

REVIEWS

PHILADELPHIA

Virgil Marti

INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART

In the latest installment of the Philadelphia ICA's guest curator program, locally based artist Virgil Marti has done a rare thing. He has put together an exhibition composed almost entirely of museum-quality historical objects within the walls of a *kunsthalle* much more accustomed to dealing with work by living artists. That this project was even allowed to take place says something about the close bonds between Marti, ICA curator Ingrid Schaffner, and Philadelphia Museum of Art curator Joseph Rishel. Such largesse has enabled the artist to construct strange theatrical tableaux, or "set pieces," from the wealth of "oddball" (this is Marti's word) objects in the PMA collection.

This unorthodox curatorial collaboration has no doubt given the purists fits. Of course, this is exactly the point. In an accompanying catalogue essay, the poet Thomas Devaney muses that seeing "Set Pieces" was like entering his grandmother's dining room. This is accurate, to a certain point. I would say that it is more like entering your grandparents' house after it's been taken over by a deranged stranger—one who would gather nineteenth-century bronze sculptures of different sizes on a large platform so that when lit, they cast huge shadows on the room's far wall, as if brought to life by some dark magic; or one who would take Surrealist Dorothea Tanning's self-fornicating couch and surround it with a ring of upright nineteenth-century tea tables that read as loyal wooden bodyguards, if not shield-bearing censors.

At the ICA as elsewhere, many of Marti's imagined dialogues are erotic in character. In one area small figures carved into antique clocks gaze longingly at one another across a vitrine. In a garish "bordello" scene, several male portrait busts on feather-trimmed pedestals solemnly face away from a solitary female head, which exceptionally rests on its side. As if cast off from the rest of the group, the head appears alone, vulnerable, even violated, as a metal support pole protrudes menacingly from the underside of its neck. Its tragedy is echoed by an equally submissive nude by Arnold Böcklin (one of only five paintings in the show) hanging nearby. Yet the circulating desire does not only coalesce around women. In another room, images of various men—an idealized George Washington rendered in oil on panel, a bronze death mask of Abraham Lincoln, a Thomas Eakins portrait featuring Franklin Louis Schenck—are staged in a cluster with antidotes to butch masculinity: campy, commercialized painted earthenware of the same male archetypes.

At the entrance/exit to "Set Pieces," two Dutch still lifes hang to either side of a model of the nearby neoclassical Philadelphia waterworks. They are appropriate bookends, since both models and still lifes bring dead things back to life. In a deep sense, this is what all curators do as well. By placing artworks into historical context through the exhibitions they organize, they reawaken objects, restoring some of their former glory. But it is to Marti's credit that in his role as artist-curator at the ICA, he shows us not a melancholic longing for a past that once was, but an animation of the fantastic lives these objects have yet to live.

—Paul Galvez

View of Virgil Marti's "Set Pieces," 2010.

