At the age of fourteen, Eddie Owens Martin (1908–1986) ran away from the small town life of Buena Vista, Georgia, and landed in New York City where he survived as a street hustler, drug dealer, and fortune-teller. Sometime in the 1930s, a voice from the “spirit world” told him he was going to become a “Pasaquoyan” named Saint EOM (pronounced “ōm”), and he transformed into the religion’s sole priest and practitioner. St. EOM returned to Georgia in 1957, moving into an inherited home and seven acres property. He continued telling fortunes and started to fund the creation of a most spectacular art environment known as “Pasaquan.”

He built and embellished fences, temples, pagodas, shrines, walls, and walkways, all influenced by his concepts of the temples pre-Columbian Mexico and the fabled lost continents of Mu and Atlantis.

Twenty years after Martin’s death in 2008, Pasaquan was added to the National Register of Historic Places. In 2013, the Kohler Foundation Inc. embarked on an extensive restoration of the site, completed in 2016. The stewardship and maintenance of Pasaquan is under the direction of Columbus State University.

PASAQUOYANISM: Eddie Owens Martin + Jonathan Frederick Walz
January 22–May 7, 2017

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PASAQUOYANISM is one of fifteen exhibitions on view throughout 2017 as part of the John Michael Kohler Arts Center’s fiftieth-anniversary series, THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED. Twenty thought leaders were invited to lend their expertise and provide new insight into the Arts Center’s collection of works created by art-environment builders.
How were you first introduced to the work of Eddie Owens Martin, also known as St. EOM?

My friend and colleague Dr. Melissa Warak teaches art history at the University of Texas–El Paso, and she has developed a semester-long course on artistic identity. Three or four class sessions treat neurodivergent, outsider, and visionary art. It was within this context that I originally learned about Eddie Owens Martin. Around the time that Curator Karen Patterson invited me to participate in the Arts Center’s “site and response” project, I accepted a job at the Columbus Museum in Georgia, not far from St. EOM’s “Pasaquan.” Synchronicity!

How does your own background inform your response to St. EOM’s work?

My undergraduate degree in studio practice (fine arts) has helped me understand Pasaquan from the point of view of imagination, materials, and labor. My graduate studies in art history and in queer visual culture have provided broader social and temporal contexts in which to understand St. EOM’s life and work. They have also predisposed my research methods: archival ferreting, close looking, substantial reading, and comparative thinking. As I, too, identify as a queer individual, Martin’s open sexuality and “alternative lifestyle” attracted me initially as an avenue of investigation. But the more I learned about St. EOM, the more it seemed irresponsible to pigeonhole him in that way. Instead of focusing on a sole (though significant) aspect of St. EOM, it seemed more important at this juncture to convey his multiplicities. Gê Orthof—who overlaps with St. EOM in many areas: queer sexuality, attuned spirituality, architectural thinking—offered a possible sympathetic collaborator, especially given his own interest in investigating the indeterminate gray area between public and private.

Has working on this exhibition changed or expanded your notions about what you do?

I received training at the University of Maryland, College Park, as an art historian, specifically as an Americanist. This field encompasses objects made in the United States from the pre-Columbian period to the end of World War II; thus, most of the art I usually research, study, and write about tends to be the output of makers who have been dead for some time. That said, the itch to produce more than academic texts occasionally arises and I have been fortunate, over time, to work with a handful of contemporary artists, as midwife or facilitator. Collaborating with Gê Orthof has only confirmed my beliefs that sexuality and spirituality are intimately linked; that the production of knowledge succeeds best in community; that the human impulse to create is universal; and that certain archetypal tropes—like the walled garden—appear throughout world cultures.