

A GLOWING LANDSCAPE



Photo courtesy Philadelphia University

"The Course of Empire," black-light wallpaper by artist Virgil Marti, is on display at the Design Center at Philadelphia University. "There was a time when the '70s were thought of as a period of bad taste," said Marti. "This is an attempt to rehabilitate that image in some way."

Exhibit evokes '70s

By Jeremy Barker

Influences dating back to the 16th century are presented in the style of 1970s kitsch in *Crazy Quilt: Virgil Marti's Selected Works*, an exhibit by Philadelphia-based installation artist Virgil Marti on display at the Design Center at Philadelphia University.

Marti lists Raphael's paintings at the Vatican, Renaissance-period Italian crypts and ornate rococo installations like those found at the Versailles Palace as inspirations in designing this four-room exhibit that evokes the "Me Decade" through flocked (velvet-textured) black-light wallpaper, vintage beer cans and frequent use of molded synthetic materials.

"There was a time when the '70s were looked down on as a period of bad taste," said Marti, who spent the decade as an adolescent in suburban St. Louis. "This is an attempt to rehabilitate that image in some way."

Before entering the exhibit, visitors pass through a foyer Marti decorated with objects from the Design Center's collection including carved tortoiseshell combs, a stuffed hummingbird fan, and

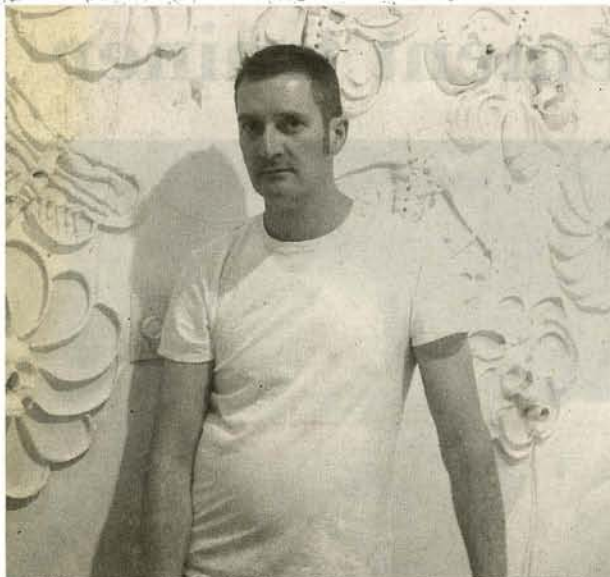


Photo courtesy Philadelphia University

Virgil Marti is pictured with artwork inspired by the tombs of the Capuchin monks, which artistically display human remains. "I visited the place 20 years ago, and it just sort of stuck in my head," he said.

'Crazy Quilt' merges fine art with kitsch ...

shoes and a handbag made to resemble peacock feathers. The items introduce the exhibit's general theme of nature being used in design.

The first room of original artwork, titled "Nature Morte," features lit-up designs of flowers and clover made of molded plastic pieces mounted on a wall. Upon closer inspection, the pieces are revealed as gold-flecked replicas of human skulls and other bones.

Marti got the idea for this work after a visit to the tombs of the Capuchin monks in Rome, which contain elaborate designs made from human bones.

"I visited the place 20 years ago, and it just sort of stuck in my head," said Marti. "I

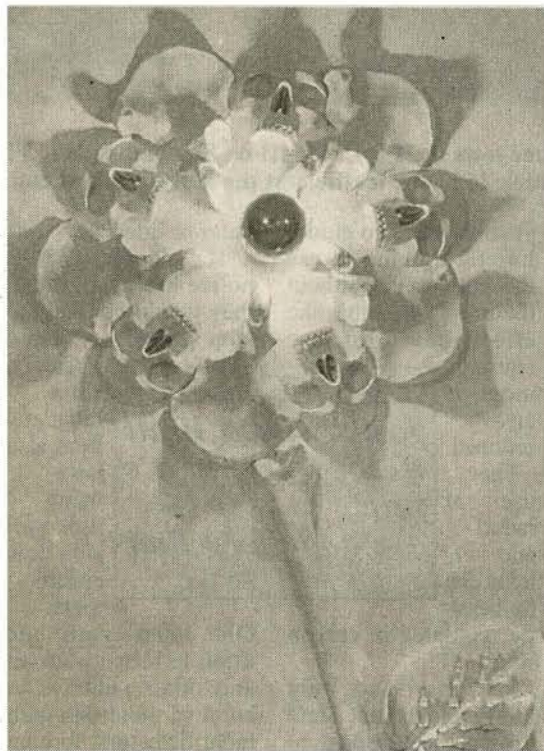


Photo courtesy Philadelphia University
"Nature Morte" is a work that features plastic pieces shaped like human bones mounted on a wall to form plant designs.

was interested in creating a secularized version inspired by rococo designs I saw."

Marti said this exhibit also focused on "decorative grotesque" artwork, or visual art designed to combine plant and animal forms.

"Nature Morte" features two other works combining plants and animals - a light-bulb chandelier made of translucent blue, green and yellow molded resin combines shapes of antlers and flowers, and a mirror shaped like a giant-tortoise-shell surrounds a metallic statue of cactuses.

The centerpiece of the exhibit, "The Course of Empire," consists of flocked wallpaper illuminated by black lights that portrays a repeating six-and-a-half feet high, eight-foot wide image of palm trees, waterfalls, towers of rock and lily pads that glow in fluorescent shades of orange, green and purple.

The classic "Garden of Eden" black-light poster found in headshops throughout the

'60s and '70s inspired this work.

"I wanted a black-light poster in my room when I was a kid, but I never had one. It's almost like a wish fulfillment at a later age," said Marti.

"The Course of Empire" was originally designed for the Furness Building at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. A border of a flame pattern on the bottom of the work pays homage to the building's kilns used in sculpture, and a design of repeating mushroom clusters that glow in psychedelic shades mimics mushroom patterns found in the concrete of the Furness Building.

"It's kind of funny that this building from the 1800s has these decorations that read in a totally different way when used with black lights," said Marti.

The exhibit also includes a room of mostly found objects titled "American Gothic."

Wallpaper Marti designed depicting his

collection of vintage beer cans lines one wall, and two-foot square carpet panels showing animal portraits line another.

A glass case displays rows of six-inch ceramic figurines such as a smiling, wide-eyed child emblazoned with the words "Have I told you lately that you're special?" Warped, stretched-glass soda bottles filled with colored sand commonly sold at carnivals fill another shelf. The overall effect is the appearance of a 1970s basement "rec" room.

"The beer can collection is kind of a weird self portrait in a way," said Marti. "It's what I was interested in when I was a teenager."

"The '70s was my adolescence, and that's an important time for determining character."

"Crazy Quilt" runs through Nov. 17 at The Design Center at Philadelphia University, 4200 Henry Ave. For more information, call 215-951-2860 or visit www.philau.edu/design_center.