



Virgil Marti, *Hot Tub*, 1998,  
mixed media. Installation view.

## VIRGIL MARTI

### THREAD WAXING SPACE

There's a thin line between groovy and ghastly, and Virgil Marti pays attention to such distinctions. In *Hot Tub*, 1998, Marti's deftly kitschy installation, this basic tension between hedonistic pleasure and looming damnation is acknowledged with the simple immediacy of a one-liner. Like the smoked mirrors, electric candle flames, and deep-pile shag it comprises, *Hot Tub* is so bad it's good. A number of interesting issues coalesce in Marti's work—domestic space as social palimpsest, the Warholian appeal of mass-produced taste, an appreciation for what curator Lia Gangitano refers to as “the purgatory” of suburbia. Most satisfying, however, is Marti's understanding of the subtle ways in which a sculptural environment manipulates the physical perceptions of its audience.

*Hot Tub* began with a narrow doorway in an otherwise blank wall, an exterior/interior opposition that played on the graduated levels of privacy in the home—the difference, say, between the foyer and the bathroom. But Marti collapsed these distinctions even as he reveled in them: The doorway was equipped with a silver vinyl hanging that looked like a shower curtain, and the step up to the entrance was carpeted in white pile. White carpeting is, of course, the ultimate in a certain class of domestic signifiers, but in this context it also came across as plain washroom tile. On the wall, silver lettering with a high-'70s look requested “No Shoes Please,” and little bare-foot icons were embedded in the carpet under the inevitable see-through plastic runner. Thus prompted to think about stripping and concealing, entrances and goings-on behind closed doors, the visitor took the plunge and slipped inside.

At first it was very dark, and the room seemed cavernous. Faux candlelight flickered, courtesy of a spherical, contemporary chandelier and four pairs of matching sconces; as the eye adjusted, it became clear that both floor and ceiling were mirrored, while the walls were lined in silver Mylar. The wallpaper pattern eventually sorted itself into a teeming lattice of outstretched arms and reaching hands (a classical scene of torment the artist lifted from a Kiss album cover). In this intimate inferno, a misstep came easily, and the pit was waiting—the “hot tub” itself, six feet across and three feet deep, sunk in the mirrored floor and carpeted in plush, textured, orange-and-brown-striped shag. After the “fall,” though, one landed in a surprisingly cozy realm. The tub was padded; the rug felt marvelous on bare feet. The space was quiet, warm, each flame redoubled by the mirrors into a dreamy netherworld in which spatial orientation was persistently denied but gradually became unimportant.

Marti's handling of materials is astute, and his use of all-over coverings like wallpaper and wall-to-wall carpet creates a strangely womblike effect. Privacy, like pleasure, is an unstable concept, containing as it does both freedom and invisibility, and Marti's *mise-en-abîme* was at once soothing and claustrophobic. Seen through a glass darkly, the brazenly tacky installation began to function as a haven in which strangers brushed together in the shadows, giggling. With Marti as a low-rent, disheveled sort of Virgil, this particular circle of decorator hell felt pretty good.

—Frances Richard