

ART BOOKS

Virgil Marti: Forest Park

By SAMANTHA DYLAN MITCHELL

Hilarie Sheets

Virgil Marti: Forest Park

(Locks Art Publications, 2014)

In her essay in *Forest Park*, a new monograph on the artist Virgil Marti, critic Hilarie Sheets identifies Marti's advent into the mainstream art world as his 2002 installation *Grow Room*. Featured in the 2004 Whitney Biennial, the work created a carnivalesque environment, with warped reflective walls and a cotton-candy-colored, resin-cast antler chandelier. Partially inspired by webs spun by spiders that had been fed psychedelic drugs, *Grow Room* is a seamless confluence of Marti's themes—kitsch, nostalgia, psychedelia, decoration, natural form—the beauty of which, Sheets remarks, can be “felt in a visceral way.” After seeing this installation come together, the pursuit of aesthetic beauty—“without irony,” according to Sheets—became a more tangible aim for Marti.



Marti's work maintains an uneasy tension between the highly decorative, the unexpectedly manufactured, and the truly weird, emerging from the primordial ooze of kitsch to become either postmodern or sincere. Culling imagery, design, and materials from a wide range of aesthetics, his work brings up unexpected parallels between seemingly unrelated elements of culture. Is the work thoughtfully engaging in this melding of style, or is it reveling in the depth of poor taste? The full range of this conundrum can be found in *Virgil Marti: Forest Park*, published to accompany an exhibition of the same name. Throughout her thorough and well-researched essay, which documents Marti's various source materials and motivations, Sheets provides a clear, engaging window into the deceptively sincere intention behind his approach.

At *Forest Park*, which has been on view at Locks Gallery in Philadelphia for the past two months, hyper-realistic Technicolor landscapes stretch from floor to ceiling. The images, aesthetically on par with those that might appear in a free calendar printed by a bank, are adorned with bright, cheesy rainbows and are mirrored to create a kaleidoscopic symmetry. Upon closer inspection, their surfaces re-



veal themselves to be pocked by quilted stitches, betraying the material’s intended purpose as packing blankets. Similar deceptions are to be found throughout the exhibit. A silvery wooden bench featuring rough-hewn planks and spindly, tinder legs is actually made of molded concrete. One of these legs is in the form of a gnarled tree root, seemingly sure to collapse at the slightest weight. Marti’s apparently functional objects are therefore distinctly decorative, while his landscapes hold a clear promise of functionality, created from an eclectic range of source materials.

Sheets guides the reader through interpretations of style, interior design, installation, and sculptural fabrication. Using Forest Park as a jumping-off point, the artist’s ambitious undertakings—from the re-creation of William Morris’s architecture in a neon waterfall motif to the renovation of an Eastern State Penitentiary prison cell in homage to Oscar Wilde—are put into context within a larger vision and practice. Marti is a Philadelphia staple, having lived and taught in the area since graduating from Tyler School of Art in 1990. In its inexhaustible supply of the antique, arcane, and tacky, rife with historical treasures and poor taste, the city is a perfect fit for his work. Working in sculpture and installation, Marti’s trademark might be his custom-designed wallpaper, which inventively combines design staples with contemporary imagery. His 1992 residency at Philadelphia’s Fabric Workshop, for example, inspired him to create Bullies on blacklight-sensitive wallpaper in French toile style, decorated with yearbook photos of junior high school tormentors instead of pastoral scenes. This project is a clear predecessor to his later endeavors, combining a serious devotion to style and design throughout history with a distinctly personal contemporary perspective.

In Forest Park, Sheets identifies two specific points of departure for Marti: the paintings of the Hudson River School and psychedelia. However disparate they may seem, these two sensibilities are intrinsic to understanding the contemporary American relationship with the natural world. In a way, they represent the same human impulse: to see God in nature, either by reveling in its untouchable glory or by finding unity with its underlying order. This theme of negotiating the sublime landscape—in the natural and the artificial—runs through Marti’s work. Beyond the clear melding of highbrow and lowbrow design, his apparent critique of cultural mores seems to be less a general commentary and more the utilization of the vocabulary, styles, cues, and information he has absorbed throughout his life. In this aesthetic, an image from a Led Zeppelin album cover and a canvas memorializing Europeans’ first encounters with the American wilderness are equally emotive and inspiring. Whether motivated by the zeal of Manifest Destiny or the desire to capture a vision from an acid trip, these experiences with the natural world are equally felt.

It is easy, therefore, to forget that everything in his work is actually artificial, a replica of something else. Both forgetting and remembering this reality are indicative of a collective cultural experience that Marti’s work plays on throughout the monograph: the desire to experience truth, and willingness to accept a mediated substitute.

As Sheets’s essay suggests, Marti has an eye for aesthetic beauty, however tongue-in-cheek his realization of that subjective concept may be. This imbues his work with a nagging yet reassuring sense of sentimentality, which consistently serves to keep us amused, engaged, and thoughtful. While the reproductions of his pieces in this monograph are more intellectually stimulating than viscerally provocative, having lost the attraction and discomfort one feels when encountering the work in the flesh, it offers a clear, satisfying trajectory of Marti’s conceptual development. Marti pays homage to all of his influences, from classic American design to Urban Outfitters, from Frederic Edwin Church to Alex Grey, and allows them to coexist engagingly in his meticulously crafted work.