



Virgil Marti, *Untitled Installation (The Pathetic Fallacy)*, 2001, fluorescent, flocked wallpaper and cast-resin sculpture, dimensions variable. Installation view.

PHILADELPHIA

VIRGIL MARTI

PENNSYLVANIA ACADEMY  
OF THE FINE ARTS

Even in this nineteenth-century museum/school, architecturally idiosyncratic by any standard, the first arch-framed glimpse of Virgil Marti's installation caused a visceral jolt that only intensified as one approached. Marti had transformed the exhibition space with fluorescent wallpaper of his own design, which glowed in the gallery under black light. The fill, as the main panels are called, repeated a large composite image of a range of landscape icons, from palm trees to Rocky Mountain waterfalls; the scene announced the kind of botanical anomalies Marti finds in the recollected landscapes of Frederic Church as well as the geographical peculiarities in some panoramas of nineteenth-century "scenics." But Marti's take on transporting wallpaper also evoked the psychedelic vernacular of the '60s and '70s and awakened the viewer's sense of nostalgia. A deep black flocking added a kitschy brilliance to the surrounding colors and suggested the illusion of space, pulling the viewer in.

Charged by its august location as well as by the cultural and biographical signs that often mark Marti's projects (*Bully Wallpaper*, 1992, presented bullies from the artist's high-school yearbook; *For*

*Oscar Wilde*, 1995, included wallpaper inspired by Arts and Crafts designs of sunflowers and lilies), the installation also offered another, analytical posture: The pulsating cascade recalled Marcel Duchamp's watery tribute to artifice in the *Etant Donnés*, housed in the nearby Philadelphia Museum of Art. But the bulk of the correspondence took place between Marti and the eclectic extravaganza of the 1876 Frank Furness and George Hewitt building housing the gallery. As the Furness and Hewitt partnership practiced a Victorian version of appropriation, incorporating a range of styles and periods into their designs (the Academy's facade combines Gothic arched windows, French academy-inspire reliefs of artists and architects of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, and elaborately patterned Philadelphia brickwork—all topped with a mansard roof), it's fitting that Marti, with his contemporary impulse to appropriate, would borrow from them. To separate the central landscape images from a brilliantly seductive flame dado below (abstracted from the detail of another Furness building), Marti reinterpreted a mushroom motif from the museum's foyer, layering his version with a subtle pattern of hallucinogenic glow and adding to the range of readings the installation encouraged. Completing the conventional division of the spheres, the artist provided a heavenly touch with a tightly patterned starry sky, an effective geometric restatement of the more randomly painted stars on the ceiling above the museum's grand stairwell. However playful this installation's riff on nineteenth-century decorative

impulses may have been, the depth of Marti's involvement revealed a sense of real homage.

Partially in response to "not wanting to be the wallpaper guy" (this is Marti's seventh such project), he fashioned *The Pathetic Fallacy*, 2001, a hard-edged but biomorphic sculpture for the gallery floor. Among the details of this graded, red form were artificial cacti, a couple of driftwood legs, and a little cartoon figurine mostly embedded in the surface. Small electric lights in the piece failed to illuminate the somewhat obscure configuration. It didn't hold a candle to the complex world the wallpapered spectacle of light described.

—Eileen Neff