

ALEX DA CORTE THE WHALE

VOICE MEMOS

Gallery 12: Welcome and Permanent Collection Selections

Welcome, I'm Alex Da Corte. In these first two galleries, you will see my selections from the Modern's permanent collection. In particular, I'd like to discuss four of the works on view, starting with **Andy Warhol's painting, *Gun*** [1982]. In a diary entry from 1980, Andy Warhol commented on Ronald Reagan's campaign slogan, "let's make American great again," saying "it does look scary." A year later, Warhol made *Gun*. He once said, "I can't say anything about death because I'm not ready for it." I would say the same of guns: I'm not ready for them.

Jessica Rabbit had a good line: "I'm not bad, I'm just drawn that way." The same could be said of Warhol's *Gun*. It is, after all, just a picture of a gun. Two guns: a red one and a black one. Stacked together, mirrored. Maybe, as the title suggests, one gun is all guns. Here the red is many things. It is blood, America, anger. Here the red shadow lies beneath the black picture of the gun. The potential threat of the gun lies just beneath the surface of its high-standard banality, in the warm-blooded hands of its owner.

Vernon Fisher's painting *84 Sparrows* [1979] reminds me of a verse in the Bible's book of Luke: "But even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not therefore: ye are of more value than many sparrows." In Fisher's painting, we are given the space to be amazed, for it is amazing to exist in the cornucopia collage of a universe he depicts. Under a big Texas sky one can lose their words, when bearing witness to the stars and all of their sparkle. *84 Sparrows* is not only a portrait of Big Sky Texas and its effects, it is also a proto-portrait of twenty-first-century existentialism, made nearly fifty years ago. What do we do with the mass that we feel? A triptych of painted bird-shaped cutouts, a "New Testament" to wonder at in awe through the lens of trompe-l'oeil drawing, and a cribbed comic panel from the beloved Ernie Bushmiller's *Nancy* comic. This is a well-balanced diet of twentieth-century media. *84 Sparrows* proposes questions: What connects us, in granular, seemingly insignificant ways, under a vast sky of innumerable stars? I take comfort here, in a moment when media glut abounds, to find an answer in the color red or its reference to it, be it through brick, birds, or blood.

Gallery 11: Permanent Collection Selections

The next work, **Marisol's *Women's Equality*** [1975], is a lithograph depicting a colored pencil drawing of two early feminists and abolitionists, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Coffin Mott, surrounded by tracings of hands, Marisol's hands: supporting, holding, sharing space with these foremothers who advocated for equality long before Marisol's time in the States. Marisol, a Venezuelan and French immigrant, understands ghosts, and the histories they carry. Typical of Marisol's works on paper, she would trace her hands and embellish them, turning the afterimage of her own body into a vessel for new life, sometimes adorning the works with plaster casts of her own self. Like Marisol's body print, *Women's Equality* also draws a direct line, and implicates the viewer too. Here the ghostly traced hand on the bottom edge of the lithograph becomes the viewer's hand, asking: how are we implicated in our forebearers' lives, and to what end do we work to uphold those who have come before us?

Another work I've chosen is **Roy Fox Lichtenstein's *Mr. Bellamy***. 1961, the year he created this painting, was a watershed year for Lichtenstein. After more than a decade of painting and exhibiting works in styles ranging from pure abstraction to Cubism to Realism, Lichtenstein "discovered" the comic. In a series of work beginning with *Look Mickey* [1961], Lichtenstein embarked on a tour of appropriated imagery—commonly understood now as Pop but in its inception, something we could more aptly compare to conceptual art. He ran with the Fluxist Bob Watts, Allan Kaprow, and folks at the Rutgers school, all of whom were interrogating culture in relation to the mechanisms which produced it. For Lichtenstein, these early conceptual paintings focused on imagery adapted from comics. These were largely focused on ways of seeing, featuring characters who were often looking for something, or someone, who was not there, or present in the isolated single comic frame. In his early years studying at Ohio State University, young Lichtenstein participated in an experimental visual studies lab created by a group of scientists and engineers, headed by Hoyt Sherman, called the Flash Lab. The Flash Labs used flashing lights, like the oculus of a camera, to show the students an image on a stage for a brief period of time, and then went dark, to

encourage artists to draw what they remembered seeing. For periods of time they would draw in darkness, until the lights flashed on again. These classes, which Lichtenstein referred to for the entirety of his career, allow one to read the ocular in these early paintings much more clearly, where the figure is looking or imagining not what is present but what is beyond the picture plane. This mode, replete with handmade “Ben-Day dots” exposes us to the mass-produced machine which printed the comic, and more importantly, the hand who made them.

Gallery 11: *Siren (After E K Charter)*

Siren (After E K Charter) [2015] was the first painting I made taking imagery from albums and reframing them, and providing these masks, too, where the painting lives on glass and there’s this image behind it, printed in half-tone to recall Ben-Day dots, Roy Lichtenstein paintings, and printed matter. This is not a digital image but a “made” thing. And pressed together in this way they make a new flag, one that recalls a giant half-circle from Janet Jackson’s video for “Love Will Never Do (Without You).” This was my first attempt, and it was quite simple. Janet lives on a horizon, above a dark sea, below a fire, a siren calling us to her.

I have always been self-conscious of my smile, and of showing my mouth. And here on the cover of her 1995 hits compilation, *Design of a Decade*, was this beautiful photograph of Janet smiling, her giggle a sign for laughter and joy. What a great symbol, I thought, what a great aspect of oneself to share. I wanted to reframe the myth of the siren as this figure who lures sailors to their death, calling them to the coast, trapping them. How do you transform that? At the time, I was in graduate school, a place where I had to defend my love of Halloween, and defend my work, which touched on themes of death using populist imagery—these things people thought they knew. I wanted to flip this imagery around, dislocate aspects of what we know, reframe or collage them, Frankenstein them into new bodies, new symbols, new medals, new heraldry.

I have also always thought of my work as a form of self-portraiture. All work is portraiture, and these “paintings,” in quotes, are diaristic. They come from a time, a moment, an experience in my life, a certain place. I react to them, I’m there with them, I sit with them. I figured out you can get bigger pieces of plexiglass in 2015 when I started using digitally printed flags. I stumbled on this flag-making store across the street from Betsy Ross’s house in Philadelphia, and I was thinking about her and the idea of the flag as a symbol. People make flags to show what they stand for, what they’re proud of, who they are. I thought, “When I make a flag here, I should print a giant figure of Janet Jackson.” I was a fan, I loved her, and I wanted to be with her and look at this beautiful photograph of her.

Design of a Decade came at a moment when Janet was rebranding herself as a sex symbol. She was moving away from her early albums like *Control* and *Rhythm Nation* 1814. The fashion photographer Herb Ritts directed the video for “Love Will Never Do (Without You),” from *Rhythm Nation*, and his imagery had appeared in her 1993 album *Janet*. The “Love Will Never Do” video was extremely important to me. I would sneakily try to catch it on MTV growing up; it was titillating for all the reasons you can imagine. The video has beautiful people in the desert interacting with giant geometric shapes. The actor and model performing on that half-circle, who turned out to be Djimon Hounsou, is quite a sight.

I began thinking about symbols. How does a person become a symbol? What is their essence when they are an icon, bigger-than-life? The other reference in this work is Ellsworth Kelly’s 1959 painting *Charter*, an artwork that I would often visit at the Yale Art Gallery in New Haven, Connecticut. It appealed to me as the perfect flag, or badge, or coat-of-arms that might represent me. It is orange and black, the colors of Halloween, and a reminder of light and dark, fire and darkness. I wanted to transpose the painting into a heraldry that spoke to me.

Gallery 10: Shampoo Paintings

I don’t like canvas. I don’t like the feeling of paint on canvas. It sickens me to death. The Shampoo Paintings are among my earliest explorations in painting—works that deliberately evade conventional materials to challenge the medium’s ingrained traditions and hierarchies. I began this series in 2012. Instead of using traditional paint, I substitute its essential character, its liquidity, with shampoo, transforming an everyday, mass-produced substance into something tactile and performative.

Like the other paintings in the series, ***Andromeda*** [2012] was created by pouring liquid soap onto a mirror. The result is a composition formed from the chemical dyes within the shampoo itself. I think about artists like Helen Frankenthaler, who painted on the floor with sponges and squeegees, and Lynda Benglis, whose latex pours embraced gravity and fluidity. But for me, shampoo is more than just a material—it’s a commodity loaded with meaning. The way it’s packaged and named carries subconscious promises of transformation, escape, and intimacy. I’ve often thought about how someone spending sixty-nine cents on a shampoo called Island Mist might be buying more than just soap—they’re buying the suggestion that they could travel, that they could have agency over space and time.

Gallery 9: Discussion on Puffy Paintings

My thinking on *The Whale* started with the first thing you would see when you enter the galleries at the museum: a large black anvil taken from a *Baby Huey* comic. Baby Huey was a big, oversized baby duck with a diaper,

and there's an image on the cover of one of his comics where he is playing effortlessly with an anvil. I was also thinking about Looney Tunes, Wile E. Coyote, and the vast Southwestern landscape in those cartoons. And I was thinking about the Acme products—often, an anvil—that Wile E. Coyote used to bombard his nemesis, the Roadrunner. From a distance, looking through the galleries, **The Anvil** [2023], a black, neoprene Puffy Painting, might look like the tail of a whale. How strange would it be to see a whale in this vast, dry space? About as strange as an anvil falling on your head, or as weird as the existence of this massive baby duck.

I learned to sew from my grandmother; as a young, gay artist, I found a safe space in the practice. The Puffy Paintings are sewn sculptural works made of neoprene and foam that use the technique of isolation. Like the anvil, the images are sourced from comic books, but most of the figures, gestures, and motifs have been stripped away. The Puffy Paintings are inspired by Ellsworth Kelly's shaped abstractions, which use the museum's white walls as a backdrop. Similar to Kelly's work, they have a "painting-object" feel, positioned off-center on the wall, engaging with the space and suggesting movement.

A Door Without a Key [2019] depicts a key entering a keyhole. The source for this has always been elusive to me. It was something I printed out in 2017 while compiling hundreds of images thinking about cats, dementia, other worlds, and things that scare people. The image reminded me of a scene in *Cinderella*, where these two mice, Jaq and Gus, try to set Cinderella free from her room and must go up a large set of stairs carrying an oversized key. The composition also mirrors the formalist style of Ellsworth Kelly's abstract geometric paintings. Disney references show up often in my work. **Non-Stop Fright (Bump in the Night)** [2019] features a large, shattered jack-o-lantern from a 1943 Walt Disney comic.

The Pied Piper [2019] is a Puffy Painting of a pair of blue gloves playing a carrot like a flute, an image from a *Bugs Bunny* comic. Bugs usually wears white gloves, but in some versions, off-brand or underground, they're blue. Like how Winnie the Pooh is free to use as long as he's not wearing his trademark red shirt.

Gallery 8: Discussion on CD Paintings

My CD Paintings take on the familiar square shape of compact disc packaging—those little cases that once held music as a tangible thing. Music isn't just sound; it's memory, identity, self-actualization. These paintings wrestle with that idea. I'm also thinking about influence, about what it means to borrow, to sample—both in art and in music. There's always tension there. Who owns what? What's transformation, and what's just taking? My borrowings aren't just lifted; they're cut up, collaged, cropped, sometimes left out entirely. What's missing is just as important as what's there.

The painting **November 23, 1963 (JFK Goes to Hell)** [2018] combines the photograph on the unfurled gatefold cover of the Carpenters' 1973 album *Now & Then* with flames derived from a Hot Wheels toy car. **The End** [2017] is derived from an image shot by photographer David LaChapelle for the cover of Mariah Carey's *Rainbow*, but with her body redacted. **Born on The Floor** [2016] borrows the cover photo, shot by Annie Leibovitz, of Bruce Springsteen's 1984 album *Born in the USA*, and places John-Baldessari-style blots and cancellations over the image and baseball cap. **Twisters Only** [2018] is from Chubby Checker's album *For Twisters Only*, with an image of the Tasmanian Devil, a Looney Tunes character. **Trouble** [2018, located in Gallery 12] is from the cover of Cat Stevens's 1970 album *Mona Bone Jakon*, with Oscar the Grouch's hand lifted from an illustration in Linda Hayward's book *A Day in the Life of Oscar the Grouch*. There's also a fake heroin needle, a plastic syringe, like you would buy as a gag; it may have come from a gag gift shop where there's a sexy nurse on the packaging. Here it signifies drugs, the bad kind—Philly drugs.

Gallery 8: Reverse-glass Paintings

Many of my paintings are made using a reverse-glass process. This technique requires me to build the image in reverse order—starting with the front-most layer of paint on the back of the glass and then adding layers behind it, with the background coming last. It's an age-old process that dates back to the Middle Ages. It's often used in sign-making and hand-drawn animation, one of my earliest influences.

The Great Pretender [2021] is based on an iconic portrait of the comedian and actress Lily Tomlin, painted by Richard Amsel for *Time* magazine in 1977. Tomlin, a lesbian, was offered a *Time* cover story in 1975 on the condition that she "come out," but she did not concede. When she was featured two years later, the article celebrated her work, not her sexuality. The cover presents her as a magician who disappears. Amsel also painted a portrait of Bette Midler, who made her name singing in New York bathhouses, for her 1972 album *The Divine Miss M*, the source for **Bloom** [2021]. Amsel, who died of AIDS-related illness in the 1980s, was a gay illustrator from Philadelphia, and painted portraits of other queer folk and queer allies.

The Future Is on Fire or: Grenade in My Mouth or . . . [2020] takes an image of Puff the Magic Dragon from a 1966 Sandpipers album and fuses it with a grenade from a 1962 *Devil Kids* comic. **Electronic Renaissance** [2021] features horses from *Johnny Fedora and Alice Blue Bonnet*, a 1940s Disney cartoon soundtrack, repurposed from a 1970 Disneyland record. **Urgent Halloween Merchandise** [2020] comes from a cardboard box from Spirit Halloween that was in my studio—I had ordered a bunch of glow-in-the-dark spiderwebs for a work I made in 2015. The title phrase sums up my work; it is just that, urgent Halloween merchandise. **Ms. Barstool or: Teenage**

Alcoholics or . . . [2020] comes from a painted mural that lives atop a store, Mr. Barstool, in Philadelphia. The mural has a blue background; I took a photograph of the mural and reversed it using the “invert colors” setting on an iPhone to derive the color. ***The Flower Show*** [2020] is from a painted sign or banner for the Philadelphia Flower Show.

The reverse-glass paintings draw from a range of source material. But I’m just as interested in those working on the edge of anonymity—album cover designers, animators, comics artists, sign painters, and stock photographers. By bringing together art-historical references with more ephemeral pop cultural elements, I want to highlight how the things we connect with, the things we use to define ourselves, are always shifting and evolving.

Gallery 7: Plastics Paintings

I really don’t like working on canvas. I did find this painted canvas, but I needed to press it behind glass, in the way that animation cels are made. Then I could access this cipher, animation, that felt more aligned with who I was and what I always wanted to do, which was work in the ink-and-paint department for Walt Disney. That’s what I wanted to do when I was younger. Then that desire went away. I went downtown to my favorite plexiglass store, Everything Plastic, which I’ve been going to since I was maybe 21, and bought a bunch of plastic tiles: mirrored plastic tiles, swirly vinyl plastic tiles. I started thinking about what would happen if you smashed all this stuff behind glass. Could that count as a painting? Then I wouldn’t have to make decisions or use my hands to make painterly marks. That felt foreign to me, intimidating. It’s not where I was, not how I think about the world. I do think about arranging things, about math. I think about right angles and systems. I was trying to give some kind of logic to things that are illogical.

I thought it was funny to call these Plastics Paintings [***MRSTABU and Loose Diamond (Arnolfini)***, both 2013]; they combine plastic material and the concept of plastic. I was listening to bands like Tracy + the Plastics and thinking about the Plastics in the movie *Mean Girls*—about plastic as a lifestyle or essence, and what that looks like. I don’t know anything about painting. I didn’t even know anything about picture-making. I was also trying to do that on a greater scale, and to inform the Plastics Paintings by thinking about the thrift store. Why, gathered on a thrift store shelf, do all these different things have the feeling of something whole and familiar? On any given day, in any consignment or thrift store, these objects get shifted, shuffled, touched, and moved around. But they are always the same. Can that feeling be maintained, exhibited, or lassoed? How does that cornucopia of things shift, tell stories, or change over time, depending on color, form, and symbol?

With this first Plastics Painting I was attempting to make an equation, a math equation, where you have a found

object—not in a colonial way, I want to resist this idea of “finding” things—this object I bought at a secondhand store, compiled with another object I bought, a CD, combined with pieces of plastic, mirror foil, and tape, and all pressed together and democratized in a way. All things on this plane are shared things. They’re meant to be together and bound, like a quilt. Your thread and mine, your love of music and mine, all share and hold space. In my mind, that is an ideal fantasy.

It’s interesting to draw a parallel between the split down the middle of these earlier paintings and the split, because of my many surgeries, that’s down the entire front of my body. There is an unknowing slip that’s occurred, where I’ve unintentionally put myself into these paintings. The way that we share this split down the middle carries weight. You can see how I tried to do that. But you can also see how the attempt is fractured and new. I didn’t even know, then, that you can get pieces of plexiglass wider than twenty-eight inches; the work has two pieces of plastic abutting each other, held together with packing tape. This ideal, this plastics fantasy space, is fractured, human, broken, Frankensteined. It is bound to fall apart. Part of fantasy is failure; it cannot be maintained or come true. That’s why fantasy exists.

Gallery 7: Slatwall Paintings

For the Slatwall Paintings, including ***A Time to Kill*** [2016] and ***Haymaker*** [2017], I use the panels that support pegs and hooks in supermarket commercial displays as their ground. On them, I carefully arrange a selection of objects, emphasizing the vast range of options available to us as consumers to fine-tune and curate our lives and environments. These objects, often dismissed as dollar store junk, are elevated to the status of art while still carrying the psychic associations of their prior existence.

The centerpiece of *Haymaker* is a cardboard standee of Margaret Hamilton as the Wicked Witch in the movie *The Wizard of Oz*; there is also a bar sign I got at a mannequin-supply store in Philadelphia called Gershel Brothers, bottled detergent, a Monster Energy drink, and other things.

My choice of materials—commercial grocery displays, everyday commodities—resonates with my father’s experience as an immigrant to the US from Venezuela. Thinking about my father, who was this alien that came to the States, I wanted to see this world and these objects—these common foodstuffs—as if I were him, as if he had just arrived in this strange place. Call it Hell, call it the United States of America. There was a heightened sense of looking, and that looking wouldn’t stop. My hunger to see, to learn, to engage, to listen, it’s all apparent in the work. For me, what’s American about it is this idea of mining what is here, of appreciating and really looking at what’s familiar.