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**VIRGIL MARTI *GROW ROOM***  
**November 15 - December 22, 2002**

For the inaugural exhibition of PARTICIPANT INC, Philadelphia-based artist Virgil Marti will produce a new site-specific installation, *GROW ROOM*. As with the whole of Marti's work, *GROW ROOM* infuses objects of taste, high culture, and aesthetic excess with allusions to his first loves, as cultivated in a suburban, crafts-based world of macramé, lucite grapes, and *Charlie's Angels* posters. That these two worlds eventually collide, rendering their socioeconomic origins indistinguishable, is the logical expression of Marti's project. In this case, his milieu of seamless contradictions contains a series of Venetian-style chandeliers that are cast from antlers—the Grand Salon meets hunting lodge in an elegant marriage of opposites. Mylar used for constructing basement hydroponic grow rooms is the substrate for his idiosyncratic hall of mirrors. These printed mylar panels are covered by flora and webs, all rendered from strictly synthetic sources, such as an extensive collection of fake flowers, selected for their melancholy iconography.

*GROW ROOM* is conceived in the style of "celebrated interiors" from a range of historical periods. The junction of temporal styles is reminiscent of film sets, particularly from space and time travel movies of the late 60s and the 70s. Like many artists of his generation, Marti found that movies from this period played a major role in his imagination. The bedroom set of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, for instance, with its fusion of Rococo and Modern décor, figures into the imaginative structure that comprises this exhibition. An elaborate shell, temporary in nature, is layered onto a raw space, posing an ephemeral experience that is activated by viewers' entry.

Other real-time sources important to Marti are Nicolas Roeg's 1976 film *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, in which an incarcerated space alien is left to play ping-pong indefinitely amidst a panoramic mural of forest wallpaper; and Richard Fleischer's 1973 *Soylent Green*, where large-scale projected nature scenes accompany euthanization. These movies tend to posit nature as a reproduction or projection, never real. Perhaps Alain Resnais' 1961 film *Last Year at Marienbad* is the most prescient.

"The film takes place in an elegant chateau, one with ornate ceilings, vast drawing rooms, enormous mirrors and paintings, endless corridors and grounds in which shrubbery has been tortured into geometric shapes and patterns. [...] and the elegant architecture of the chateau was as real as the bedroom at the end of '2001'—in other words, simply a setting in which human behavior could be observed." (Roger Ebert, *Chicago Sun Times*, 1999)

Similarly, *GROW ROOM* operates using various levels of artifice. Marti applies pictures of pictures and positions the viewer in a reflective space that induces a torpid invisibility. References are assembled to quietly insinuate the mausoleum. In *GROW ROOM*, a preponderance of spider webs accentuates the pallor of the space and fractures the reflective surfaces of the mylar panels like broken mirrors. Marti's webs are twice

removed from their natural state, which generally signify the fragility and brevity of life. These specific web structures are derived from a study of nets made by spiders fed on drug-dosed flies. The experiment produced distorted webs that are recreated by Marti using colored cords and the hippie-craft technique of macramé. The knotted sculptural webs are photographed and printed to form the aberrant patterning of the mylar panels. Much like the black-light posters and panoramic wallpaper of his previous installations, the mirror posters hint at the psychedelic interiors of a teenager's bedroom, elevating them to manor status.

Marti recombines images and objects to build his interpretation of the classical decorative grotesque—the fusing of plant and animal forms in a stylized manner. GROW ROOM uses the erratic proliferation of natural forms such as flowers, webs, and antlers to create a synthetic heaven. The arrangement of the installation is primarily devised according to Whistler's *Peacock Room*. Of particular interest is the notion of transplanting a room, as documented in photographs of the *Peacock Room*'s subsequent removals, re-installations, and renovations over time.

Marti's project can be viewed an eccentric memorial to contested aesthetic values. GROW ROOM invests the artificial manners of ornate ornamentation with a network of complex emotional utterances drawn from his personal experience, in what might be an irreconcilable effort to restore such spaces to true expressions of feeling. GROW ROOM recalls such places as Marie Antoinette's unused bedroom at Fontainebleau, where opulence is coupled with the morbidity it belies. An airless space is embellished with profound décor; its mirrors reflect visitors as ghosts. Marti's lavish garden of fake flowers is a Pop funeral arrangement, as earnest as the Rolling Stones "Dead Flowers," an ode to the queen of the underground.

Virgil Marti lives and works in Philadelphia. He has had solo exhibitions at White Columns, NY; Holly Solomon Gallery, NY; Thread Waxing Space, NY; and The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Upcoming exhibitions include the Rhode Island School of Design Museum of Art and The Santa Monica Museum of Art. He was the recipient of a Pew Fellowship in the Arts (1995) and a Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Award (1997).

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