

JAMES COHAN GALLERY

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Untitled [carpet piece], 2001, polyurethane resin, oil, and acrylic paint, platform dimensions: 144 x 96 x 5 inches; overall dimensions: 132 x 84 x 26 inches
[courtesy of the artist and James Cohan Gallery, New York]

There is heartbreak beneath the gorgeously slick surfaces and the rock-and-roll edge of Erick Swenson's art. This odd combination generates conflicting emotions: enrapturement at all that sexy, juicy technique, then despair at the vast gaping loneliness of existence that the Dallas, Texas-based sculptor summons up with his potent work.

It's easy to be overwhelmed by the visually hot-dogging showmanship of 2004 Whitney Biennial alum Swenson's sculpture, featured in *Caught Captive* [Savannah College of Art and Design/Atlanta's Trois Gallery: December 9, 2009—January 24, 2010]. *Untitled [Fawn with Cape]*, 2007, one of the most memorable pieces in this terse show, features a spindly-legged fawn whose delicate body could be snapped like a wishbone and whose unnaturally voluminous pink ears intensify its infant-like vulnerability. The fawn is cruelly hoisted into the air by an invisible figure, a dark magician represented by a billowing black cape dramatically red-flocked on its underside. The animal's expression is one of pitiful inevitability, a resignation to the laws of life and death. The cape—with no one save death beneath it—floats malevolently above the animal. The sheer spectacle of the counterbalancing of the small animal and the enormous cape is its own magic. Swenson's achievement of such feats of physical and emotional realism through patently

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artificial means—strategically placed metal rods, polyurethane resin, and polystyrene—is its own tongue-in-cheek triumph of the human over nature. What's more, his deft use of unapologetically unnatural materials—including his combination of parts from many different animals—unleashes a range of associations: from the simulacrum of Hollywood special effects to the frozen moments of natural history museum dioramas. It's also hard not to think of Disney, for its equally flash fictions of innocence assailed, but also of anime with its mix of seductive, antiseptic visuals with hyper-articulated science-fiction cuteness that merges idealized animal and human.



Untitled [Fawn with Cape], 2007, plastic, fibreglass, steel, flocking, acrylic and oil paint, 91 x 43 x 46 inches, ed. 3 of 3 [courtesy of the artist and James Cohan Gallery, New York]

Life's perils for the small and fragile are foremost in the show. In *Untitled [Carpet Piece]*, 2001, another technical feat, a more mature deer with legs like sapling tree branches twists its molting antlers into the ground in an effort at relief. The animal's pristine, alabaster white body, arranged to evoke the sexual vulnerability of pin-ups, suggests sun-bleached bone. The white animal is set on a startlingly realistic Oriental carpet, a polyurethane resin surface painted in believably muted, textured imitation of the thing itself. The combination of the meticulously crafted carpet and the strangely alien white deer suggests a science-fiction scenario not unlike the final moments of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. As such, the sculpture articulates a common Swenson theme: isolation within the gaping maw of existence.

Swenson may be the Cormac McCarthy of sculptors, with the ultimate isolating event—death—very much on his mind. There is also a consistent strain of pathos in his work. In *Ne Plus Ultra*, 2005, the artist has used the nineteenth-century technique of scrimshaw, that is, etching onto whalebone and teeth. Here, however, the effect is entirely ersatz. Swenson has manufactured the skull, whose flesh has been peeled away to reveal decaying tissue and

frightening rows of intact teeth, from resin and MDF. In minute detail, the artist has rendered a sailing ship and an illegible list of names—possibly a roster of dead sailors. The creature's open-mouthed end suggests that it has been captured in a silent death wail. Its marble-like glossy black eyes evoke a sentient presence, suggesting that the animal is watching its own end and implicating us in the trauma—as viewers—for our passivity. A sense of gothic cruelty pervades the piece. One imagines frightful scenarios of images etched onto the animal's flesh as it decayed. Or perhaps Swenson is suggesting the emergence of some congenital primal tale as the animal rots. Despite the fact that these are animals crafted from resin and MDF, we cannot dispel the feeling that these glossy orbs reflect our own eventual demise. Swenson's work manipulates our feeling of helpless despair by asking us to bear witness. The cold silence of his alabaster surfaces and the sense that we are the sole witnesses to these creatures' death render the solitude and subjective experience of death. While death may be the most ubiquitous of events, it remains the most singular for its victim.

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That sense of solitude recurs in the twin sculptures *Untitled [Ice Head]*, 2004, and *Untitled [Velvet Horn]*, 2009. In *Ice Head*, the brown antlers of a dead deer—represented as an isolated white head—suggest a slow death in the forest. In *Velvet Horn*, a similarly disembodied head sits silently, its velveteen antlers still molting, to suggest a pitifully premature end. In this small, elegantly precise show, the one mildly inconsistent note may be *Ebie White*, 2007, the disembodied head of an eerily wise monkey in snow-white plastic resin. *Ebie White* is the one creature in *Caught Captive* that seems less trapped in struggle or consumed by mortality. Instead, it looks out from its pedestal with an appraising air. The monkey may serve as a bridge between Swenson's forlorn animals and ourselves. Or it may represent a dispassionate universe, helpless to stop the surrounding slow, grinding, chaos.