

Alex Da Corte's "The Island Beautiful/Mortal Mirror"

I'll let you be in my dream if I can be in yours
-Talkin' World War III Blues, Bob Dylan

In "The Island Beautiful/Mortal Mirror", Da Corte has created twinned concurrent exhibitions in two Philadelphia spaces: Extra Extra, with an installation in bright colors, and Bodega, all in a sinister black. We are ushered into the main room of each gallery by a life-size cardboard cutout. The host of The Island Beautiful (at Extra Extra) is Stevie Nicks, famed lead singer of Fleetwood Mac, while at Mortal Mirror (Bodega), the threshold is guarded by Severus Snape, from the Harry Potter series. Nicks appears as a Good Witch archetype, but her well-known struggles with cocaine, klonopin, and personal relationships complicate this reading, as does the source of the image. The photo of Nicks comes from the cover of her first solo album, *Bella Donna*, a double entendre meaning "beautiful lady", as well as a name for the toxic plant *Deadly Nightshade*. Snape is her inverted doppelganger, a figure who appears evil but is in fact quite the opposite. This pairing announces the separate installations as two sides of the same coin, and provides a key to that coin's exchange value.

Inside the rooms, Da Corte's "islands" are oddly shaped platforms supported by soda cans, and flooded with colorful soda reductions. Each island is inhabited by an array of small sculptures. The platforms' shapes are derived from basketball plays overlaid on the markings of a court, placing the sculptures into relationship like players on a team. Just as a team's individual members form a coherent and meaningful whole, the sculptures on each platform assemble a language and narrative.

Da Corte invited thirteen other artists to contribute pieces, which he then absorbed into his own process of assemblage. His works are composed of mass culture items such as fake fingernails, wigs, plastic swords, Nikes, air freshener, soda, and basketballs. Da Corte's creations encompass the beautiful and the grotesque, revealing his ambivalent relationship with these two qualities. In *The Island Beautiful*, a piece titled "Pink Jackie" consists of an M&M's character with his brains blown out, standing atop a facsimile of Brancusi's *Endless Column* made from plastic trashcans, conflating the Kennedy assassination, art history, mass production, and television advertising. In *Mortal Mirror*, the Brancusi trashcans reappear, this time topped by half a *trompe l'oeil* basketball (an open cranium?). Da Corte's sculptures are Frankenstein monsters. Through abstraction, the formerly utilitarian objects in these amalgams come to life, set free to evoke erotic and violent fantasies, picking up additional meanings as they roam the cultural countryside. One could also imagine the sculptures as

the exploded anatomy of a single body, a corpus of pleasure and pain, with its scars and recollections displayed for analysis. By combining other artists' work, pop culture iconography, and mass-produced materials, Da Corte examines the means by which we collectively constitute each other's thoughts, memories, and dreams.

As in the Nicks/Snape pairing, objects are doubled and mirrored throughout the two exhibits, creating chains of reference within and between the installations. A painted image of a black glove at *The Island Beautiful* reappears as an actual black glove in *Mortal Mirror*, evidence of a crime whose mystery has yet to be solved. The repetitions of image and material are links that can be followed, like a trail of breadcrumbs. But we know what happens next. The breadcrumbs are eaten by birds, and we're lost in the woods. Walking through one installation, it's difficult to remember all the details of the other; signification becomes hazy and confused. And this, in part, is the point: we have access to our own lives, to history, and to each other only through our tenuous ability to harness memory and find meaning in the stories and artifacts of our mutual existence.

In *Mortal Mirror*, a figure lies alone in the back corner. It's a dead cat, a road-kill, with tinfoil head and paws, and a bunch of plastic grapes wondrously transformed into viscera spilling out on the floor. Da Corte suggests that while we struggle to make sense of the past and present, we are stupefied by death. We can only stare at a corpse and butt against the limits of comprehension. The cat is titled *Horcrux (NIL)*, and we know from Harry Potter that being a Horcrux, it stores a piece of our soul. In J.K. Rowling's tale, the Horcrux must be destroyed for good to prevail, but for Da Corte, it's not about good and evil. Rather, it's about the things in which we invest ourselves, and through which we express ourselves. If we reanimate these objects through our attention, Da Corte proposes, they will help us understand our own reflections.

-Daniel Gerwin

