Eddie Owens Martin was born in Marion County, Georgia, to poor white sharecroppers in 1908. Three significant breaks occurred during his life: escape from his abusive father to a life on the streets of Manhattan in 1922; a fever-induced, rapturous vision in 1935; and a self-inflicted fatal gunshot in 1986. The revelation that Martin received at age twenty-seven from Pasaquoyans—giant enlightened beings from the future—convinced him to grow out his hair and beard, to change his name to “St. EOM,” and to construct a compound filled with sacred art and architecture. After St. EOM returned permanently to western Georgia in 1957, he worked tirelessly on Pasaquan—a kind of psychedelic, modern-day hortus conclusus (walled garden) turned pilgrimage destination—until his tragic suicide at age seventy-seven.

Pasaquan occupies the center of three interpenetrating spheres: home, heaven, and the hardware store. Eddie Owens Martin inherited the original house and a small piece of surrounding land from his mother upon her death. Rather than create a site separate from his living quarters, St. EOM constructed Pasaquan to radiate outward from it. The property served as a sort of forum where all kinds of interrelated activities took place: cooking and sleeping, fortune-telling and ceremonial dancing, building and beading. In conflating the domestic with the occupational and the spiritual, St. EOM enhanced the uncanny qualities—the cognitive dissonance of something simultaneously familiar yet strange—of the space.

Humans have long imagined heaven as an enclosed garden. Indeed, the English word “paradise” traces its origins back to the eastern dialect of Old Iranian: pairidaēza- , from pairi- / “around” + daēza- / “wall.” The concept of the “sacred” has even longer and deeper roots. The Indo-European radix sak- conveys the act of sanctification, that is, the pronunciation or setting apart of something as holy. Unsurprisingly, tradition holds that St. EOM began the physical materialization of his Gesamtkunstwerk by erecting a cement partition. Besides serving a protective function (along with two German shepherds), this wall and others around the property demarcated the border between the ordinary and the extraordinary. (Its location in the middle of nowhere didn’t hurt.) Wide-eyed sentinels at portals and curvilinear serpents on barriers ward off evil and provoke the “viberrations” of visitors.

The amount of materials—concrete, paint, aluminum—needed to build and embellish Pasaquan implies innumerable trips to the local hardware store. St. EOM financed the entire operation through the reading of cards and the provision of lottery numbers (and, if we’re honest, through the sale of marijuana). The site came together little by little, in much the same way a nautilus accretes chambers one after the other. (It’s important to remember that the present restoration belies the way visitors to the site in the middle of the twentieth century would have experienced it: as an organic form, faded and dilapidated where the project had started, brighter and more solid where St. EOM had just left off.) This production method suggests the French verb bricoler—an informal, inexpert, puttering-away practice of home repairs—and the noun
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Sheboygan, WI     September 27–29, 2017

_quincaillerie_—an old-fashioned dry goods store, in slight disarray, where one can find copious amounts of stuff, new and used, with which to fabricate or fix. The hardware store not only supplied the goods to create Pasaquan; through countless trips there over the course of thirty years (similar to performance artist Judith Butler’s sense of repetitive acts that constitute identity), it became an extension of the site itself.

In 1959, two years after St. EOM’s return to the Deep South, Gê Orthof was born in Petrópolis, in the state of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Because of political unrest in the country, his parents—a medical doctor and an actress (later an author of children’s books)—removed the family to Europe, never staying long in one place, though they eventually returned to Brazil. Orthof received his BA in design from the Escola Superior de Desenho Industrial, Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro in 1981. He subsequently pursued and completed several graduate degrees at Columbia University, New York. In 1993 he began teaching at the Universidade de Brasília, situated in the country’s new-from-the-ground-up capital, only established in 1956. Orthof works in a variety of media—drawing, performance, photography, video—with a recent penchant for installations and interventions. For his school’s visual arts program, he directs a research group called Moradas do Íntimo (Intimate Addresses) in which participants investigate the creative process and how it moves from the studio to public involvement, from museums and galleries to private consumption.

Like St. EOM, Orthof works at the junction of home, heaven, and the hardware store. Perhaps his peripatetic childhood has influenced his ability, wherever he lands, to create artistic safe havens as part of his practice (resulting, in part, from his refusal of the monumental in favor of the miniature). A self-proclaimed atheist of Jewish descent, Orthof nonetheless is highly attuned to the supernatural in the Jungian sense: there is more to the material world than meets the naked eye. His sprawling three-dimensional works share Pasaquan’s effect of generating a heightened awareness of the present (sometimes even ecstatically so). This otherworldly character balances out the banality of the hardware store: Orthof employs everyday materials like thick felt, colored acrylic sheets, cardboard boxes, found objects, and recovered texts and tunes. Sourcing these mundane items (often in large quantities) becomes part of the process.

In preparation for the exhibition at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, Orthof consulted a Brazilian card reader. During their session, she told the artist that he would not be completing St. EOM’s work, but continuing it. This oracle seems appropriate in two regards: it foregrounds Orthof’s open-ended, postmodern sensibility, in which the work of art is never fully realized, only arrested. It also means that while the renovation of Pasaquan near Buena Vista, Georgia, may have come to an end, St. EOM’s beatific vision of a powerful place where home, heaven, and the hardware store intersect has only begun.