

The New York Times Reprints

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit www.nytreprints.com for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)



December 23, 2010

Art Imitates Movies in a Series of Scenes

By KAREN ROSENBERG

PHILADELPHIA — An inspired meeting of the big, encyclopedic museum and the small university kunsthalle is under way at the [Institute of Contemporary Art](#) here, where the artist Virgil Marti has taken a turn as guest curator. His show, “Set Pieces,” transports decorative works from the storage rooms of the [Philadelphia Museum of Art](#) across town to the institute and is as irreverent as it is resourceful.

Working with the curators Ingrid Schaffner, from the Institute, and Joseph J. Rishel, from the Philadelphia Museum, Mr. Marti selected about 75 objects from the museum’s collection. He then configured them in tableaus loosely based on scenes from classic films: “Citizen Kane,” “Last Year at Marienbad,” “The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant” and “L’Avventura,” to name a few.

You don’t need to have seen all of these movies, though, to appreciate Mr. Marti’s auteurish way with the Philadelphia Museum’s collection. As in [his own sculptures and installations](#), he knowingly confuses high and low, period and contemporary, formal and informal design. “Set Pieces” isn’t as trippy as his best-known [Versailles-meets-psychedelia environments](#), but it offers camp high jinks aplenty.

And like many other artist-organized exhibitions, it involves some wonderfully bizarre choices, and some obscure ones. Mr. Marti’s mission as curator, he said, was to redeem works that had been languishing in storage — the “oddball players, minor characters and extras.” He unearthed casts of Lincoln’s face and hands, a provocative Surrealist sofa-sculpture by Dorothea Tanning, and even an Eakins portrait that wasn’t on view for some reason or other.

A Victorian wax still life of decaying fruit, preserved in a glass bell jar, was deemed too fragile to make the trip across town. It can be seen, however, on the cover of the show’s catalog. Mr. Marti calls it his “Rosebud,” in homage to “Kane.” In his introduction to the

show he writes: "I kept returning to thoughts of 'Rosebud,' the beloved childhood sled irretrievably lost in the vast warehouse of treasures at the end of 'Citizen Kane.'

Overshadowed by more important objets d'art, it is of sentimental value to only one person, and yet it is the mysterious heart of the story."

A late-19th-century model of the Fairmount Water Works, which was then on a hilltop that is now the site of the Philadelphia Museum, opens the exhibition. In Mr. Marti's hands it cheekily casts the museum as the ominous "Xanadu" of the opening scenes of "Citizen Kane."

It's echoed by another landscape in miniature, an inset on a Viennese porcelain coffeepot with a striking faux-bois background. Nearby is a spectacular 18th-century French foldout writing desk carved to look like a full library when in its locked position. Each of these things pretends to be something else: porcelain is disguised as wood, wood as leather bookbindings.

More cinematic, though, is an arrangement of two marble and terra cotta heads — one of a young St. John, the other of Aesop — and a small "Miniature Drum Set" sculptured in canvas by Claes Oldenburg. They're all grouped more or less as Mr. Marti found them in storage, with St. John staring intently at the drums, and Aesop looking off to the side like a distracted parent.

The show has many such "Night at the Museum" moments, not all of them PG-rated. One of the best involves a ring of tilt-top tea tables, a wall of mahogany-framed mirrors, and Ms. Tanning's saucy furniture-sculpture hybrid "Rainy Day Canapé," from 1970. The tables shield the Tanning (which looks like figures copulating on, or with, a sofa); the mirrors encourage voyeurism.

Sometimes Mr. Marti doesn't do enough to recontextualize his finds — simply clustering several mantel clocks of similar provenance, for instance. And sometimes he does too much, as when he uses theatrical uplighting to turn a scattering of small academic bronzes into a Victorian shadow play.

He also seems determined to recreate the gloomy atmosphere of museum storage, leaving mirrors unpolished and some of the statues a bit dusty. The precedent here is Warhol's 1970 "[Raid the Icebox](#)" show at the Rhode Island School of Design's museum, which took painting racks and other back-room devices into the galleries.

But you can't fault Mr. Marti's eye, which obliterates conventional museum distinctions

between fine and decorative art (as in a pair of lamps by Alberto and Diego Giacometti), and even real and fake items (that bust of St. John is listed as a “19th-century forgery, Artist/Maker unknown”). Though the objects on view span three centuries, a good number of them date from the late 1700s. Mr. Marti seems to feel very much at home in this period, among ornate European and plainer American decorative artworks.

American political celebrity is the thrust of a small and fascinating set piece that features, among other items, the Lincoln casts and several dainty earthenware figures of Washington and Franklin. They're joined by a bust of Voltaire and (somewhat randomly) by the bearded, sleepy-eyed visage of Eakins's “Bohemian (Portrait of Franklin Louis Schenck).”

If you are familiar with Mr. Marti's work, “Set Pieces” may look oddly restrained. The institute's high-ceilinged, industrial-looking galleries keep the objects' eclecticism in check, notwithstanding the purple and orange walls. You wish that Mr. Marti had managed to work more of his art into the show: his dizzying wallpapers, eerie chandeliers or plush upholstered pouffes.

The final “set piece,” at least, is deliciously over the top. Marble busts rest on furry white ottomans of varying height, in a nod to the rocky island landscape of [Michelangelo Antonioni's](#) film “L'Avventura.” A nymph and a satyr sunbathe in a painting by the Swiss Symbolist Arnold Böcklin, in view of a silver-gilded, carved-wood gander and an urn teeming with porcelain birds and flowers.

Mr. Marti playfully posits the museum as Kane's Xanadu, “a collection of everything so big it can never be catalogued or appraised.” But he isn't daunted by its vast storerooms.

“Set Pieces” continues through Feb. 13 at the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 118 South 36th Street, Philadelphia; (215) 898-7108, icaphila.org.