

Chasing the Sublime in Forest Park

Hilarie M. Sheets



In *Forest Park* at Locks Gallery, Virgil Marti's assemblage of looking glasses and furniture take the romantic landscape—whether pictured in Hudson River School paintings or psychedelic posters—as a point of departure. Since first breaking into the art world in the early 1990s with his trippy black-light wallpaper installations, Marti has been plumbing the virtual warehouse of art and interior design for the discontinued and forgotten. Riffing off styles that are out of fashion or considered lower down on the cultural food chain as well as off his personal experiences, the 52-year-old, Philadelphia-based artist creates hybrid objects that blur the distinctions between art and decoration and bristle with humor, social commentary, and unexpected beauty.

His six-foot-tall looking glasses (fig. 1) hover in limbo between mirror-like objects and paintings of transcendent skies. Marti originally began the series in 2010 after long coveting a Chippendale mirror—with its wild scrolling profile framing the reflective glass—that he would see every summer in an antique store in Maine but couldn't afford. For Marti's ersatz remakes of that object of desire, he laminates MDF boards with veneers of urethane cast to resemble wood grain (he made molds from the rough-hewn planks of his basement floor), and then proceeds to cut a wiggly creature-like profile for the work. The trompe l'oeil grain looks almost like the back of a mirror frame. The whole surface is finished using a contemporary process akin to traditional chemical glass silvering. The chromed façades capture only subtle shifts in light, thwarting the expectation of a true reflection and

Fig. 1

Golden Hours, 2013, urethane, MDF, and silver plating, 72 x 36 x 4 inches

offering more of an apparition when approached.

The first he made were monochrome. But after his experiences combing through museum collections for recent installation projects, Marti—who studied painting at Washington University in Saint Louis and then at the Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia—was inspired by the dramatic skies in Hudson River School landscape paintings by artists including Thomas Cole and Frederic Edwin Church. He lifted the moody palette from the sunset in James Hamilton's *Evening on the Seashore* (1867; fig. 2), for instance, and transposed the slow melt of color from deep blue to brown to rust down the



Fig. 2

James Hamilton, *Evening on the Seashore*, 1867, oil on canvas, 23 3/8 x 42 1/8 inches. Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT, the Elizabeth Hart Jarvis Colt Collection, 1905.50

surface of his looking glass titled *On Some Faraway Beach* (2013, p. 21). This work is joined by new 2014 looking glasses that take their high-key palette cues from various 1960s counter-culture aesthetics. One has a transition from pink to orange that summons ground and sky and suggests a kind of perversion of Rothko's distilled atmospheric bands. Marti chases the idea of the sublime across time and media—from Northern Romanticism in both literature and the landscapes of Caspar David Friedrich, to Hudson River School paintings, to Abstract Expressionism, and then to *The Endless Summer* (1966) posters decorating teenagers' bedrooms.

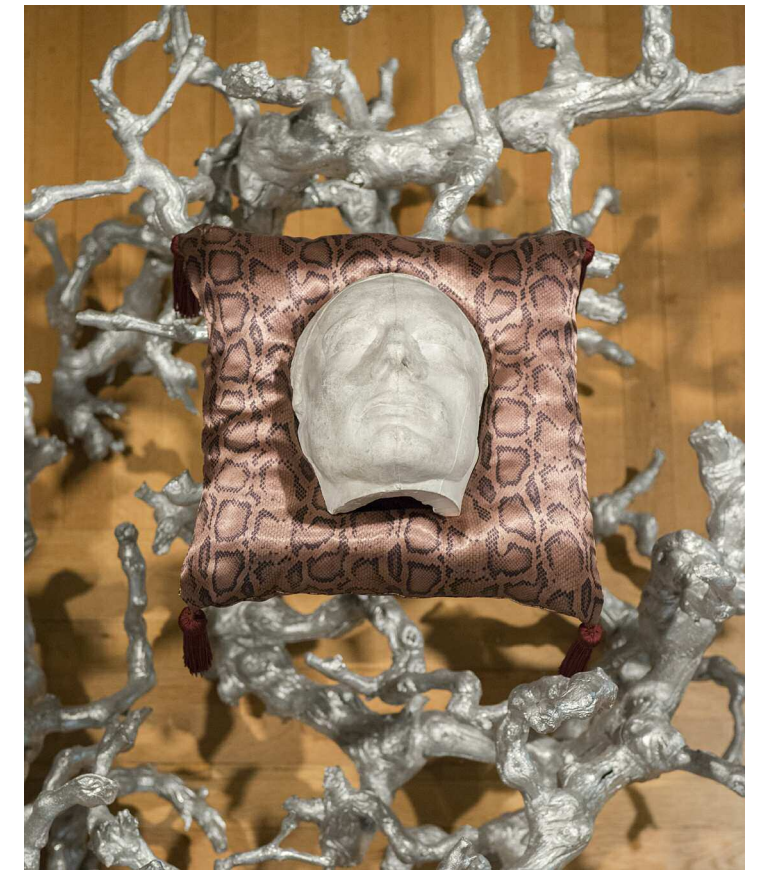


Fig. 3

Italian, 19th century, *Death Mask of John Keats*, plaster, 9 3/8 x 6 3/8 x 5 1/2 inches. Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT, gift of Miss Mary C. Barton, 1924.432a

Monstrance, 2013, aluminum, fabric, trim, and wood, 39 x 48 x 48 inches

Over the course of his recent MATRIX project, he discovered the death mask of the English Romantic poet John Keats (1795–1821) in storage at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art. Donated to the Hartford museum in 1924, the mask had never been exhibited. In his research of the forlorn object, Marti learned a life mask of Keats had also been made, casts of which are now sold in the gift shop at the National Portrait Gallery in London. Marti's idea to pair the life and death images of Keats stems from *Paul Thek Times Two* (1967). This image by famed Village Voice photographer Fred W. McDarrah shows Thek—an artist who has been highly influential on Marti and who died of AIDS in 1988 at age 54—laying beside his own long-haired, life-size effigy. The photo was taken in Thek's studio while working on his installation, *The Tomb*, that later came to be known as *Death of a Hippie*.

In 2013, Marti designed elaborate shrines on which to



Fig. 4
Untitled (Mountain Meadow), 2001, digital dye print on canvas, crushed velvet, quilting, and grommets, 87 x 87 inches



Fig. 5
Untitled (Desert), 2001, digital dye print on canvas, crushed velvet, quilting, and grommets, 87 x 87 inches

display the Keats' masks side-by-side in a nod to Thek's *Technological Reliquaries*. He propped the life mask at the center of one of his decadently upholstered ottomans, for which he appropriated a six-pointed star, common in traditional quilt design. He scaled up the star and pieced it together from crushed velvets and rabbit skins dyed electric colors and radiating from the head of Keats (he also died prematurely, at 25 from tuberculosis). Marti rested the death mask on a pillow floating in a gnarled tangle of cast aluminum grape vines that evokes a flaming funeral pyre (fig. 3). These works position Keats as a kind of forefather to the 1960s aesthetic (both the Romantics and the hippies were looking to commune with nature) and his spirit seems to ripple through *Forest Park*.

Marti recognized the sublime, several degrees separated from the source, in a book called *Scenic America* of generic landscape photos that he felt could have been used in a Claritin ad. In 2001, he scanned selected images, including an alpine meadow and a desert terrain, and mirrored each to create symmetrical landscapes to which he added a stretch of rainbow. He then printed these mirage-like scenes with acid dyes on seven-foot-square canvases that he backed with vibrantly colored crushed velvet and stitched over to make quilted packing blankets (figs. 4 and 5). He recontextualizes

those hallucinatory blankets in *Forest Park*, where they echo the Rorschach symmetry of the looking glasses.

Marti's interest in prettifying a functional and multipurpose object like a grommets packing blanket relates to his experience of how decoration functions in the average American home and his ongoing interrogation of what "real art" can be. As an undergraduate, the message continually reinforced from his professors was that serious art should not be used as interior design. Yet in his own middle-class upbringing in Saint Louis, his grandparents cut out particularly nice landscapes from calendars and framed them for the wall. His parents had reproduction colonial furniture from Ethan Allen and a lithograph of an Albert Bierstadt landscape over the fancy living room couch. His quilts share the kind of high-octane realism of Maxfield Parrish's mass-market prints that in 1925 graced the walls of an estimated one in four American households, but were reviled by art critics. Marti continually pushes back against the tenets of high culture by rehabilitating dismissed aesthetics and melding them into objects that are oddly familiar but extraordinary.

If Marti's quilt and looking glasses in *Forest Park* offer iterations of the sublime landscape, his woodsy-looking pieces of furniture around the gallery suggest perches from which to take in the views. Seemingly hewn from rustic logs and branches, these chairs and benches are actually hand-sculpted in cement over steel armatures to resemble wood. Marti marries this French "faux bois" technique, used for bridges and outdoor furniture in parks in Paris, with a range of styles from Adirondack to Charter Oak furniture. His piece *Tête-à-tête* (p. 15), referencing a type of two-person S-shaped chair, suggests a pair of figures locked in a yin-yang duet and echoes the dialogue between the life and death masks of Keats. Hanging off the trompe l'oeil driftwood that makes up the chair's back and arms are long tendrils of macramé that resemble a kind of circulatory system and enhance the figural presence of the piece. Marti was inspired to add macramé, one of the many crafts his mother taught him, by the silk tassels dangling from a Carlo Bugatti chair—a crazy amalgam of Islamic, Japanese, and Gothic influences that in the late 19th century was considered modern but now looks completely over the



Fig. 6

Bullies (detail), 1992, screen-printed fluorescent ink and rayon flock on Tyvek. Philadelphia Museum of Art, gift of Marion Boulton Stroud and the artist, 2003-39-5

top. The eclectic California-dreaming vibe of all the works in the exhibition reflects Marti's youthful romanticizing of West Coast lifestyles based on his perusal of *Sunset* magazine. He remembers the event of hippies coming to Saint Louis, when his family loaded into the car and slowly drove through Forest Park to watch them bathing in the fountain as though they were at Lion Country Safari.

Marti first mined his own biography and early aesthetic loves in the wallpapers he began making while working as a master printer at the Fabric Workshop in Philadelphia after receiving his masters at Tyler in 1990. In *Bullies* (fig. 6, p. 64), from 1992, he married the Day-Glo palette of 1970s flocked black-light posters with French toile design, swapping its pastoral scenes with portraits from his junior high school



Fig. 7

Beer Can Library, 1997, 4-color process silkscreened wallpaper. Installation at the Philadelphia Art Alliance, Philadelphia, PA

yearbook of the cool kids who tormented him. Subsuming these boys, whom he both admired and hated, in garishly ornamental color and pattern, Marti simultaneously enshrined and neutralized their power. In 1997, he made his own version of a trompe l'oeil library wallpaper, reproducing rows of beer cans he collected as a teenager (a popular hobby at the time) in place of shelves of books that were meant to make a home look more sophisticated (fig. 7). Throughout his work of the 1990s, Marti tweaked ideas of taste, class, sexuality, and self-portraiture with a kind of campy humor.

While Marti was always interested in how he could revive and remake styles deemed tacky, his pursuit of transcendent beauty became more defined with his breakthrough work *Grow Room* (2002; fig. 8). First installed as the inaugural



Fig. 8

Installation view of *Grow Room*, 2002, mixed media installation, at the *Whitney Biennial 2004*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY

exhibition at the nonprofit alternative space, Participant Inc., in New York that year, he recreated it for the Whitney Biennial in 2004 which catapulted him to the national stage. Building on the idea of his wallpapers as a glamorous skin that could be grafted onto architectural settings, Marti covered the gallery walls with prints of spider webs on silver mylar that distorted reflections like fun-house mirrors. Exploring the distance between nature and artifice, Marti originally lifted photos from the internet of erratic-looking webs that had been spun by spiders fed various drugs in a 1960s experiment. He then produced macramé versions of these webs that he photographed and printed onto the mylar. In his deliriously immersive hall of mirrors, it was hard to discern what, if anything, was “real.”

At the center of *Grow Room*, Marti hung what looked like hybrids of Venetian glass and hunting lodge chandeliers. Playing off the historical interweaving of animal forms and foliage in the decorative grotesque, Marti cast animal antlers in resin to mimic glass, with flowers and light bulbs sprouting from the tips. While his concept for the chandeliers was consistent with his ideology of finding artistic value in jarring forms, Marti had never entirely believed of his own premise until seeing the work finished for the first time and feeling its beauty in a visceral way. Since then, he has pursued that quality without irony.

Marti is fascinated by the trickle down of fine art to popular decoration, by how some variation of a Jackson Pollock painting ends up in a bowling alley. Mining the gap between high and low, his objects of allure consistently subvert aesthetic hierarchies and offer something other, but never lesser, in return.

Hilarie M. Sheets is a contributing editor to *ARTnews* and writes regularly for *The New York Times*.