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—JOHN KEATS, 1817

“While there is t
—PAUL THEK, 1987

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AUGUST 1, 2013 – JANUARY 5, 2014
WADSWORTH ATHENEUM MUSEUM OF ART
“O for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts!” —JOHN KEATS, 1817

“While there is time, let’s go out and, and feel everything.” —PAUL THEK, 1987

Thousands of objects reside behind the locked doors of the art storage rooms in the Wadsworth Atheneum. Some have never been exhibited, and are gazed upon only by a fortunate few. Philadelphia-based artist Virgil Marti was given special access to explore those secure areas, and there he “discovered” the nineteenth-century Death Mask of John Keats. Since it was donated to the museum in 1924, the mask has not seen the light of day, until now. Marti credits this morose plaster cast of the dead poet’s face as the initial inspiration for his site-specific MATRIX project. For Marti, the tarnished object immediately conjured the image of Paul Thek Times Two (1967), a photograph of the long-haired, mustached artist lying side by side with his sculptural self-portrait effigy, the centerpiece of Thek’s most significant work The Tomb (1967), popularly known as Death of a Hippie.

The seemingly disconnected spirits of John Keats (English, 1795–1821) and Paul Thek (American, 1933–1988) unite in Virgil Marti’s Ode to a Hippie, an homage to Thek that is also an inventive evocation of an English garden, where Keats found inspiration for his poetry. Over Marti’s twenty years of sculpture and textile-based installation work, the artist has regularly combined seemingly incongruous subjects and objects in elegant and witty arrangements, revealing surprising affinities. He often fuses high and low culture, fine art and craft, in a complicated process requiring numerous collaborations with artisans including upholsterers, metalworkers, and carpenters. In Grow Room (2002), French rococo meets rustic hunting lodge in Venetian-style chandeliers cast from deer antlers. In “Bully” Wallpaper (1992), a traditional French fabric design in muted tones featuring flowers and country scenes is reimagined as flocked black-light wallpaper in Day-Glo colors depicting yearbook portraits of junior high school bullies in place of the quaint rural landscapes.

John Keats, a major figure of English Romantic poetry perhaps best known for his Ode on a Grecian Urn (1819), died prematurely from tuberculosis at the age of twenty-five, having never achieved any real success during his lifetime. Likewise, although Paul Thek saw early success with hyper-realistic chandeliers, he was severely affected by the anti-establishment AIDS in 1988 at the height of his career and moved to Europe to receive needed treatment. Yet shortly after his move, he was acclaimed by art critics as a significant figure. Therefore, in his own time, Thek represents a summation of untamed English and American trompe l’oeil objects from the Armory fire of 1913.
The Tomb (1967), a hyper-realistic sculpture of chunks of meat and human body parts rendered in flesh-like beeswax, the anti-establishment artist was all but forgotten by the art world when he died from AIDS in 1988 at the age of fifty-four. The Tomb was instantly recognized as a masterpiece of American sculpture of the sixties and was prescient in stating that “The Tomb represents a summation and an adieu.”4

Marti notes that the Keats death mask serves his MATRIX project as the “McGuffin”5 — the initial motivation for a work that can become less important as themes play out. Following through on the motif of life and death, visualized by the living artist and his “corpse” in Paul Thek Times Two, Marti requested a Keats life mask for the exhibition to represent Keats and Thek in both states. In developing the setting of a natural, untamed English garden, Marti makes reference to numerous nineteenth-century objects from the Atheneum's collection: Hudson River School landscape paintings; American trompe-l'œil paintings; a Carlo Bugatti chair; a tête-à-tête chair; furniture made from the Charter Oak; and the fused metal and revolver parts from the Colt Armory fire of 1864.6
The sculptural work of Virgil Marti, like beeswax, in the Tomb of 1967, was the most significant piece of the sixties. The artist packed up shop to America in the 1970s, at the height of the New York art scene. Shimmering psychadelic themes play out throughout the exhibition, from the exhibition of a natural, th-century, redwood cut, like rough wood paint, to vibrant horn, hair; furniture, and other works."McGuffin" peak the exhibition of a natural, th-century, redwood cut, like rough wood paint, to vibrant horn, hair; furniture, and other works.

The Hippie Movement felt estranged from the society of the 1960s; simultaneously longing against conservatism and drugs like marijuana. Marti, likewise experimenting with material—cast into their scroll-cut object—depicted in William C. Mawdsley's "The Tomb of Descent," 1863, oil on canvas, bequest of Clara Hinton G. This is the exhibition of a natural, th-century, redwood cut, like rough wood paint, to vibrant horn, hair; furniture, and other works."McGuffin" peak the exhibition of a natural, th-century, redwood cut, like rough wood paint, to vibrant horn, hair; furniture, and other works.
Shimmering psychedelic colors pop from the muted walls on oversized looking glasses, their scroll-cut outlines derived from Chippendale mirror designs. The looking-glass material—cast urethane laminated to MDF board—has been manipulated to appear like rough wood paneling, resembling the painted *trompe-l’oeil* (trick the eye) walls depicted in William Harnett and John Frederick Peto’s compositions. Marti’s mirrors flash vibrant horizontal bands of color suggesting Mark Rothko’s abstractions relating to landscape, but in actuality Marti has created interpretations of the dramatic skies seen in specific works of Hudson River School artists. They, in turn, were inspired by European Romantic landscape painters, who were part of the same Romantic Movement that included Keats. And the impossibly fantastical color palettes of the skies also link Romanticism to hippie culture.

The Hippie Movement borrowed its ideology, in part, from Romanticism. The Romantics felt estranged from a world increasingly engaged with logic and technology, while simultaneously losing touch with nature and feelings. In the 1960s, hippies reacted against conservative tendencies with peaceful actions based on spontaneous feeling rather than rational thought. The fact that hippies have generally been associated with drugs like marijuana, mushrooms and LSD also aligns them with the Romantics, who likewise experimented with hallucinogenic drugs, in the form of absinthe and opium.
looking glasses, looking-glass (intended to appear the eye) walls arti’s mirrors actions relating dramatic skies were inspired Romantic reliquaries of the

The Romantics, while Romantics, who the and opium.
Marti’s English garden can idle to contemplate. The rustic seating is made of The log and branches relate to the historic Charter Oak. The cross section of the tree possibly have yielded the wood. So, nothing is quite as it seems. Fabrics again relating to the life mask of Keats are fabricated. They are illusionistic macramé passageways by Thek’s effigy, Carlo Bugatti chair-shaped in an “s” the dialogue between deities and the dialogue between life and death. Reliquaries designed for endings are upholstered with the palette dominated by a star quilt design, the life mask of Keats. By contrast, the metal of aluminum drifts and revolver parts. Keats’s fellow Romantic, Shelley famously anoints Keats an anointing vessel used to hold the Eucharistic host. Whose work is perhaps "Cemetry Gates,." In the gallery, transmogrification and a church interface. In Ode to a Hippie Movement through longing for immortality, artistic contributions...
Marti’s English garden includes rough-hewn outdoor furniture on which the visitor can idle to contemplate the sublime landscape vistas through the looking glasses. The rustic seating seamlessly blends with the artist’s allusion to a natural landscape. The log and branch forms of the benches and chairs, including Throne, make reference to the historic Charter Oak furniture in the museum collection. Interestingly, far more “Charter Oak” objects exist than the wood from the mythic fallen tree could possibly have yielded, an absurdity that only fuels the legend and Marti’s narrative. So, nothing is quite what it seems. The artist’s garden furniture is faux bois (false wood), fabricated in steel, aluminum and cement, their naturalistic textures and forms again relating to the museum’s American paintings in trompe l’oeil (trick the eye). They are illusionistic, like Thek’s hyperrealistic, sculptural Meat Pieces. The addition of macramé passages to the log benches invokes the “hippie craft” accessories worn by Thek’s effigy, and also alludes to the knotted-tassel details of the museum’s Carlo Bugatti chair, a bizarre hybrid of Gothic, Japanese and Islamic design. Marti’s tête-à-tête chair—a seat intended for two people, typically facing each other and shaped in an “s” form—also finds its basis in the collection, but perfectly visualizes the dialogue between Keats and Thek, the juxtaposed masks, and life and death.

The life and death masks of John Keats are separately enshrined in customized reliquaries designed by Marti. The life mask rests atop a sumptuous ottoman upholstered with quilted fabric of smooth and crushed velvet and rabbit fur, its vivid palette dominated by purple, electric blue, magenta and gold. Inspired by a traditional star quilt design, the cushion’s single, six-pointed gold star radiates from the pristine life mask of Keats, in part a reference to his celebrated love poem Bright Star (1819). By contrast, the death mask lies on a python-print pillow ensconced in a tangled nest of aluminum driftwood branches. The twisted forms echo the collection’s fused metal and revolver parts from the Colt factory fire, and also allude to the funeral pyre of Keats’s fellow Romantic poet Percy Shelley, who drowned in a shipwreck in 1822. Shelley famously wrote Adonais (1821), an elegy to his friend John Keats. Marti anoints Keats and Thek with holy status entitling the piece Monstrance, named for a vessel used to exhibit sacred relics. A monstrance is best known as the display for the Eucharistic host at a Roman Catholic mass, which also relates it closely to Thek, whose work is pervaded with Catholic allusions. The religious references continue in Cemetery Gates, approximations of stained glass windows installed at the far end of the gallery, transforming the overall space into a cross between an outdoor garden and a church interior—a cathedral of nature.

In Ode to a Hippie Virgil Marti seamlessly intertwines Romanticism and the Hippie Movement through the tragic figures of John Keats and Paul Thek. The two artists longed for immortality through their work, but died too young to believe that their artistic contributions would have longevity. Marti acknowledges their mortality and
fame, both individually and interchangeably, as well as their continued significance to current and future generations of artists. But Thek, who used complicated crafting techniques and diverse materials in many of his works, speaks directly to Marti’s project and working methods. The remarkably complex assemblage of art objects in Virgil Marti’s Ode to a Hippie is a tribute not only to life and death, and beauty and the sublime, but also to Thek’s legacy of inventive materials, unexpected pairings, and creative collaboration.

PATRICIA HICKSON
Emily Hall Tremaine Curator of Contemporary Art

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**REFERENCE IMAGES**

![Image](image1.jpg)

**WILLIAM MICHAEL HARNETT,** *The Faithful Colt, 1890.* OIL ON CANVAS. THE ELLA GALLUP SUMNER AND MARY CATLIN SUMNER COLLECTION FUND, 1935.236 PHOTO: ALLEN PHILLIPS/WADSWORTH ATHENEUM

![Image](image2.jpg)

**JOHN H. MOST,** *Charter Oak Chair, 1857.* OAK AND BRASS. THE ELIZABETH JARVIS COLT COLLECTION, 1905.1579 PHOTO: ALLEN PHILLIPS/WADSWORTH ATHENEUM

![Image](image3.jpg)

**CARLO BUGATTI,** *Chair, c. 1895.* WALNUT, VELLUM, STAMPED BRONZE, SILK, IVORY, AND PAINT. GIFT OF SAMUEL P. AVERY, 1983.3 PHOTO: ALLEN PHILLIPS/WADSWORTH ATHENEUM

![Image](image4.jpg)

**METAL AND FUSED REVOLVER PARTS RECOVERED AFTER THE DESTRUCTION BY FIRE OF THE COLT ARMORY, 1864. METAL. 1905.X.10 PHOTO: ALLEN PHILLIPS/WADSWORTH ATHENEUM**
VIRGIL MARTI

EDUCATION

1990 Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Summer
1990 Tyler School of Art, Temple University, M.F.A. Painting
1984 School of Fine Arts, Washington University, B.F.A. Painting

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2001 Morris Gallery, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia
2000 Beer Can Library, Habitat, London
2000 Couch, Points of Departure, Ardmore Station, Ardmore, Pennsylvania
1998 Hot Tub, Thread Waxing Space, New York

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2010 The Jewel Thief, Frances Tang Teaching Museum, Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, NY
2007 Biennale de Montréal, Montreal, Quebec

GRANTS AND AWARDS

2011 Joan Mitchell Foundation Painters & Sculptors Grant
2005 Pennsylvania Council on the Arts Fellowship
2003 Pennsylvania Council on the Arts Fellowship
1997 Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Award
1995 Pew Fellowship

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Art Resources Transfer, Inc.
Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum
Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College
Fabric Workshop and Museum
New Museum of Contemporary Art

Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts
Philadelphia Museum of Art
Rhode Island School of Design Museum of Art
Victoria & Albert Museum
Whitney Museum of American Art

WORKS IN THE ESTATE OF JOHN KEATS

To Engender Pleasant Beauty and courtesy the artist.

Velvet, rabbit fur, trim, tube.

84 x 46 1/4 in. (each)

Cemetry Gates

Unless otherwise noted and courtesy the artist.

Located in Hartford, Connecticut.

To authenticate the artist.

1 See John Keats, The Letters
2 This quote is painted in curs
3 Robert Pincus-Witten, "Thek
4 Ibid.
5 The term “McGuffin,” also sp
6 Most of these objects are cu
7 Three of the five mirrors find
8 See Arash Farzaneh, “The Ins
9 Located in Hartford, Connecti
10 With permission of Cemetry

Born in Saint Louis, Missouri.
Lives and works in Philadelphia.

Unless otherwise noted and courtesy the artist.

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Velvet, rabbit fur, trim, tube.

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Born in Saint Louis, Missouri.
Lives and works in Philadelphia.
Born in Saint Louis, Missouri, 1962
Lives and works in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Unless otherwise noted, all works are dated 2013 and courtesy the artist.

To Engender Pleasant Dreams (For a Life Mask of John Keats)
Velvet, rabbit fur, trim, and wood
34 x 40 x 40 in.

Studio of Benjamin Haydon
Life Mask of John Keats, 20th century (from original cast of 1816)
Plaster
8 3/4 x 6 5/8 x 5 1/2 in.
Collection of Suzanne R. Hoover

Monstrance
Aluminum, fabric, trim, and wood
39 x 48 x 48 in. (overall)

Italian, 19th century
Death Mask of John Keats
Plaster
9 3/8 x 6 5/8 x 5 1/2 in.
Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Gift of Miss Mary C. Barton, 1924.432a

Windows
Cemetry Gates
Aluminum and urethane
84 x 46 1/4 in. (each of two)

Looking Glasses
Golden Hours
Life, Death, and Immortality
On Some Faraway Beach
Starman
Thanatopsis
Urethane, MDF, and silver plating
72 x 36 x 4 in. (each)

Chairs
Tête-à-tête
Cement, steel, and nylon
39 x 47 x 36 in. (overall)

Throne
Cement, steel, and nylon
56 x 33 x 45 in. (overall)

Benches
Cold Pastoral
Cement, steel, and nylon
52 x 56 x 22 in. (overall)

The Golden Bough
Cement, steel, wood, and gold leaf
42 x 37 x 13 in. (overall)

Gremlin in the Studio
Cement, steel, and aluminum
20 1/2 x 53 x 16 in. (overall)

ARTIST TALK

MATRIX Gallery Talk
Virgil Marti
Thursday, August 1
6 pm
Marti will discuss his Ode to a Hippie in the life and work of John Keats.

1 See John Keats, The Letters of John Keats, various publications.
2 This quote is painted in cursive on Paul Thek’s painting titled While There is Time (1987).
3 Robert Pincus-Witten, “Thek’s Tomb…absolute fetishism…” Artforum, November 1967; p. 24. This review is considered to have the best descriptive record of Paul Thek’s The Tomb. The installation was not well documented and is no longer extant, with the exception of the right hand of the effigy and three fingers.
4 Ibid.
5 The term “McGuffin,” also spelled “MacGuffin,” is a plot device primarily noted in literature and film (Marti is an avid film lover) popularized by Alfred Hitchcock.
6 Most of these objects are currently on view at the museum, with the exception of the Bugatti chair, the tête-à-tête chair and the specific Charter Oak chair that inspired Marti. However, there are other examples of Charter Oak furniture available to see in the American Decorative Arts galleries at the museum. For collection images, visit www.wadsworthatheneum.org/collection-2/.
7 Three of the five mirrors find their source paintings in the collection of the Wadsworth Atheneum. Life, Death, and Immortality is based on the sky in the museum’s 1844 Thomas Cole painting bearing the same title. On Some Faraway Beach is drawn from James Hamilton’s Evening on the Seashore of 1867. Thanatopsis is based on Frederic Edwin Church’s Coast Scene, Mount Desert, 1863. Marti’s titles are thoughtfully layered with arcane and popular cultural references from literature, poetry, art, and music, primarily from the eras of Romanticism and the Hippie Movement, and all directly relating to the project’s themes.
9 Located in Hartford, Connecticut, the Charter Oak tree became a symbol of American independence. According to legend, in 1687, Connecticut’s Royal Charter of 1662 was hidden in a hollow of the tree to prevent its confiscation by the English, thus retaining the state’s autonomy. The mighty oak fell in a storm in 1856 and its precious timber was acquired and fetishized in a variety of objects, many in the collection of the Wadsworth Atheneum.
10 With Cemetery Gates, the misspelling of “cemetery” is intentional. It follows the spelling of the title of a 1985-86 song by English band The Smiths, who cite Keats in the lyrics.

© 2013 Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art
ARTIST TALK

MATRIX Gallery Talk
Virgil Marti
Thursday, August 1
6 pm
Marti will discuss his MATRIX project
Ode to a Hippie in the Eleanor H. Bunce Gallery.

The artist would like to thank Mimi Cheng, Allie Emeric, Alyce Perry Englund, Suzanne R. Hoover, Nick Lenker, Liz McIlvaine, Don Pirre, Chloe Reison, Kevin Strickland, and Jeb Wood, Ben Nichols, and Jonathan Maley from Independent Casting, Philadelphia. And special thanks go to Peter Barberie for moral support and challenging questions.

MATRIX 167 is supported with funds from the The Dedalus Foundation, Inc.
The MATRIX program is also supported by the current and founding members of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art’s Contemporary Coalition.
Support for the Wadsworth Atheneum is provided in part by the Greater Hartford Arts Council’s United Arts Campaign and the Connecticut Department of Economic and Community Development Office of the Arts, which also receives support from the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency.

Wadsworth Atheneum
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