

MARIGOLDS

KARMA, NEW YORK, 2019

EMPATHY PUZZLE

by John Canemaker

“. . . I looked beyond myself and into the depths of another person. This was the beginning of compassion, and one cannot have both compassion and innocence.” —Eugenia W. Collier, “Marigolds” (1969)

In Eugenia W. Collier’s 1969 short story “Marigolds,” Lizabeth, the narrator, recalls a singular event in her youth—“fourteen-going-on-fifteen,” an African American girl living in “dust and squalor” in the Great Depression–era South—“when I was suddenly more woman than child.”

Frustrated beyond expression by her miserable living conditions, young Lizabeth torments an elderly neighbor, Miss Lottie, who she nicknames “old lady witch,” and grows fixated on a golden ring of marigolds tended carefully by the woman in her otherwise barren yard:

. . . a dazzling strip of bright blossoms, clumped together in enormous mounds, warm and passionate and sun-golden . . . For some perverse reason, we children hated those marigolds. They interfered with the perfect ugliness of the place; they were too beautiful; they said too much that we could not understand; they did not make sense.

In a climactic fit, a maelstrom of feeling compressed into “one great impulse toward destruction,” Lizabeth destroys Miss Lottie’s marigolds. Witnessing the woman’s devastated reaction to the loss of the singular source of color and beauty in her life, the girl is overcome with new consciousness of her pain and sadness. “That violent, crazy act was the last act of childhood,” writes Collier. Lizabeth comes of age with the arrival of empathy.

The American conceptual artist Alex Da Corte came across Collier’s story while researching the symbolism of flowers for his exhibition at Karma titled *Marigolds*. “It’s a very loaded thing,” he told me in an interview earlier this year. “To give someone a rose or an orchid meant something, and the color had power . . . a subliminal message, and I liked that.”

The Aztecs believed marigolds have protective powers; marigolds appear as symbols of grief and the fragility of life during the Mexican Día de los Muertos holiday. Ten years ago, on and off medication during a months-long hospital stay, Da Corte wrote strange scenarios and single-line jokes and prompts: “I planted marigolds around my bed before I fell asleep to ward off the weeds.” (Gardeners have long planted marigolds around vegetables to ward off insects.) Da Corte’s half-waking thought was that the marigolds “would keep away nightmares.”

Marigolds begins on the wall outside Karma with a blown-up snapshot of a sleeping child. A pea-green face and black shadows over the open-mouthed child (is his mouth agape in anger, or in awe of an unseen dream?) resemble those of the Wicked Witch of the West

(is she shrieking in ecstasy, or pain?) as depicted in Andy Warhol's *Myths* series (1981).

"If you were to plant marigolds around the child to protect him, it would protect whatever is happening inside his brain," Da Corte says. The question is one of searching for a safe place, for solid ground in unsteady times, for which "the best bet is sometimes inside our head."

Da Corte's immersive art is often grand in scale and complex in concept: gorgeous color-saturated installations in large theatrical spaces, and provocative, elegantly designed and directed videos, coalescences of Da Corte's obsessive desires and interests. Fantasy, horror films, sex, pop culture, comic books, animation, art historical references, sleekly fabricated found objects, memories, and family relics, among other sources, captivate his eclectic eye and vibrant imagination, expressed in his work as campy, startling, disturbing juxtapositions of imagery and color.

Sometimes the artist morphs himself into replications of others: the rapper Eminem, Mr. Rogers, a mummy, a witch (or two). He once fashioned a mask from a cast of his grandmother's face. "It's as though," wrote Annie Godfrey Larmon, in a catalogue essay for Da Corte's 2016 exhibition *Free Roses*, "by subsuming his own subjectivity into the skin of another, he might see differently." "New ways we can decipher poems that make no sense, new ways we can decipher dreams, new ways to decipher flowers," he told me. The viewer is placed "in the space of decoding or seeing something that may not be readily present. Which is maybe the lesson of the short story, that what we're seeing is not always apparent. To dig deeper. It is a call for empathy."

Marigolds unfolds as a participatory walk through a puzzle, or "film," as Da Corte describes his projects, or non-film, as I am describing it, made with an invisible "multiplane camera," a handcrafted motion picture device invented in the 1920s by German animator Lotte Reiniger. Later adapted by Ub Iwerks and Walt Disney, the device offered an illusion of depth when flat artwork on separate levels passed in front of a frame-by-frame animation camera. (Adobe After Effects software offers a modern, digital version of multiplane camera techniques.)

Da Corte compares his process, unplanned and meandering in the beginning, to weaving, quilt-making, at once collaborative and "dissociative" work, yet "not so different," Da Corte thinks, from directing an animated film with a team of assistants. "Collecting all of these scraps," he says. Elsewhere, I have seen him called a "neo-pop ragpicker."

Appropriately, *Marigolds* is as likely to present text informed by designer Peter Saville's famed album cover for New Order's *Power, Corruption & Lies* (1983), featuring a nineteenth-century painting of roses by Henri Fantin-Latour, as it is an image by M.C. Escher, master of alternate or so-called "impossible" perspectives, or Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's famed drawing of a hat (a full decade before Roger Price's droll Doodles), which his Little Prince explains is really a boa constrictor digesting an elephant—a test for a grown-up's imagination or closed-mindedness. Or puffy, rubbery neoprene "paintings" isolated from mid-twentieth-century comic books, resembling plump, edible paninis, or delicious pastries by artist/former Disney inbetweener Wayne Thiebaud.

The cartoons, in particular, may trigger thoughts of youthful frivolity and sadistic cruelty; the pains and passions of being gay; artworks left incomplete, not attempted, or destroyed;

time passing; the need to create beauty even in sad, dark, desolate places; growing up and into empathy. Disembodied gloved hands (an unseen Bugs Bunny) play a tune on a carrot flute, evoking the Pied Piper leading Hamelin's children to an alternative, better world. Another neoprene of a phallic key in a keyhole might be seen as an emblem of actualized desire or fantasy. Growing up "queer or marginalized in any capacity," says Da Corte, "becomes a keen way of observing both the outer world and your inner world, because you constantly have to compromise. You're placed in a position of having to cater to the norm, twisting and turning through things that maybe aren't your path. And that creates a deep sense of empathy."

The largest neoprene is ten feet tall by forty feet wide, and depicts a broken cartoon pumpkin and lit candle, from a Donald Duck comic book. "For me, a broken pumpkin is always a sign things happen in the night when you're not looking," Da Corte says, recalling Ichabod Crane's Headless Horseman or Cinderella's coach. "This notion that to break a pumpkin is to conquer death. To break your fears. The pumpkin is a real marker of time and the possibility of death."

Empathy through destruction, through dissonance, through difference, meets convivial empathy, in *Marigolds*, in the subtle manifestation of color. Inspired by artist Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Reassemblage* (1982), "where she's talking about resisting 'about-ness,' in other words, not speaking at a thing, or down to a thing, but speaking in its company, from the position of nearby," Da Corte told me; "the floor is yellow like marigolds, but it reflects upward onto the walls, so it shares in whatever color might be on the walls. It spills over and has this energy of speaking beside."