

# JAMES COHAN GALLERY

Gibb, Brian, "Erick Swenson Interview," *Art Prostitute*, August 2006



Erick Swenson, *Edgar*, 1997, mixed media, 60 x 48 x 108 inches

**While you attended the University of North Texas, you were a member of the Good/Bad art collective. What kind of impact did it have for you?**

Well I actually went to school for jewelry, and then painting and drawing sort of by default. I didn't know what the fuck I was doing. I actually wanted to be a special effects artist. I got to school in 1990 and I graduated in '99. It was somewhere in '95 that my friend Will Robison got me into the Good/Bad. I got there a couple years in. I think it was more of a studio space at the time, and they weren't really giving us any projects yet. I guess it was kind of like graduate school because of deadlines, press, and all that shit. It was a good experience. It was my graduate school. That's what it meant to me. I have friends to this day from that place.

**Is there a reason why you haven't decided to go to graduate school?**

I don't see the point. I'm not really a big academics guy.

**Has that hindered you at all?**

No one has ever asked to see my graduate degree. That's what Good/Bad was like. I guess you make shit, and you have the guts to put it up and take responsibility for it. It's pretty much that simple.

**What was your experience like at UNT? You mentioned that you studied jewellery making and drawing and painting? Did you ever study sculpture formally?**

I was down in the sculpture lab a lot. David Iles was down there. He was a really cool guy. He really helped out. I got to hang out there more when I took the Hybrid Arts class with Vernon Fisher and I had a little more freedom, but nobody really taught me how to do anything formally over there in the sculpture lab as far as processes. I think a school's value lies in the people you were surrounded with.

**You were still in school when that show opened. How did your professors and peers react to you having a breakthrough show before you even had your BFA?**

Well, I passed. [laughs] They were really cool, and it allowed me to slide a little bit. I really didn't go to school much then. I actually failed my artist's statement too. By now I forgot what I even wrote.

**Why stay in Dallas now that you have representation on both coasts?**

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I like it here alright. I've got two brothers here. I don't mind Dallas. I don't like New York. I can only go there for four days and tolerate it. I'm always rooting for the underdog city. I don't know, maybe I don't have the balls to go up there. I don't see any reasons why I should have to go there. I just never had to. I'm just lucky I guess.

## **So how did you go from painting and drawing to working with poly-resin?**

Actually through Good/Bad. My friend Will started messing around with it. I was mainly doing installation art at the Good/Bad, but I knew in my heart that I wanted to make sculptures. One day I just made one there. It was a piece called "Edgar." Will helped me out.

## **In the beginning, you were using taxidermy models in your work, but now you fabricate everything from scratch...**

Right. There were a couple of early pieces that had taxidermy models in them. I just didn't have the money, and frankly, didn't know what the fuck I was doing as far as casting things.

## **At what piece would you say you had a handle over the medium?**

I still don't have a complete handle of the medium, I'm still learning. It takes a lifetime to learn how to cast shit right. I think I'm pretty good at it now though.

## **What was the motivation to making shows that only consist of one single piece?**

I'm not going to bullshit you, its logistics really. It takes so fucking long to make one thing. That street piece for example, it's so ungodly to put together. I just feel like a piece can take a room. I guess I learned that early on with the Ft. Worth Modern when I had that cape piece up. I was supposed to have two other pieces done for that. But there was just no way to get it done. I was working in long successive shifts, and I just couldn't finish enough for this big room that was supposed to have two other pieces in it. Part of me wanted to have just one thing in there that had the power to take a room. That was what got me on utilizing the quietness of one object. If it does its job correctly, just one object can fill a space. It doesn't have to be a ton of objects that people can be entertained by. This is what I made for you. I hope you like it. And that's it.

## **Do you think about the space at all when you are building a piece like that?**

Not really. Not any particular space. It usually has to be more about the piece and what it needs. You work out that shit about the space later.

## **What made you gravitate toward pieces with a dioramic narrative to them like the street or carpet pieces?**

The work has to be presented in some fashion, or it doesn't work. Like the carpet piece I did was originally supposed to be on the ground. Then I found out that it's good to present it on something that removes you from being in the gallery. So, I put a base around it to keep it separated from its surroundings. It gets the point across better. I used to think, "Aww, it's so arty to present things like that." But then, fuck it. That's what it is, it's art. It just feels very natural to do that.



Erick Swenson, *Untitled*, 2001, polyurethane resin, oil and acrylic paint, 132 x 84 inches

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Erick Swenson, *Ne Plus Ultra*, 2005, Resin, MDF, 12 1/4 x 16 x 14 3/4 inches, Edition of 5

## **When you created the carpet piece, why did you decide to cast a rug and not just put the deer on an existing rug?**

I wanted to cast a rug. I wanted that challenge. Everyone was telling me that you can't do that. But the more you experiment with the materials, the further you can push it, and that translates to the next project. You learn by doing things that are really difficult, and that was a really difficult thing to do, but you figure it out, and that's fun. It's fun to make things that you shouldn't be able to do. It needed to be fabricated. There is a quality to the rug if you see it in person. It's really strange. If it was just on a rug, it wouldn't have the same impact.

## **You only made one of those?**

Yeah. That was when I was young and full of hope that you could getaway with making a one-off. Then gradually I learned that I've got to do editions because it's not worth it. That was a pain in the ass to make actually. It's kind of cool that people can go up to it and they don't realize that isn't a real rug. I guess I find that interesting, to make things look so real. But ultimately, that's not the point. It's just part of the magic.

## **Are you also building a few smaller pieces instead of just the one piece that fills the room?**

I pretty much do what I want. I've been very lucky to do that. Obviously collectors would prefer that there were some smaller pieces. I did make three editions of the street piece and I feel that was a mistake. Fortunately, they were all placed. I do make smaller things. The *Ne Plus Ultra* piece is one of the most favorite things I have ever made. I feel it's the most "meaty" [laughs], and has the most depth to it, and it's small. So scale isn't always the end-all. Just because it's bigger doesn't mean its better.

## **You were in the Whitney Biennial in 2004. The Biennial is one of the pinnacles that so many people try to reach in their lives. What was it like personally and professionally to reach it before the age of 34?**

To be honest with you, I didn't really understand the gravity of it. It didn't really matter. It was just another show. It was cool, don't get me wrong. People were telling me, "Hey, that's a pretty big deal." I said, 'Alright, that's cool.' I don't really follow that kind of stuff very much. I work in my studio and that's that. I know that sounds kind of hokey, but it's true.

## **What are some things that motivated you to keep making art?**

It's a lot of things. Bills. Prospects for the future, like buying a house. I have tunnel vision about what I want to see, and I don't see it very often in galleries or artwork. I just have this need to create. Although sometimes I just don't do shit for months. I mean, I'll always be doing editions and stuff like that, but that's really boring and horrible. I couldn't tell you...hmm...let me think about it. What drives the Swenson? [laughs] Some of it's pressure. You've got to produce if you are going to live and all that. I need to see things that are really beyond my means. It just makes me feel shitty and alive at the same time. I like to challenge myself.

## **Do you start hands on, or is there a drawing process that you go through?**

I never really do sketches. They don't really help me. I've been trying to do little mock-ettes lately. I can't really say that those are part of the process. I really just jump right in and start doing it. It kind of works itself out. You make

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mistakes, then go back and have to redo stuff. Probably with a little more prep and planning, it might cost less money to do.

## **You work with a lot of animal forms of deer and lambs. What has you working with those forms?**

I don't have real affinities for deer. Animals are just something I gravitate toward, and for some reason I don't care to question it. All of them are usually given a shit sandwich, just like life. It's high drama.

## **Is there any hope for your subjects?**

No. It's done. Have you seen the new one, the New Plus Ultra one with the bloody head? That's were it's progressing to. It's been pretty gruesome, and it's getting a lot darker.

## **Somebody told us that you sleep in a tepee. Is that true?**

No. But I used to have a saloon where my old place was. I used to have a Halloween party there every year, and to do something kind of fun and interesting we made a tepee. So you walked through this tunnel then realize, "Holy Shit I'm inside a fucking tepee!" It was very strange, because it felt like you were outdoors. It was really realistic looking and it was inside my house. I'm very much into changing environments, where you can pretend that you have just been transported somewhere.

## **So are we looking at Erick Swenson the interior designer now?**

[laughs] You know, I like furniture more now than I like art.