

# VIRGIL MARTI

# MATRIX 167

# ODE TO A HIPPIE



AUGUST 1, 2013 - JANUARY 5, 2014  
WADSWORTH ATHENEUM MUSEUM OF ART

# ODE TO A HIPPIE

*“O for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts!”<sup>1</sup>*

—JOHN KEATS, 1817

*“While there is time, let’s go out and, and feel everything.”<sup>2</sup>*

—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

PAUL THEK *TWO*, 1967. PORTRAIT OF AMERICAN ARTIST PAUL THEK (1933 – 1988) AS HE POSES BESIDE A LIFE-SIZE EFFIGY OF HIMSELF, NEW YORK, NEW YORK, SEPTEMBER 16, 1967. THE PIECE WAS EXHIBITED IN A STEPPED PYRAMID IN THE INSTALLATION *THE TOMB* AT STABLE GALLERY. PHOTO BY FRED W. MCDARRAH/GETTY IMAGES



Thek saw early success in America in the 1960s with his entirely original sculpture of hyper-realistic 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. Thek's iconic installation, *The Tomb* (1967), was acclaimed by art critic and historian Robert Pincus-Witten as "one of the most unanticipated yet representative masterworks of American sculpture of the sixties."<sup>3</sup> Yet shortly after its premiere at the Stable Gallery in New York, the artist packed up and moved to Europe. Thek met with continued success abroad, collaborating on elaborate installations with various colleagues, but when he moved back to America in the mid-1970s, he was never quite able to regain a foothold in the New York art scene. Therefore, in his review, Pincus-Witten was prescient in stating that "[*The Tomb*] represents a summation and an adieu."<sup>4</sup>

Marti notes that the Keats death mask serves his *MATRIX* project as the "McGuffin"<sup>5</sup> —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'oeil* 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.<sup>6</sup>

VIRGIL MARTI, *THANATOPSIS*, 2013.

PHOTO: GREENHOUSE MEDIA. © VIRGIL MARTI



FREDERIC EDWIN CHURCH, *COAST SCENE*,  
*MOUNT DESERT*, 1863. OIL ON CANVAS.  
BEQUEST OF CLARA HINTON GOULD, 1948.178



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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

VIRGIL MARTI, *LIFE, DEATH, AND IMMORTALITY*, 2013 (DETAIL).  
PHOTO: GREENHOUSE MEDIA. © VIRGIL MARTI



VIRGIL MARTI, *ON SOME FARAWAY BEACH AND BENCH STUDY*, 2013.  
PHOTO: GREENHOUSE MEDIA.  
© VIRGIL MARTI



VIRGIL MARTI, *BENCH STUDY*, 2013  
(DETAIL). COURTESY THE ARTIST.  
PHOTO: GREENHOUSE MEDIA.  
© VIRGIL MARTI

VIRGIL MARTI, *TO ENGENDER PLEASANT  
DREAMS (FOR A LIFE MASK OF JOHN KEATS)*, 2013.  
PHOTO: GREENHOUSE MEDIA. © VIRGIL MARTI



STUDIO OF BENJAMIN HAYDON, *LIFE MASK OF JOHN  
KEATS*, 20TH CENTURY (FROM ORIGINAL 1816 CAST),  
AND VIRGIL MARTI, *TO ENGENDER PLEASANT DREAMS  
(FOR A LIFE MASK OF JOHN KEATS)*, 2013 (DETAIL).  
PHOTO: GREENHOUSE MEDIA. © VIRGIL MARTI

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.<sup>9</sup> 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*,<sup>10</sup> 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 Tremain Curator of Contemporary Art

### REFERENCE IMAGES



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



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



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



*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

- 2010 *Set Pieces*, Curatorial project for Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia
- 2008 *Ah! Sunflower*, Visual Arts Center, Richmond, Virginia
- 2007 *Virgil Marti/Pae White*, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC
- 2003 Project Room, Santa Monica Museum of Art, Santa Monica
- The Flowers of Romance*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia
- 2002 *Grow Room*, Participant, Inc., New York
- 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
- 1996 *White Room, White Columns*, New York

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2010 *The Jewel Thief*, Frances Tang Teaching Museum, Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, NY
- 2007 *Biennale de Montréal*, Montreal, Quebec
- 2004 *Whitney Biennial 2004*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY
- 1997 *Apocalyptic Wallpaper*, Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, OH

## 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
- Pennsylvania Council on the Arts Fellowship
- 1995 Pew Fellowship
- Art Matters 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

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

9 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**

*Cemetery 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)

<sup>1</sup> See John Keats, *The Letters of John Keats*, various publications.

<sup>2</sup> This quote is painted in cursive on Paul Thek's painting titled *While There is Time* (1987).

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> 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/](http://www.wadsworthatheneum.org/collection-2/).

<sup>7</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> See Arash Farzaneh, "The Inspirations behind the Hippie Movement" at [www.suite101.com](http://www.suite101.com), posted 25 March 2013.

<sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>10</sup> 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.

## 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  
Museum of Art

600 Main Street  
Hartford, Connecticut 06103  
(860) 278-2670

[www.wadsworthatheneum.org](http://www.wadsworthatheneum.org)

DEDALUS FOUNDATION, INC.

