

# JAMES COHAN GALLERY

Simek, Peter. "The Labor of The Idea." *Front Row*. June 2012.  
<http://frontrow.dmagazine.com/2012/06/the-labor-of-the-idea-erick-swenson-on-process-time-and-craft/>.



There's a month left to see the striking show by Erick Swenson at the Nasher Sculpture Center (closes July 8). A University of North Texas graduate who was a member of the Good/Bad Art Collective back in the late-1990s before his international career took-off, notably landing a spot in the 2004 Whitney Biennial, Swenson's show at the Nasher is the first solo exhibition of the artist's work by a museum in his hometown (and the first by the museum of a local artist). It is a spare show, featuring just three complex and visceral sculptures: a snail-covered beer stein (*Schwärmerei*, 2012), a conch shell being devoured by the creature that lives in it (*Scuttle*, 2012), and a decomposing deer (*Ne Plus Ultra*, 2005). The simplicity of the installation adds to the weight and impact of the exhibition, but is also a reflection of how Swenson works. His virtuosic creations are complicated and intricate, each requiring months of painstaking labor. When I spoke with Swenson soon after the opening, I began by asking him about the time he spends on each of his pieces, and how his way of working runs up a contemporary art world that seems to be always hungry for the new, fresh, and shiny.

**FrontRow:** There is a tendency to think that if you don't keep up with the cycle, you could lose the attention of the art world. So it seems like there is a tension in your work in the way that it requires the long-term care and attention of the artist, and then, subsequently, the care and attention of the viewer. But do you feel that pressure, to always be making more, or that you aren't making enough?

Erick Swenson: Yeah, absolutely.

**FR:** So is this how you have always found yourself working?

ES: I mean, there's just different kinds of work. There are things that take less time, and things that inherently in the process themselves takes a long time. It is not anything you can really control, unless you can farm stuff out, and I don't like to do that. I'm a very hands-on guy. I mean, when you say a year, something takes a year, that's really not that long a time to make one thing. People have done that. A lot of museums have stuff that has taken years and years and years. But I don't know what it is about now. People are just like, 'Is that all? Is that it?' And so, yeah. I guess so.

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Schwärmerei, (2012).

**FR: Does the time place a pressure on each work, that each idea and piece has to hold your attention for period it takes to bring it into completion?**

ES: If you are willing to sit there for a year and do this, it's got to have energy and excitement to it. It's true. And I wish they took less time. It depends on what it is. You can never really anticipate the problems. If you did the same thing over and over and over again, you could get the time down. But there is all this set up and the molds, and all those have to be made. But then, if we make a second one, which we often do, then all of that takes less time. All of that stuff is done, and now we are just reproducing. But that's just tedious.

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**FR: How do the pieces start? Do you conceive of them fully before you begin your execution, or is their an organic element to process?**

ES: Probably the idea came really quickly. I collect things in my head, images and things, and then every now and then, things come together. I wouldn't say it is a formula, but it's like "a," I'm missing "b," equals "c" and then "b" pops in. And okay, that's "b." And that kind of happened with this piece. It has to be pretty regimented in a sense, because you have to know what you want in the end, to actually be able to do the process, so it is not entirely organic. There are parts of it, like the actual placement of the snails, that are very organic and intuitive. But you have to know that you want the stein to look like this, and there's a hole that goes down, so a lot of it is pre-planned. But it kind of depends on the piece.

**FR: Is working hands-on an important part of the process for you?**

ES: It is interesting, because that is what artists do. They make things. And it is amazing that there is this weird idea — I'm just making an object, which is traditionally what artists have done for hundreds and hundreds of years. *[laughs]* And now there is this question of this whole farming out idea. That's okay for some people, but it just doesn't mean that making things handcrafted or by hand should die. It is where the business end gets into it. And in all fairness, we make these into editions, so there are multiples. I'd prefer not to do that, but that is just the reality of the compromise. If you do this, you make certain work, then you have to *[make editions]*. It just takes longer to get your work out. If I were to start on new work I'd probably have three more pieces by the end of the year. That's not going to happen.

**FR: Because you are working on editions now?**

ES: Yes. It is interesting that we think a year is a long time. I hope what you make in an end is worth a year. That's debatable. That's for someone else to decide. I sound like a cranky old man, but everyone wants something now and they want a lot. That's some other artist.