

Jan Estep on Virgil Marti
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

44 Growing up in the middle of the country, in the middle of income brackets, in the middle of intelligences—frightfully in the middle of all things middling—a person's foremost desire might be to rise above a leveling mediocrity. This could account for women who wear clothes they can't afford, men tooling around in pricey sports-utility vehicles who never leave the city, and all sorts of snobbishness: superficial, if somewhat convincing, attempts to show the rest of the world that we've done good, or at least that we're better than where we've come from. All of this overcoming fits right in with the American Dream and with the recent theoretical brouhaha about deconstructed identity, shifting reference, and, ultimately, arbitrary meaning. You can be whoever you want to be. What's most interesting to me is when the story of origins is not simply hidden behind a shiny new façade, or seemingly discarded with an unnerving ease, but allowed to stand visibly, comprehensively, and with complications as integral to the present. I think about these things when I look at the work of Virgil Marti, who hangs out his old, tattered laundry right alongside over-200-thread-count linens, a refined mix of tacky and sophisticated, esoteric and pop, high and low, ersatz and sincere, that confounds questions about source and substance.

A born midwesterner living in Philadelphia, Marti has created a series of works that draws directly from his middle-class suburban life, most abundantly from his high-school days. Marti muses, "I grew up in a subdivision, drawing plans for the tree house where I would live someday with my best

friend. The fanciest house on our cul-de-sac had a Mediterranean-style rathskeller with tangerine shag carpeting, bar stools made of wine barrels, and a chandelier of giant Lucite grapes. In my memory it is still very beautiful." Against such secret dreams of home and domestic comfort, it makes sense that Marti uses interior decoration as a staple component, trying to make art (or artistic environments) as beautiful as that rathskeller.

In *Bullies*, one of Marti's first wallpaper installations, a form he has continued to use off and on, an adolescent's longing for love and acceptance stands out vulnerably against the treacherous rites of peer rivalry. *Bullies* comprises the yearbook images of all the boys in his high school who he feared or envied. Marti is the sissy—a little too smart, a little too queer—who can, at last, make company with the tough guys. Dwelling on the ambiguous emotions of a social misfit while verging on the opulence of grand, baroque decor, the piece frames the class pictures with garlands of flowers, set up in a nineteenth-century French toile pattern, printed in fluorescent inks and flocked like velvet, and accompanied by blacklights that make the wallpaper emit an eerie glow. The first installation of the *Bullies* wallpaper was in a boiler room, deep in the basement of the Community Education Center in Philadelphia, where the dank, dark confines underscored the love/hate relationship between Marti and his psychic pals.

A similar play of visual lushness and disparate psychological undercurrents turns up in other pieces. "Blacklight Posters" is a series of confusing images of men wrestling, punishing, and otherwise touching one another, taken from '50s and early '60s physique magazines. It's unclear if pain or pleasure is the key element here. *Untitled (Funeral Arrangement)* consists of two-foot-tall block letters that spell out the name of the band KISS. The chunky letters are covered by large silk pansies, mourning the middle-aged demise of rock and roll. For the installation *Pills*, Marti wrapped fluorescent, flocked wallpaper of large primary-colored capsules up and around a stairwell, covering a room from floor to ceiling, inducing a kind of visual vertigo while mocking an overdosed, psychedelized haze. Reminiscent of a *Valley of the Dolls* or *Mother's Little Helper* mystique, it also recalled the high-school slow-dance anthem *Stairway to Heaven*.

With *Hot Tub* Marti created a special leisure room lined with a giant crowded print of fans roaring at a rock concert, floor and ceiling mirrors, a deep-shag-cushioned sunken dry tub, and an exploding Sputnik-like chandelier of flicker-flame bulbs. And in an untitled series of portrait posters, Marti

photomontages his own image into hyper-real contexts, made up of pink silk, clear blue skies, shimmering bubbles, sweet pansies, and pretty yellow buttercups; the images are ebulliently hopeful, but so cool I can't quite trust them. Each of these works is completely manipulated and aestheticized, yet manages to create the aura of an authentic, remembered charge. This allows nostalgic and emotional excesses to become the stuff of celebration.

Marti's most recent installation, a trompe l'oeil wallpaper *Beer Can Library*, conjoins high-end collector with teenage hobbyist. A repeated, screen-printed photo-reproduction of roughly half of an 800-can collection amassed by Marti in the '70s lines the walls of what appears to be a rare-books library. The dark mahogany molding, thick, wide doors, and matching ornate tables serve to elevate the beer cans to a new level of connoisseurship, ennobling the fastidious care and determination that preserved them, and dignifying the memory of stacked beer cans arranged proudly behind the basement wetbar. Overall, Marti's work leaves me with feelings of poignancy mixed in with a queasy embarrassment, the ambivalence of a too-trashy upbringing caught by a cultivated sensibility.

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Virgil Marti

Beer Can Library, detail of installation at Art Alliance, 1997. Screen-printed four-color process wallpaper, dimensions variable. Photo by Aaron Igler, courtesy of the artist.

