



DIRECTIONS

Virgil Marti
Pae White



Artists Virgil Marti and Pae White are both known for their innovative, site-specific installations and for raising questions about the definition of art. Continuing and extending the tradition of conceptual art that began in the 1960s and that questioned the meanings, materials, and display of art, Marti and White create works that are visually and intellectually stimulating in surprising, unexpected ways. The two artists had worked together once before while both in residence at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Maine, but this is their first museum collaboration. Exhibition curator Milena Kalinovska asked the artists about their work and about the process of creating the installation for the Hirshhorn.

MK: What was your initial response to the aesthetically spare space of the Museum's lobby, and how did it inspire your visually bold, extraordinary objects?

VM: I remember visiting the Hirshhorn as a child. It's one of my earliest memories of experiencing art. So I think I have a bit of a nostalgic attachment to the place. I always liked the modern architecture of my youth. It was much more exotic than the suburban ranch house with Early American reproduction furniture that I grew up with. I love the way the Hirshhorn building seems to shift scale. Sometimes it seems very large and imposing, fortress-like. Other times it seems very humanly scaled and almost intimate.

I like when there is something in a space (whether it is an architectural element or some institutional history) that will inflect my work. It adds a richness to my intervention, beyond my own preoccupations. I often don't enjoy working in white cube gallery spaces as much—I like it when there is some residue in a space.

PW: For me the space does not feel spare since there is the crazy floating gift shop inhabiting the space as if it were a sculpture as well as the visual overload of exterior activity bleeding into the space through the windows. At one point I had really wanted to disrupt this dynamic by covering the windows completely with huge heavy tapestries/drapes, hoping to impose a feeling both of intimacy and austerity, with muffled sound foregrounding the other sculptural elements. But the reality is there would always be that floating gift shop.





MK: Pae, what considerations influenced your ideas concerning the shape and position of the couches as well as the material and design pattern of your tapestries?

PW: The “flop couches” were born out of a suggestion of Virgil’s when he was talking about the casualness of artist John Chamberlain’s foam couches as a way to display textiles. Aside from the *trompe l’oeil* effect I have been exploring through the creation of these tapestries, I am also interested in exploiting the ephemeral aspects of the newspaper. A headline one day is forgotten the next. My desire is to pluck the headline from its place in time, erase its context, then weave it into a tapestry, transforming it into something odd, foreign, potentially disturbing. I’m drawn to the awkwardness that the act of sitting on a charged headline can generate when it is blown up in scale and rendered in wool. The headline takes on new meaning: a tragedy in Somalia yesterday becomes furniture in Washington, DC, today: naturalized, forgotten, upholstered.

MK: Virgil, organic elements have found their place in your fantastic curtain of bones. You are persistent in pushing the limits of the decorative, and, at the same time, you are making comments about taste and class. Is your work ultimately about identity?

VM: I suppose in some ways it is. I’m continually struck by the contrast between my childhood ideas about art and being an artist, and my adult experience of these things. Art school did not erase all of the ideas and class issues I had

from my upbringing. I find that the way people respond to my work reveals a lot about them as well. There’s a range—from people who find the work really beautiful to people who think it’s just camp. But my work is also about taming fears and anxieties through art and decoration, and identity is ultimately incidental to that.

MK: Virgil, you have said that sitting on the fence between art and design is what you enjoy and where you feel comfortable. This position of “in and out of art status” in fact applies to both of you and is that what makes your work escape categorization and keeps the relationship between you and the viewing public open?

VM: The summer Pae and I first met, we collaborated on a project. The basic premise was to create an homage to a sad little room at the school we were at in Maine. The room was supposed to be a study lounge, but it was completely uninviting. The main manifestation of the project was a little newspaper that we published, usually every two weeks, over the course of the summer. For the first time, I wasn’t hung up about whether I was making Art or not. It was just a project that excited me, and I decided to just go with it and see where I ended up. I guess I ended up realizing that arguing about whether something was art or not was kind of pointless. A mediocre painting is categorized as Art, but that doesn’t make it better than a really great lamp. A lamp could still be interesting, even if it’s not categorized as Art.

PW: I frequently come across references to my work in relation to the blurring of the boundaries between “art and design.” This is not really an objective for me. I like to use the arena of the applied arts as raw material. Then I can play with the established assumptions of that object or method. The perceived transdisciplinary aspect of my work is less interesting to me than exposing the restrictive impulse to define disciplines in the first place.

Directions—Virgil Marti and Pae White is on view from March 9–July 29, 2007.



Public Programs

Gallery Talk

March 9, 12:30 pm

Exhibition curator Milena Kalinovska will talk with artists Virgil Marti and Pae White about their collaboration and installation.

After Hours

March 9, 8 pm–Midnight

The opening night of the exhibition features late opening hours and events.

Gallery Talk

March 23, 12:30 pm

Artist Virgil Marti and exhibition curator Milena Kalinovska will discuss the installation.

Meet the Artist: Virgil Marti and Pae White

April 12, 7 pm

Artists Virgil Marti and Pae White will discuss their work as well as their collaboration on the installation at the Hirshhorn.

An interview with Virgil Marti and Pae White can be downloaded as a free podcast from www.hirshhorn.si.edu and through Apple iTunes®.

Support for *Directions*—Virgil Marti and Pae White is generously provided by the Trellis Fund. Additional funding is provided by the Durfee Foundation, Carol and Arthur Goldberg, and Nancy and Stanley Singer.

Inside: Installation shot of Virgil Marti's *Cloudbursting*, 2006. Courtesy of the artist; Weaving of one of Pae White's tapestries. Courtesy of neugerriemschneider, Berlin; Detail of Virgil Marti's *The Flowers of Romance*, 2003. Courtesy of the artist. Back cover: Installation shot of Pae White's *Bed with Ornamental Brackets* and *Tip Top Tapestries*, both 2006. Courtesy of Skestos Gabriele Gallery, Chicago.

Virgil Marti (b. 1962, St. Louis, Missouri; lives and works in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania) received a BFA from the School of Fine Arts, Washington University, St. Louis, in 1984 and an MFA from Tyler School of Art, Temple University, Philadelphia, in 1990. His work has been exhibited since 1990, and he has been invited to participate in the 2007 Biennale de Montréal.

Pae White (b. 1963, Pasadena, California; lives and works in Los Angeles, California) received a BA from Scripps College, Claremont and an MFA from Art Center College of Design, Pasadena. She has been exhibiting her work in galleries and museums internationally since 1990 and has been selected to participate in the 2007 Sculpture Projects in Munster.

