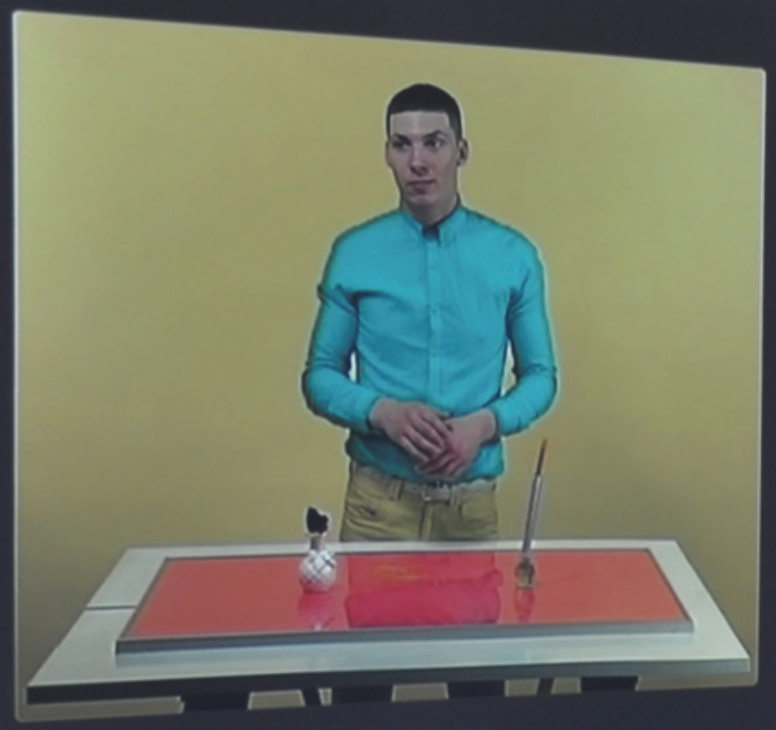
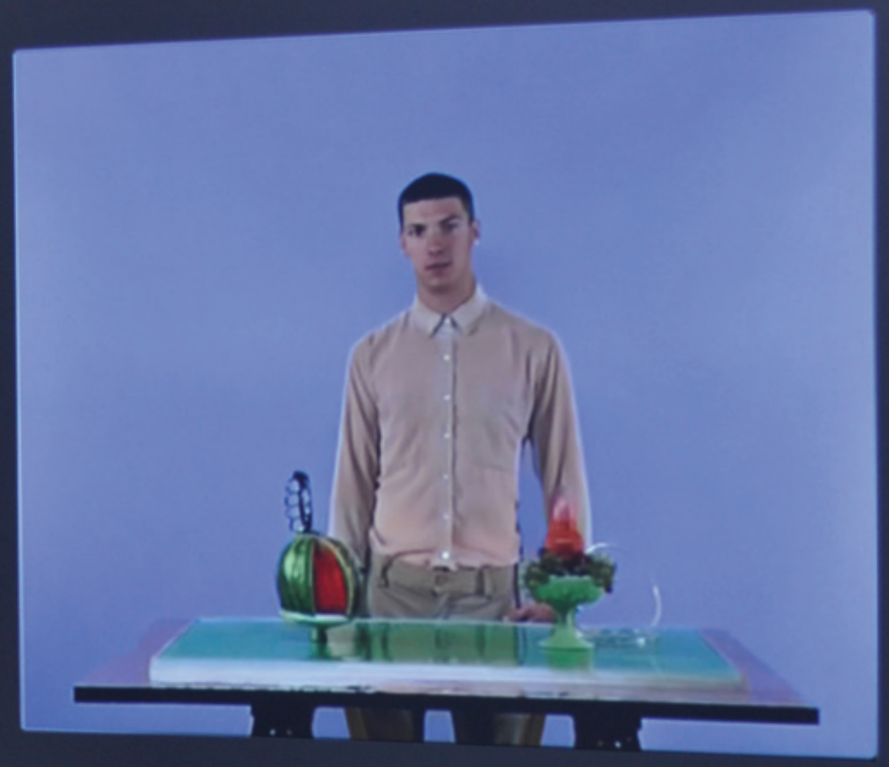
ALEX DA CORTE
A SEASON IN HE'LL

NOVEMBER – DECEMBER



Alex Da Corte *A Season in Hell* Digital video 5:04 minutes 2012



Alex Da Corte *Bad Blood* Digital video 3:59 minutes 2012

CONDITIONED ECSTASY

The gallery is dark. By the time the exhibition *A Season in He'll* opens each day, the winter sun has set, and no light comes in from the skylights overhead. Three films are projected onto three different gallery walls, in sequence, one after another, a quarter turn to the right. Three stools are positioned ready: a theatre before curtain up. Three vignettes, three stages set for three similar scenes. The same figure appears in each film, a young man standing behind a table, in front of a plain backdrop, with a variety of objects laid out before him. At the point each video begins, he and the materials are assembled in position, ready. In slow motion, he engages in an act that resembles the rituals of drug-taking, while the static camera and his expression reciprocate a lack of emotion. Despite the remove they set, the wet viscerality of what we are being shown overwhelmingly provokes an instinctual repulsion. But what really can be seen?

The first video projected, *A Season in Hell* (2012), takes its title from Rimbaud's narcotic-infused poem. In the disrupted version of the exhibition title, it is transformed into a potential – an agent with an action to do. The visual simplicity and immediacy of the standard format used throughout the filming of this trilogy suggests we will find an answer to that question: the point at which the 'he' does what ever it is he is going to do. As the first video begins, and the man within the frame stretches his neck like an athlete before movement, the sense that all is about to be revealed is intense, and the tension itself is mesmeric. Staring directly out at the viewer,[1] the man is aware of the camera and is as frank a part of the display set forth for viewing as the objects on the table. Like them, however, we can not clearly tell what his role is, or very definitely ascertain what he is doing – definitions on every level become fuzzy round the edges. One reason for this is the quality of digital video, projected on the wall so that the man is practically life-size, resulting in an image that is far from razor sharp. In fact, it refutes both the expectation that any digital imagery must offer the clarity of the hyper-real everyday of HD televisions, and the assumption that a sharper image is a superior image. While the details are unclear, they remain crucially important – hence, the egg that the man picks up from what appears to be a small, decorative vase is black. He cracks the egg and neatly returns the broken shell. Then using the available straw, he snorts it up. The slowed motion stretches the moment at which the viewer doubts what they are really seeing, a technique of prolonging disbelief that is repeated in all the films. Also throughout, the necessity of each item laid out on the table to their respective processes, carefully placed within arm's reach, suggests an inexplicably studied preparation (such as the pre-painted egg). This extends the time frame beyond the limits of the temporal suspension that we witness: back into an inevitable past, where all this has been planned; and, by implication, forward into a future where the mess must be cleaned up. First impressions might suggest that everything is clear to us – from the display-like action on screen to the signposts to a catalogue of anti-heroic romantic references, the borrowed titles being the most direct link to a raft of nineteenth century poètes maudits. There is humour bordering on insolence in the subversions of these solitary male idols: however seriously and with what reverence the task is undertaken, it is nonetheless an egg that he inhales, and that then drips from his nose. The videos revel in a fairground presentation of the grotesque, yet there is a lack of exploitation. The man in the videos is less a freakshow curiousity and more a business-like presenter on a home shopping channel.

Presentation is certainly key. The composition of colours within each film is one of the most intensely striking features of the trilogy. The man's uniform of button-down shirt and smart trousers goes through three different colour options, just as the background colour is altered in each film, and the colour of the table, which also has an extra surface of colour on top of it. In the second video of the sequence, *Bad Blood* (2012), this results in colour fields of purple, peach and coffee, brown and green. The large watermelon on the table has a section removed to reveal the bright red within and on the right, in the midst of a green platter of grapes a red liquid passes up a curled tubing as the man sucks. Then, taking the black object of this scene,[2] a knuckle knife, he punches the side of his face, and the red liquid spurts out his mouth to the opposite side from the impact. Colours become an essential feature of the narrative: here the moving red, up the tube and then flying from his mouth; in *A Season in Hell* the yellow yolk leaves a stain of colour across the table; in each, liquid colour is consumed. Even the movement of these colours is orchestrated, an integral part of the pre-ordained plan. Such a dominant use of colour to shape composition links Da Corte to an obvious art historical heritage,[3] his choice of zingy candy shades an acknowledgement of his pop-cultural fascination. While every object and colour may seem to be overtly referential, the fact that both lend themselves so strongly to the linear, self-contained narrative of each video shifts the emphasis away from knowing cliché to short story.

Yet the narrative is surreal, and the surreality is cinematic. In the longest film, *The Impossible* (2012), the most unnatural of ingestions is suggested: the man appears to use a syringe to inject his arm with cola. Here the fuzziness of the image deliberately distorts our understanding of what is going on. This film marks most firmly the difference between what is being shown and what is seen. There is a lingering idea of falsity in the whole set up – in short, that the viewer is being set up just as carefully as the stage has been set for filming. Despite the apparently full picture presented to us by the direct, static camera, it denies us a close up of needle to skin, and it is impossible to tell what is in the bottle from which he draws the liquid. Everything exists as it appears to us. The exhibitionism of bodily functions balances against contrived provocation. The viewer's wincing reaction to it is as much a part of what the artist has coordinated as the visual presentation. The stimuli on screen and off are unorganic and controlled, especially the use of sound, an aspect that Da Corte exploits fully. The musical soundtracks are not simply an accompanying background, rather they direct an emotional response to the films, building tension as unsubtly as any B-movie horror. The synths and beats are sinister, revelling in the macabre, rhythmically echoing the action. Slow distortion pulsates loudly through the gallery, dominating our perceptive faculties and creating an additional frame through which we see what is happening. The lack of noise from what is being filmed separates us even further from the action, which combined with the highly individualised colours, makes it impossible to place the videos within a real, reachable world.

Drug use, of the kind imitated with non-stimulants here, is often a ritual performed alone, reverently, or in private groups. Presentation of such ceremony in public throws into sharp relief the shadows of quasi-religious sentiment that accompany such methodical practices. Nothing shown is illegal, but there is an apparent degree of self-sacrifice: ostensibly for the self-pleasure of our protagonist, but realistically, since these are ingestibles empty of high, at the behest of the artist, and for the sake of the viewer. In an age of constructed-reality television shows, where viewers knowingly buy into a false picture of the intimate, while celebrities over-expose themselves via twitter and other instantly accessible media, Da Corte traces a history from the Dr Frankensteins who put their life, to their doom, into their work. From the vibrancy of the colour schemes to the scenarios themselves, there is something inherently shocking about what is being shown to us. It has a confrontational value, mediated for us by the guiding hand of the artist, placing the action a solid step away from us, within its own bubble of sound and colour. The value of the objects is at a remove too – whether as kitsch ceremonial tropes or as symbols, stand-ins for the hard stuff. The biggest distance is the temporal one, between the speed at which we view, and the mannered control of the implied habit that we are seeing. In the dark of the gallery, we stumble upon an island inhabited by a solitary lotos-eater:

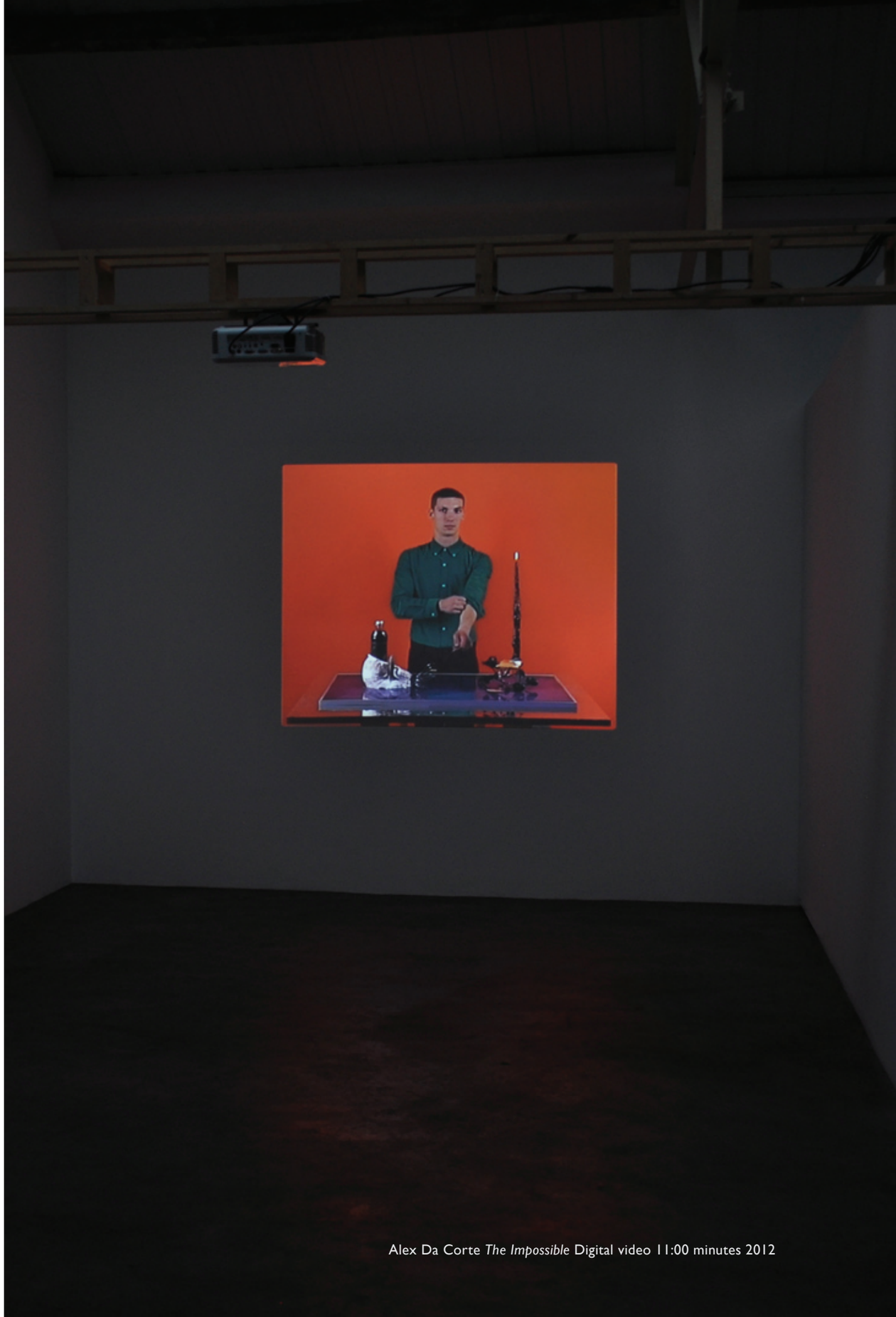
"In the afternoon they came unto a land/In which it seemed always afternoon…
And deep asleep he seem'd, yet all awake/And music in his ears his beating heart did make."[4]

The spectacle of Da Corte's protagonist explores the tension between a communal morality and an isolated, indulgent escapism. By placing him within a spatially distant, exotically coloured box, we are free to place judgements upon the man and his actions, his existence liberated from our world and any of its logic. He is a strong, almost physical, presence, while not operating within any physical or temporal reality that we can touch. We are forced to stand back from him, outsiders within this sensually immersive experience, conditioned in our response and kept in our seats by the ringmaster who is even more elusively present and absent: the artist himself.

"Conditioned to ecstasy, the poet is like a gorgeous unknown bird mired in the ashes of thought."[5]

Mai Blount

[1] Except when he moves his gaze unhurriedly to focus on the task in hand.
[2] There is a significant black object in each film: the egg, the knife and, in the final film, the totemic candle
[3] Sweeping together artists from Matisse to Rothko from the twentieth century alone.
[4] Alfred Lord Tennyson, *The Lotos-Eaters* (*Poems*, 1832)
[5] Henry Miller, *The Time of the Assassins: A Study of Rimbaud* (New York: New Directions, 1962 (1946))



Alex Da Corte *The Impossible* Digital video 11:00 minutes 2012