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Alex Da Corte: Free Roses

First museum survey of Philadelphia-based neo-pop artist



Alex Da Corte, *Chelsea Hotel no. 2*, 2010 (still)
HD digital video, 3:04 minutes
Courtesy of the artist

North Adams, Massachusetts — Provocative, puzzling, and visually seductive, Alex Da Corte's exuberant works merge the languages of abstraction and modern design with banal, off-brand items, ranging from shampoo to soda, tchotchkes, and household cleaning supplies, in his first museum survey.

Brilliantly colored, often acid-hued, and organized with a rigorous formal logic, Da Corte's mash-ups mine these products of consumer and domestic life — which he finds on pilgrimages to supermarkets, flea markets, and dollar stores — for unexpected visual appeal as well as emotional and libidinous impact.

Contemporary heir to the pop artists, Da Corte combines these common consumer objects with pop

cultural references, personal family narratives — and even other artists' work — in vibrant sculptures, paintings, videos, and immersive installations. Taking over MASS MoCA's second-floor galleries on March 26, 2016, *Free Roses* features a selection of works made over the last ten years, as well as a major new installation. An opening reception will be held on April 16, 2016.

Typical of his enveloping installations — which take cues from theatrical and cinematic traditions — Da Corte's presentation at MASS MoCA connects multiple works into a unified physical, visual, and narrative experience. The centerpiece of the exhibition is a sprawling new ensemble created for the museum's 100-foot long, 30-foot tall gallery. It is the artist's sixth installment in a series of works based on Arthur Rimbaud's poem *A Season in Hell*. The young 19th-century poet's angst-ridden prose — which struggles with self-knowledge, work, and love — mirrors Da Corte's own references to his suburban upbringing, teenage desire, family relationships, love, and loss. Also on view are three videos inspired

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by *A Season in Hell*, along with a suite of table sculptures — a series that originally developed from props used in the videos. Meticulous arrangements of items such as frames, plastic grapes, a Wiffle bat, and hair rollers placed atop a surface supported by sawhorses [*Untitled (Buffet)*], 2012, function like sophisticated time capsules. They can be read as three-dimensional snapshots of a cultural moment or records of the daily rituals and aspirations of a particular individual. Like his influential predecessors Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy, and Jim Shaw, Da Corté investigates the cultural and psychological narratives invested in the objects he manipulates.

Da Corté's works examine the careful aesthetic and calculated design choices that produce the royal purple hue of a handheld Swiffer broom or the sinuous lines of a VO5 shampoo bottle and their attendant psychological associations. His work shares common ground with artists such as Haim Steinbach, Jeff Koons, and Josephine Meckseper, who address the meaning of display and the hierarchy and value of objects. Da Corté is particularly attracted to objects, which, in his words, "he doesn't understand or doesn't like." He tries to strip his work of his own taste in order to study how others find pleasure in the form, color, or composition of even the most mundane elements. Sensitive to the hopes and drives embodied in these items, he treats them as entities worthy of our attention. Da Corté's works also reflect the leveling effect of the internet as his constellations of disparate objects flatten or dismantle any hierarchy, treating equally images as dissimilar as a Kandinsky painting and a poster from a teen's bedroom. All images are sexy in Da Corté's work; he understands that "fantasy is present and available in all forms."

The exhibition features two of Da Corté's most important video works. The first is the seminal *Chelsea Hotel No. 2* (2010), named for Leonard Cohen's song of the same title, which provides the soundtrack. The work can be understood as an index of Da Corté's vocabulary of materials, colors, and processes. Two hands — variously covered in flour, dirt, aluminum foil, and packing tape — manipulate foodstuffs and objects, including bread slices, bananas, grapes, cherries, bologna, and lettuce, as well as a plastic grocery bag, broom, and IKEA chair. The video bursts with color featuring a bright orange bucket, a robin's egg blue plastic bowl, and cherry-red soda. Ketchup, soda, and nail polish mimic both paint and bodily secretions. As a study and a performance of color, texture, movement, sound, smell, and desire, the video brings to mind a number of precedents including the performances of the Viennese Actionists, as well as Fischli/Weiss's 1987 film celebrating the magic of making sculpture, *The*

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Way Things Go, and Richard Serra's *Verb List* from 1967-68 (Da Corte's version might read "stacking bread," "shaking soda," and "squeezing ketchup").

Da Corte's groundbreaking video installation *Easternsports* (2014), made in collaboration with artist Jayson Musson for the ICA Philadelphia, is a dazzling, eccentric four-channel video, installed "in-the-round" on four large, free-standing walls surrounded by colorful carpet tile and linoleum designed by the artist. The work envelops viewers in the vibrant, surreal, visually ordered, but psychologically messy world familiar to Da Corte's work. The 3-hour kaleidoscopic video-cum-telenovela, with a poetic script by Musson and music by Dev Hynes, is inspired by the Thornton Wilder play *Our Town*. That minimal classic is re-imagined with brightly colored and patterned sets, shiny props, enigmatic characters, and references to the likes of Don Quixote, David Lynch, Sol LeWitt, Edna Andrade, and Ja Rule. In *Easternsports*, the products and objects of Da Corte's sculptural and installation work become the props through which the video's archetypal protagonists — often dressed in pared-down costumes of body-hugging tights — "perform," in the artist's words, "their desired lifestyles." Da Corte emphasizes the theatricality, and even the wonderful absurdity, of daily rituals and how they construct and reflect our dreams and ideologies: a young woman shops for shiny, brilliantly hued objects with the help of an attendant on stilts as a skateboarder rolls by; three bare-chested young Adonises play beer pong, and a mummy sings karaoke against a Matisse mural. The title of the work is taken from one of Musson's poems and alludes to the privileged position of Westerners who try on religions and cultural exports from around the world as they try to find themselves, reducing these philosophies to entertainment.

As is evident throughout his ambitious MASS MoCA exhibition, Da Corte has long been interested in sets and stages — be it a television set, music video, opera or cartoon, or more invisible kinds of stages and special effects, such as the cardboard shelf holding a stack of AXE body wash in the corner store. He explores the notion that artifice is everywhere while examining the masks and props we use to create meaning in our lives, and also to deceive ourselves.

About the Artist

Alex Da Corte was born in Camden, New Jersey, in 1980. He received a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Printmaking/Fine Arts from the University of the Arts, Philadelphia, and a Master of Fine Arts from the Yale University School of Art, New Haven. Recent solo exhibitions include *Giò Marconi*, Milan (2015);

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a site-specific commission for Luxembourg & Dayan, New York (2015); the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia (2014, together with Jayson Musson); Carl Kostyál, Stockholm (2014); White Cube, London (2014); David Risley Gallery, Copenhagen (2014); Joe Sheffel Gallery, New York (2012 and 2013); the Institute of Contemporary Art, Maine College of Art, Portland (2013); Oko, New York (2013, together with Borna Sammak); and the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia (2012). Da Corte's work has been included in numerous group exhibitions in venues that include the Museum of Modern Art, New York; MoMA PS1, New York; the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, Lincoln, MA; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Musée des beaux-arts Montréal; Contemporary Art Museum, St. Louis; Zach Feuer Gallery, New York; Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York; Team Gallery, New York; and Yvon Lambert, New York. In 2012, Da Corte was awarded a Pew Fellowship in the Arts from the Pew Center for Arts & Heritage. He lives and works in Philadelphia.

Images

A collection of high-resolution images is available here: <http://bit.ly/1DhwKEE>.

Sponsorship

This exhibition is supported by the Massachusetts Cultural Council and ArtNet.

About MASS MoCA

MASS MoCA is one of the world's liveliest (and largest) centers for making and enjoying today's most important art, music, dance, theater, film, and video. Hundreds of works of visual and performing art have been created on its 19th-century factory campus during fabrication and rehearsal residencies, making MASS MoCA among the most productive sites in the country for the creation and presentation of new art. More platform than box, MASS MoCA strives to bring to its audiences art experiences that are fresh, engaging, and transformative.

MASS MoCA's galleries are open 11am to 5pm every day except Tuesdays. From June 26 through September 7, MASS MoCA's galleries are open 10am to 6pm every day, with extended evening hours to 7pm on Thursdays through Saturdays. The Hall Art Foundation's Anselm Kiefer exhibition is open seasonally, spring – fall. Gallery admission is \$18 for adults, \$16 for veterans and seniors, \$12 for

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students, \$8 for children 6 to 16, and free for children 5 and under. Members are admitted free year-round. For additional information, call 413.662.2111 x1 or visit massmoca.org.