line.

Da Corte is a storyteller, his work remixing familiar narrative tropes and classic themes of love, sex, faith, and death. His work takes cues in equal measure from horror films, animation, the opera, and Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel (reproductions of which hung in his childhood home). Growing up in suburban New Jersey, he was introduced to scary movies of every genre, from Hitchcock to slasher films. Watching late into the night was a family pastime. The suspense and gore were augmented by the romance and *Sturm und Drang* of the Metropolitan Opera, where the family had season tickets. But it was animation that was the artist's true love and escape. He in fact trained as an animator, and animation is referenced throughout his practice—in his process, his work's relationship to time, and in his cartoon-color palette. Walt Disney's 1954 film *Johnny Fedora and Alice Bluebonnet* is one of many important influences for Da Corte. The animated short tells the story of two hats in a department store window who fall in love yet are separated when each is sold. A forlorn Johnny searches for his Alice until the hats ultimately find themselves together again, though worn and battered from use. The personification of these inanimate objects, so common in Disney films, clearly had an effect on Da Corte, whose work similarly breathes life into things, investing them with our emotions. The artist's empathy for these objects, and their users, remains.

Things often stand in for people in his work, which are all portraits of a kind, of himself, of family members, or people important to him—this is true of his ongoing series "Dedication Monuments" and "Table Sculptures." These constellations of objects function much like the attributes in traditional portraiture or the symbols associated with images of Catholic saints. The artist Marisol's self-portrait entitled *Dinner Date* (1963) was a direct influence on the "Table Sculptures." In the collection of the University Art Gallery at Yale, where Da Corte earned his MFA in sculpture, *Dinner Date* presents multiple, varying images of the artist as she sits across a table from herself. The image suggests a psychological portrait of the artist through a product as mundane as the TV dinner she eats—the meal-for-one hinting at loneliness, an existential state, more than just the lure of modern consumer convenience. At MASS MoCA, four "Table Sculptures" are arranged on an orange carpet and lit from overhead with peach-colored neon. Portraits of the artist and his parents, the ensemble evokes a family dinner. A toy bat endlessly circles above the group. Titled *Dead Alive*, the work is a kind of safe Halloween-type reminder of death, a constant specter in Da Corte's work. In a corner of the gallery, a ladder hangs from the ceiling, offering a mysterious exit.

Family figures prominently in Da Corte's work, and his "Dedication Monument" entitled *Cold War* (2011) is a portrait of his mother. A small folding chair in mid-collapse summons the image of her lap. A rubber egg and a jar of peanut butter sit precariously on the seat. The egg rests on a rearview mirror, a symbol of the artist's look backward at his childhood or, perhaps, a manifestation of a mother's watchful eye. The title recalls the era in which Da Corte grew up, but also the emotional stalemates that transpire between parents, and parents and children. In both its form and content, the work brings to mind Joseph Beuys's iconic *Fat*

Chair (1964). Beuys used fat—a familiar material able to speak to a wide audience and one of his primary materials—to imply internal processes and feelings. He also used it to equate art with nourishment. Da Corte uses peanut butter similarly, as a stand-in for his mother’s love and the most primal of relationships. Like Beuys’s fat, peanut butter is perhaps the most basic element in a mother’s pantry that can be converted into energy, and it appears throughout Da Corte’s practice. The jars are often arranged in abundant stacks, like building blocks or Warhol’s stacks of Brillo boxes (see *1 O O O I S L A N D*, *Night in Hell*, *Die Hexe*, and *Easternsports*). A particularly American foodstuff, peanut butter is a staple of childhood. Yet, there is a certain maternal guilt in defaulting to the easiest option—a cold sandwich versus a hot meal. An image of primary needs met, it is nevertheless, a symbol of both comfort and conflict, the eternal struggle played out in Da Corte’s works.

Food plays an important role in the artist’s vocabulary. It is a representation of life forces and appetites of all kinds, as evidenced in the sensuous activities performed with raspberries, ketchup, and soda in *Chelsea Hotel No. 2* and the phallic lure of *As is Wet Hoagie*. Shown together at MASS MoCA, the works are installed in a gallery with red-and-white striped walls that appear to vibrate and a painted floor with a bright-red lattice design. First installed in *Delirium I*, the pattern has mirrored voids that seem to descend into an endless darkness below. It is a dizzying riot of color and pattern. The giant, cast-rubber hoagie sits on a similarly striped table that balances on four Coke cans (a product as universally recognizable as Beuys’s fat and one that figures in a number of Da Corte’s works). The oversized rubber sandwich, forever preserved in a moment of perpetual anticipation, is the opposite of the cut-rate, soggy sandwich of the work’s title. Yet, for all its perfection, it is not real. In its original installation at Oko in New York, which Da Corte and his collaborator Borna Sammak transformed into a deli, the hoagie was out of reach, only visible through a series of windows.

The absence of *touch*—the analog experience overshadowed by our hypervisual digital and online culture—is a theme that appears throughout Da Corte’s practice. With his “CD Paintings,” he draws attention to the loss of CD jewel cases, objects made obsolete in the age of digital streaming and downloads. At MASS MoCA, Da Corte installed his “CD Paintings” along with the “Plastics Paintings” (which often include real CD cases) in a space carpeted like the gallery in *Fun Sponge*, the first exhibition featuring the “Plastics Paintings” at the ICA in Portland, Maine. The works are stacked one in front of the other in rows, some sitting on top of others. At the ICA, visitors were invited to touch the works, move them, shuffling through them like CDs or album covers, objects once casually arranged and pondered in any teenager’s bedroom.

This yearning for the object, for touch, is also articulated in the many telephones referenced in visual or audio form in installations including *Delirium I*, *Die Hexe*, and *Easternsports*. A staple of horror films as well as romantic story lines (someone is always waiting anxiously for a call or a text), phones represent for Da Corte a crucible for drama of all kinds, embodying the titillation of suspense and anticipation. At MASS MoCA, a sculpture entitled *Triumph*—an Eero Aarnio-designed, orange, Koons-like puppy chair turned on its head— becomes an

oversized stand for the cell phone taped to its head. Representing the world of touch, with a stack of green Hulk fingers lined up on its tail looking like one large pointer finger, the work seems to suggest that the world of objects has been relegated to a series of props for lives performed via cellular and WiFi networks. Across the gallery, a work entitled *The Dare* (2016) embodies the pure thrill of touch. A doorbell installed in a Sonotube begs to be pushed, though there is no sound, no door to open. The pleasure of the action exists on its own. (The title may imply the risk in summoning a face-to-face encounter at someone's front door rather than the safe distance of a text.) While Da Corte is fully engaged in the visual culture of the present moment—an active presence on social media, a phone always in his hand—he remains enrapt with the romance of a more analog era.

The artist's romantic side is suggested in the evocative title of the exhibition and book. "Free Roses" was inspired by a regular fixture in the artist's hometown of Philadelphia, a roadside vendor who sells flowers to passing cars. The artist has long imagined buying her stock of roses and handing them out to people on the street. This idealistic impulse reflects both the sincerity and the generosity that are hallmarks of Da Corte's practice. It also speaks to his penchant for finding the personal stories embedded within the corporate consumer economy we live in. A rose is a perfect object for the artist's musings: rich with already-embedded meaning (a cliché, really), a symbol of love, and, with its thorns, a reminder that love hurts. Its value changes radically depending on context, though a cheap dollar rose bought on the street or a long-stemmed dozen delivered to the door both conjure the promise of beauty and romance ("a rose by any other name would smell as sweet"). The rose embodies the contradictions and shifting nature of value and identity that Da Corte investigates in objects and material culture throughout his practice.

"Free Roses" takes on another meaning in Da Corte's work entitled *The Deep Pink Sea* (2015), in which an image of roses appears to float in a wash of color. One of the artist's "CD Paintings," the work is an enlarged and partially painted-over facsimile of the cover image of New Order's 1983 album *Power, Corruption, and Lies*. The album cover is itself an appropriated image of painter Henri Fantin-Latour's 1890 canvas *A Basket of Roses*. This kind of use and reuse of an image is a central component of Da Corte's art-making. The long tradition of appropriation in the visual arts includes such figures as Picasso, Warhol, Richard Prince, Koons, and Elaine Sturtevant, the last making precise copies of other artists' works. Interestingly, Da Corte engages with originals as well as copies or remakes. In works like *Conor Kennedy* and *Loose Diamond*, for example, artworks by Sean Fitzgerald and Sascha Braunig are permanently embedded in Da Corte's combines alongside such objects as American Apparel tights and a vacuum-sealed rose. Folding these artworks into his own, along with dime-store tchotchkes and sculptural reproductions, Da Corte questions definitions of authorship and the usual hierarchies of aesthetic and economic value, as well as the separations between the real and representation.

In his 2014 installation *Die Hexe*, Da Corte incorporated temporarily borrowed works by Robert Gober, Mike Kelley, Haim Steinbach, and Bjarne Melgaard (Melgaard's work was itself an appropriation of an Allen Jones sculpture). In their lives beyond the exhibition, Da Corte's sculptural installations feature

remakes of these works, fabricated in white in their initial materials. For the artist, these replicas function like ghosts or memories of the originals, a blank slate for new associations and new meanings. This kind of lifting and content-sharing is more and more the norm in the age of the internet and social media (though still hotly debated), with conventional ideals of authorship, originality, and ownership radically shifting. While the issues are a central concern for Da Corte, he is also particularly interested in how meaning and value change once an object is released into the world—either in object form or as an image—and placed in a new context in relationship to other objects. Da Corte understands that no object exists in a vacuum, that everything (and everyone) is informed by what surrounds it.

With *Lightning*, the centerpiece of the exhibition at MASS MoCA, Da Corte incorporates into his installation Joseph Beuys's sculpture *Lightning with Stag in its Glare* (1958–85), Da Corte's title both a nod to that work—a fixture at MASS MoCA for over a decade—and the “Lightning” chapter of Rimbaud's “A Season in Hell.” The sprawling ensemble unfolds over eight sculptural tableaux arranged on colorful rectangles, seven of them carpet, that function like stage sets for different scenes in Da Corte's theatrical narrative. Together, they depict multiple views of a house split open as if struck by the lightning of Beuys's sculpture, which is visible at the far end of the installation and aglow with Da Corte's green neon. The fractured house, with its façade and interiors visible at once, blends personal memories, pop culture allusions, and movie references, all suggesting a house disturbed (in order of appearance: the disheveled living room of *The Simpsons*, the murder mystery that plays out around the billiard table in the movie *Clue*, the Grinch's holiday burglary of Whoville, and the haunted house of *Beetlejuice*). Da Corte mixes images of comfort and chaos, pleasure and pain, sex and death—dualities mirroring Rimbaud's internal struggles (or our own) and those embodied in lightning itself, both a creative and destructive energy. The divided house could just as well be an image of the divided self, its many moods on view, darker impulses and yearnings included.

Eight rectangular halos of neon are suspended over each of the eight scenes that make up the installation, painting the objects below in yellow, blue, pink, green, and red light. Just as opera relies on music to tell stories, communicating emotions to audiences who may not understand Italian or German, Da Corte speaks with a common language of vernacular objects, channeling emotion through color, pattern, and form. Goethe's 1810 treatise *Theory of Colors* sits on the table in Da Corte's studio, a reflection of his interest in the emotional power of color. He has understood it since he was young; his first science experiment in grade school was a chart of associations his classmates assigned to certain hues.

A “CD Painting” titled *Set Glass* articulates in compressed form the transformative powers of color that Da Corte translates to more dramatic effect with the colorful walls, floors, and lighting of *Lightning*. The work features a reproduction from the interior of Fleetwood Mac's 1979 album *Tusk*, depicting a white room with an animal-print chair, clothes, and shoes on the ceiling. Two potted plants and a bellhop drink stand sit upright on the floor. Da Corte has flipped the reproduction so it is upside down (and looks right-side up, the kind of disorientation the artist relishes). Four squares of transparent color divide the image into four quadrants,

each section “colored” with a different mood, much the way neon colors the scenes of *Lightning*. The original image from Tusk was a significant influence for Da Corte’s installations that also use his objects to set a scene, recalling the missing protagonists with their belongings. In the album image, the band is evoked by the things left behind, with a story implied but left to the imagination. Da Corte uses similar strategies in works like *Lightning*, leaving clues for viewers who become protagonists in a cinematic story of their own making, with Da Corte’s works functioning as both props and supporting characters (see *Delirium I* and *Die Hexe*).

In *Lightning*, viewers may traverse the purple, sidewalk-like paths of wooden flooring that meander through and around the tableaux, looking into each scene like a Peeping Tom (the title of Michael Powell’s 1960 horror film, the first to give the audience the viewpoint of the killer) or one of the many watchful villains of so many horror films since. As we know from such films, or the more realistic examinations of the dark side of suburbia in the films of Todd Haynes and David Lynch, there is always something hidden behind the façade. In the center of the gallery, a classic cartoon house—a flat image like a child’s drawing of a house, with a triangle on a square—features two arms and hands holding a cat’s cradle made of silver chain. The home, and the self it represents, is indeed a complicated web. This scene provides the backdrop for two white swans that circle endlessly in a shallow rectangular pond. Tinted pink from the neon above, the pond appears to be lit by a perpetual sunset, reflected and rippling in the water. Da Corte has imparted the same kind of emotional drive that Disney assigned to Johnny Fedora and Alice Bluebonnet to the two plastic swan planters. The kinetic aspect of the work pushes it even closer to the magic of animation. Da Corte altered the necks of the birds so that they each crane backward looking for their mate, who sadly remains forever out of view and out of reach. The endless circling of these unrequited lovers becomes its own sweet version of hell, Da Corte trading Disney’s happy ending for a darker reality—the constant state of desire that characterizes the contemporary psyche.

On a deep purple carpet next to Da Corte’s heartbreaking swans, the long neck of an Italian arc lamp reaches through a circular opening in the center of a decorative security gate, an effort to keep intruders out. With metal bars that radiate outward to all sides, it is reminiscent of a spider web. The round head of the anthropomorphic lamp hangs close to the floor on the other side, where a collection of Halloween pumpkins in various forms are gathered. Da Corte has arranged the bright orange plastic items so that they resemble a Nativity scene, worshipping the lamp’s warm light. The sleek lamp, an icon of elite modern design, seems to yearn to be on the other side of the fence, to be with the group, to be something else. Halloween figures prominently in Da Corte’s work, a day when we all wear masks and tap into alternative identities and dark alter egos—and acknowledge that death is part of life.

On the other side of the lamp, an Akita circles his small patch of yard (carpet) over and over. The breed of dog that witnessed the Nicole Brown Simpson murder, the Akita here wears a mask to disguise himself as a German shepherd. But no disguise can hide us from death. Masks of all kinds appear in Da Corte’s work, the more mundane social masks we wear (in the form of selfies, clothing,

and possessions) as well as the masks of horror films: Michael Myers's distinct fleshy white skin mask (Da Corte grew up in Haddonfield, the name of the fictional town in *Halloween*) and Jason Voorhees's goalie mask from *Friday the 13th*. Da Corte equates the gore of Catholicism and its threats of hell with these Hollywood revenge stories, all contemporary morality tales about teenage sex. Michelangelo's self-portrait in the flayed skin of St. Bartholomew in *The Last Judgment* was a formative image for Da Corte. The artist has pictured himself in the installation; not surprisingly, he too is disguised, his head and torso masked by a large tomato. Awash in red light, he stands next to large red lips (a knockoff of Salvador Dali's Mae West Lips sofa) with a large shiny straw inserted, shiny beads bubbling out the top. Small fake tomatoes resembling cold sores mar the perfection of the luscious lips. Standing between this allusion to sex and the ominous void of an open grave in the middle of the bright fuchsia carpet, Da Corte contemplates the fleeting pleasures of life. He seems to be urging us to drink them in, even the pain. A large Oldenburg-inspired tissue box hovers behind the artist on another carpet. The box is decorated with an advertising image of Lays potato chips that float amidst a Magritte-like blue sky with puffy white clouds. The Lays slogan "Betcha can't eat just one" comes to mind, our unquenchable desires bringing tears in the end. A black spider lurks behind the tissue, a symbol of our most instinctual fears—but also a symbol of creation, a maker, spinning whole worlds.

The black hole of the Warner Bros. iconic *Looney Tunes* ending oversees what seems to be the final scene. The words "That's all Folks!" removed, Da Corte seems to imply that this may not be all. The installation leads into the gallery where Beuys's *Lightning* is installed, the accompanying stag, goat, and worm-like primordial creatures reflected in its light. Da Corte has surrounded the scene in a sickly green carpet. The scent of mint and cedar hangs in the air, and music by the synaesthetic musician Devonté Hynes evokes the sounds he associates with green and red: the two colors of neon meeting at the threshold between Da Corte's visions of life and death. The installation suggests that the hell that Rimbaud imagined awaits many of us. Yet, in the "Lightning" chapter of Rimbaud's poem, the tortured poet began to see things in a new light, recognizing the light of everyday life amongst its darkness. "My life is worn out," he wrote. "Well, let's pretend, let's do nothing! Oh, pitiful! And we will exist and amuse ourselves, dreaming of monstrous loves and fantastic worlds, complaining and quarreling with the appearances of the world..." With the rest of his work, Da Corte too sees the richness of everyday life, and with his manipulations of the familiar, strives to produce a sense of "jamais vu" for the viewer. Translated as "never seen," it is the uncanny feeling that something that has been seen many times before is seen afresh, strange and new.