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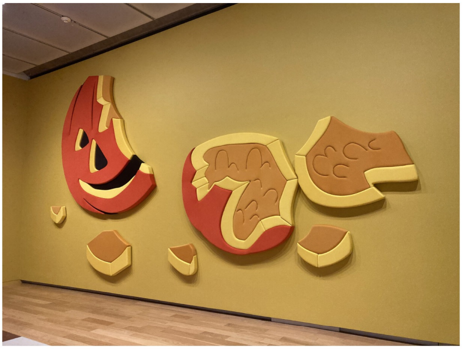
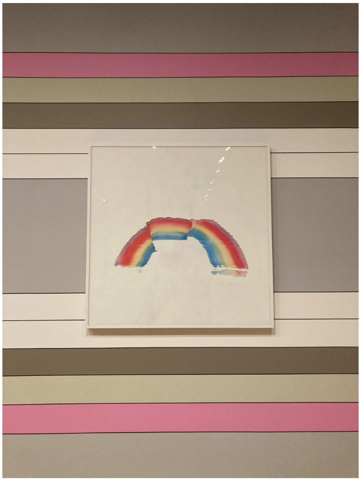
Two Visions: Alex Da Corte's "The Whale" and Robert Peterson's "Somewhere in America"

by William Sarradet | August 1, 2025

***Alex Da Corte: The Whale* at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, March 2, 2025 – September 7, 2025**

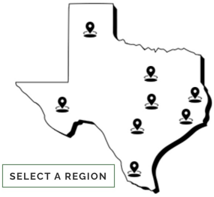


Alex Da Corte, "Non-Stop Fright (Bump in the Night)," 2019



Alex Da Corte, "The End," 2017

What makes a painting a painting? This is the central question Alex Da Corte wrestles with in *The Whale*, his exhibition at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. Known for his unorthodox approach of eschewing traditional painting materials in favor of neoprene and plexiglass, Da Corte's work is a subversive exercise in stretching the definition of a medium that has dominated Western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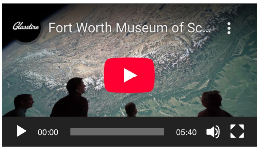

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art for centuries.

At the outset, the exhibition greets visitors with selections from the Modern's permanent collection, including familiar names like Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, and Frank Stella. On closer inspection, Da Corte, as the works' curator, has slyly disrupted the canon: a mini Frank Stella is actually by Richard Pettibone, and the Marilyn Monroe portrait, ostensibly by Warhol, is Da Corte's own. This deliberate act of artistic misdirection imposes modernism onto the viewer before leading them into the heart of Da Corte's own practice, where authenticity and authorship are constantly in flux.

"I don't like the feeling of paint on canvas," Da Corte admits in the exhibition statement, an aversion that fuels his inventive approach to image-making. In his *Puffy Paintings*, sewn neoprene and foam works inspired by comic books and Ellsworth Kelly's shaped abstractions, he isolates fragments of images, stripping them of context and allowing them to hover between objecthood and illusion. His *CD Paintings* mimic the square format of compact disc packaging, turning music into a physical artifact while interrogating sampling, appropriation, and memory.

His *Plastics Paintings* push this ethos further. Encased behind plexiglass, like animation celluloid, these works include found objects and artworks by other artists, dissolving distinctions between originality and remix culture. This gesture, absorbing and recontextualizing existing imagery, mirrors Da Corte's treatment of pop culture, which he engages with as both an art historian and an irreverent scavenger.

Da Corte describes his process as a "Jungian night sea journey," a descent into the depths of cultural memory where past and present comingle. Museums, in his view, are "cavities for ghosts," a sentiment embodied in "*ROY G BIV,*" the exhibition's lone video piece. Here, Da Corte plays four characters, including Marcel Duchamp and his alter ego Rrose Sélavy, against a stage set referencing the iconic Philadelphia Museum of Art gallery populated by Constantin Brâncusi's sculptures. The video eventually dissolves into surrealism: the sculptures anthropomorphize into a band and perform Etta James' "I'd Rather Go Blind." This moment of haunting camp encapsulates Da Corte's ability to animate the past, making it sing, dance, and ultimately combust into something new.

While Da Corte's reliance on American kitsch (clowns, comics, Halloween costumes) can sometimes feel exhaustive, his technical mastery remains undeniable. His use of Flashe paint, for instance, achieves an ultra-flat, high-quality finish reminiscent of vintage sign painting. His reverse-glass paintings, laboriously created by painting in reverse order, elevate the often-dismissed technique to a contemporary art context, collapsing distinctions between high and low.

By the time viewers exit the exhibition, they are met with works by Vija Celmins and Gerhard Richter that are textural, monochromatic depictions of the ocean's surface. The contrast is striking: where Celmins and Richter conjure the infinite through subtlety, Da Corte does so through excess. If painting, as Da Corte suggests, is a haunted medium, then *The Whale* is less about exorcism than about inviting the ghosts to stay, handing them a microphone, and letting them belt out a ballad before they vanish into thin air.

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Robert Peterson: Somewhere in America **at the Green Family Art Foundation, June 7 – September 14, 2025**

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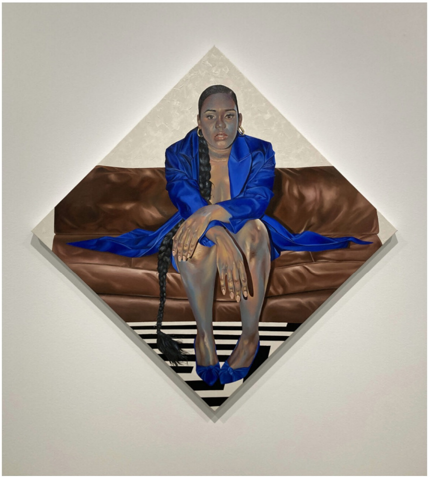
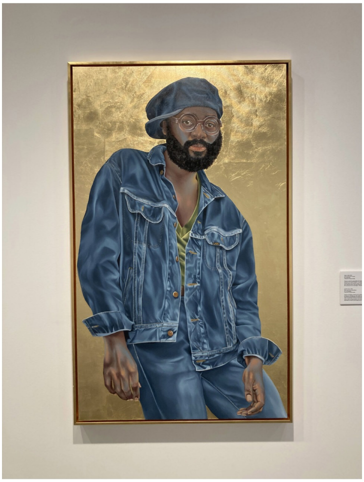


Robert Peterson, *"She is Like Water,"* 2022



Robert Peterson, *"Small Town Girl,"* 2024

Organized by the Wichita Art Museum, this show offers an uplifting exploration of the human spirit, giving viewers the opportunity to connect deeply with the authentic tapestry of contemporary American life.

Robert Peterson's work transcends representation; it's a celebration of shared humanity, rendered with an exquisite sensitivity that makes each figure feel intimately familiar. His ability to capture the nuanced expressions and inherent dignity of his subjects is nothing short of remarkable, as he transforms everyday moments into powerful narratives that resonate universally. These paintings reflect the beauty and resilience that define us.

A signature element of Peterson's artistic genius is his innovative and evocative use of color, particularly the luminous blue penumbra that delicately insinuates depth and highlights the sensual qualities of the paint and the physical presence of his figures. This masterful technique enhances the nuanced expressions seen in his work, and shows his ability as a portrait painter. Coupled with his refined precision and crisp lines, and even subtle, delicate embellishments, Peterson creates images that are both visually striking and deeply moving.

Works like *Heart of Gold* stand out with an almost iconic quality, showcasing Peterson's ability to imbue his subjects with a reverent, timeless presence. His compositions are consistently dynamic and compelling, drawing the viewer in and holding their gaze — the intentional, often minimal backdrops serve to direct focus entirely to the profound emotional landscape of the subjects themselves, enhancing the timeless and universal appeal of these powerful portraits.

Robert Peterson's journey as an artist is as inspiring as his work. Recognized as Artist of the Year for Southwest Oklahoma in 2016, and notably featured on a 2023 U.S. Postal Service stamp honoring author Ernest J. Gaines, his art has found its place in prestigious collections including the Brooklyn Museum and the Philbrook Museum of Art. This exhibition beautifully showcases his evolution from capturing celebrity images to creating intimate, authentic works inspired by his own community and family. In a world often seeking connection, Peterson's paintings offer a vibrant testament to the enduring humanity and joy found in the everyday, providing a much-needed moment of reflection and celebration of our collective spirit.

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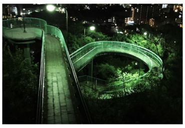

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