

Robinson, Gaile. "Sculptor Erick Swenson's shell games," *DFW.com*, April 18, 2012,
<http://www.dfw.com/2012/04/18/609013/sculptor-erick-swensons-shell.html>



Sculptor Erick Swenson's shell games

By Gaile Robinson

DALLAS -- The Nasher Sculpture Center -- after almost 10 years in operation -- has finally deemed a North Texas artist worthy of exhibition.

The first person to shoulder the honor is Erick Swenson, a Dallas artist who earned his bachelor's degree in fine arts at the University of North Texas and who, in just a few short years, has breached the collections of the Whitney Museum of Art, the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, the Dallas Museum of Art and the Saatchi Gallery in London. For the Nasher occasion, Swenson has mounted three new pieces in the lower-level gallery. Although the number is small, the labor that goes into each piece is monumental.

In *Schwärmerei*, more than 700 individually cast snail shells and snail bodies crawl up an elaborate 19th-century beer stein. Theologian Martin Luther coined the term "Schwärmerei" to define a utopian mass enthusiasm or fanaticism. Swenson illustrates the concept with a mass of gray slug bodies glistening with slime. The snails' tiny eye stalks seem to quiver in anticipation as they hoist their carapaces on top of each other in a frenzy to reach the top of the open stein, where they will, no doubt, fall in and drown. End of snail story.

Swenson uses the snails as a metaphor for us, for our lemminglike propensity to embrace misguided thinking spurred on by group hysteria. The beer stein could represent Germany and the snails the Nazis, he says, or perhaps the beer-fueled mayhem induced by a sporting event.

Although the museum visitor is inclined to polite behavior and hushed tones while marveling at the technical prowess it takes to make such verisimilitude, it is our animal nature, herd mentality and assured death that is on display.

Object No. 2: In *Scuttle*, a large sea snail has stretched far out of its protective shell to wrap around its armor and in doing so, has crushed it beyond usefulness. "Scuttle" is a nautical word for sinking one's own ship to keep it out of the hands of the enemy. In this case, the sea snail's act of self-sacrifice might not have been necessary -- or perhaps it was forces of a financial nature that caused the collapse of the snail's housing.

Object No. 3: Behind the wall, in the recesses of the center, is Swenson's final sculpture, *Ne Plus Ultra*, which he translates as "nothing beyond this," the rotting carcass of a young buck. The entire thing was hand-made by Swenson over an almost five-year period. Swenson often uses deer, especially young female deer, in his art, and because they have no horns, they can be mistaken for dogs, making them more familiar to the museumgoer. Often, in their fragility, they seem simply to be wild creatures brought down by brutal forces.

We are drawn to the macabre effects of the long dead. There is a childlike curiosity to look closely at the flesh, which looks like gills because it is so desiccated, and the way the bones and tendons are exposed. There is no blood left, the goo is long gone, and the carcass is closer to dust than to life.

JAMES COHAN GALLERY

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Here in the Nasher, the hide and flesh of Swenson's buck has been chewed away, exposing bone that bears scrimshaw marks of maps and stories. Swenson says it is the unfulfilled story of the deer's life written on his skeleton and that death, often as grisly as this, is the constant finality for everyone. "We consume each other. It is what we do," he says.

There is tragedy in Swenson's pieces; there's no getting around that. And he's not counting on an afterlife, either promised or threatened. But he is able to create a beauty in death that is so exact and realistic, it becomes a celebratory homage.