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Death and Poetry in Plastic: Erick Swenson at the Nasher

By Jerome Weeks



Erick Swenson, *Ne Plus Ultra*, 2005, acrylic and polyurethane resin.

For the first time, the Nasher Sculpture Center is featuring the work of a North Texas artist. The exhibition of Erick Swenson's sculptures is small, with only three works. But KERA's Jerome Weeks says there's a lot in it.

It has eight hundred snails, for one thing.

Erick Swenson has made a national name for himself with his astonishingly realistic sculptures of animals. His works — including ones in the collections of the Dallas Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art in Fort Worth — have been compared to museum dioramas in their detailed, captured stillness. But these dioramas are often grotesque or mysterious in some way. We're left to puzzle over them.

JAMES COHAN GALLERY

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Swenson: "This is a static object. I'm asking you to look at this for more than three seconds. That's hard to do sometimes. People just blow through stuff, you know. So it's leaving things sort of enigmatic and open-ended."

Swenson says his sculptures are actually more like a special effects scene from a film. Something's just happened. Or is about to happen. There's a story here, somewhere.

Newsweek called Swenson one of the stars of the Whitney Museum's Biennial show in 2004. He was only 32. His room-sized work of plastic and paint looked like a beautifully rendered ice flow with the carcass of a killer whale on it. Viewers wondered, who — or what — could kill the whale? And why did it leave half the body?

Or take the snails at the Nasher. All eight hundred of the little creatures are clambering over each other, crawling up a very tall beer stein. Any gardener knows beer attracts and kills snails. But the sculpture (left) is called "Schwarmerei," German for "enthusiasm," the enthusiasm of crowds. Which is one clue Swenson's works aren't environmental warnings, they're not about human cruelty to animals.

Swenson: "They're not really about animals, at all, really. I mean, the snails, you know, that's humanity, rushing towards the end, and they fall into a bottomless pit."

To make his point, Swenson has literally built the stein with no bottom. Peer inside looking for beer, and you find — a black void.

Even before he graduated from the University of North Texas in 1999, Swenson had had solo gallery shows, a rare achievement for an undergraduate. But he also worked with fellow Denton-area artists in the Good/Bad Art Collective. He's called the deadpan-prankish collective his "graduate school."

Swenson: "We learned how to do a show and how to work really hard. You know, get things done on time, even if it was at the very last minute. You better be done."

[studio ambient sound, hiss of spray compressor.]

A few blocks south of Old City Park is a pre-fab warehouse. It's divvied up into little studios. In one of them, Swenson and his assistant Elliott Johnson fabricate sculptures.

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The unfinished plastic skull from *Ne Plus Ultra*, left, and the completed one at the Nasher, right.

Swenson: "So here's how it starts, sort of." [sounds of unscrewing continue under] Swenson unscrews the two halves of a mold to show how it was shaped around the original clay model he made. With the molds emptied out, he pours in either silicone rubber, to make softer parts like the snail bodies, or polyurethane resin for the harder ones, like the snail shells. Eventually, the separate pieces are individually hand-painted and glued together. It's like assembling a giant model kit, Swenson says. But first, you have to make all the parts yourself.

Like . . . the eight hundred snails.

Swenson: "They all have personalities. [chuckles] I've named them all. 'Stewart. You need to get it together.'" [laughs]

In addition to snails and beer steins, Swenson's studio is cluttered with the body parts of his largest work at the Nasher. It's called *Ne Plus Ultra* — 'there is no more beyond this' — and it's the life-sized and partly decayed corpse of a seven-point buck, meticulously recreated down to the flesh peeling away from bones, some of it rotting, some of it apparently chewed.

Which brings up another aspect of Swenson's works. They're all about death in some manner: death as isolation (the killer whale), death as oblivion (the snails), death as sudden transformation (the small fawn being yanked upwards by a cape at the Fort Worth Modern).

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But they're not about *just* death. [footsteps going upstairs]

Swenson climbs to a small balcony room overlooking his studio. ("This is where things go to die," he says of the various castaway experiments lying around.) He explains how plastic skeleton parts get sandblasted to give them the texture of bones. But he also covers them with a special plastic he holds up. Sandblasting it leaves the bones etched. Get up close to that gruesome dead deer at the Nasher, and you'll see its bones have delicate maps and messages carved on them, elaborate scrimshaw that seems to evoke an ocean voyage. It's as if this deer had been a seafarer on a full-masted ship, and somehow, while alive, had gotten its tale tattooed into its own skeleton. Our lives do mark us.



Swenson: "Part of the piece is that you have to look a little closer, have to embrace that horror. You have to look at that. 'Oh, look at the bones, they have a story.'

"So horror first – then poetry." [laughs]