

Art in America

December 2014

By JENNIE HIRSH

Philadelphia-based Virgil Marti titled his first solo show at Locks after Forest Park, in his native St. Louis. A tribute to the hippie culture he witnessed at the park as a kid in the 1960s, the exhibition brought together a selection of his little-shown, large-scale tapestry-style landscapes (from 2001) and his more recent arboreal benches and sculptural mirrors (from 2013 and '14). The result was a modern-day Arcadia that filled the gallery's first floor space, offering homages to figures ranging from the Romantic poet John Keats to artists Paul Thek and Mark Rothko.

But rather than the lush plantlife of a typical park, Marti's garden-like installation offered artificial versions of nature. For each of the three 7 1/4-foot-square tapestry works on view, he appropriated



Virgil Marti, *The Purple Mushroom*, 2014, urethane, MDF and silver plating, 72 x 36 x 4 inches; at Locks.

landscape imagery from a book titled *Scenic America*, and printed it horizontally doubled-Rorschach-style-on a piece of fabric, which he then had quilted and stitched. Into each image he incorporated a too-perfect rainbow, enhancing the synthetic quality of the hallucinogenic scene.

Four of Marti's bench sculptures were placed around the perimeter of the space. Consisting of tree trunks and branches cast in cement and grapevines cast in aluminum and steel, these pieces conserve the natural shapes and textures of the original materials, petrifying and immortalizing them. Most dramatic is *The Golden Bough* (2013, 42 x 37 x 13 inches)- cast from a split tree trunk and fea-

LOCKSGALLERY



600 Washington Square South
Philadelphia PA 19106
tel 215.629.1000 fax 215.629.3868
info@locksgallery.com
www.locksgallery.com



turing a gilded grapevine protruding from its top. Named from the branch required for Aeneas to enter Hades in Virgil's *Aeneid*, the sculpture evokes the underworld as does the show's centerpiece, *Monstrance*. The latter work features the death mask of John Keats resting on a satin, python-patterned pillow set atop an intricate web of aluminum-cast grapevines. In the show's catalogue, critic Hilarie Sheets notes that Marti sees Keats as the original hippie-poet. Conceived as part of Marti's 2013 Matrix project at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Conn.—where the artist discovered the Keats mask, which the museum loaned to him for this show—the work was inspired by Paul Thek's effigy of himself as a corpse in the 1967 work *The Tomb*, also known as *Death of a Hippie*.

Interspersed with blankets on the walls were four looking-glass sculptures made of MDF (all 72 x 36 x 4 inches). Laser-cut in a shape that mimics a Chippendale mirror, the boards are topped with urethane casts made from floorboards in the artist's former studio. Bearing the rough texture and grain of the original wood, the pieces were then silver-plated and coated with tinted urethane. The final surfaces are semireflective and display horizontal bands of color that evoke Color Field painting—particularly the most intensely hued one, *The Purple Mushroom*, which ranges from pink and purple to blue and gold. The palette of the other three is softer and more neutral, suggestive of Hudson River School painting. The reflections the four mirrors offer are blurry, prompting the viewer to look inward for a sense of self, much as Mark Rothko's canvases said to do.

Throughout the show, Marti fused sculpture with painting, the natural with the synthetic, and the high-minded with kitsch. The resulting installation served as shrine to his fallen heroes and to lost paradises, real and imagined.