

JAMES COHAN GALLERY

Dailey, Meghan, "Erick Swenson: James Cohan Gallery," *ArtForum*, September 2004

ARTFORUM



Erick Swenson, *Untitled*, 2004, polyurethane resin, acrylic paint, MDF, polystyrene, 276 x 173 ¼ x 23 ½ inches

At least since his 1998 show at Dallas's Angstrom Gallery, Erick Swenson has pursued a level of presentation and craftsmanship so exacting that it might attract phone calls equally from museum curators and from Hollywood special-effects technicians. Titled "Obviously a Movie," the Angstrom show consisted of sculpted creatures, including a creepy half-horse, half-sheep called *Edgar*, 1997, that stood upright and two green-faced ape-men set in action poses among snow-covered rocks, all dusted with artificial snow. Making no secret of their artifice and sources, Swenson's hybrid forms appear almost capable of movement yet are wholly unnatural and inhabit uniquely improbable environments. Like the aliens in the Star Wars movies, Swenson's figures are initially modeled in clay, then cast in polyurethane resin and painted. But Swenson's wondrous tableaux serve no script except his own, a set of concerns that is itself a hybrid encompassing awarenesses of the nineteenth-century Romantic sensibility and the inhabitants of the ice planet Hoth.

As this, his first New York solo show, and the concurrent display of his work at the 2004 Whitney Biennial indicated, Swenson's sensibility has shifted from the cinematic to the theatrical and the mythic, with two discrete but ambitiously scaled works that are at once pristine and baroque. *Untitled*, 2001, exhibited at the Whitney, is like a still from a Surrealist film. A milky white fawn is shown standing on a Persian carpet with its legs splayed, casting a dark, oddly shaped shadow. The animal stoops to rub its antlers against the carpet and sloughs off a covering of downy velvet, leaving peelings and eroding the rug. It is a peculiar convergence of man-made and natural elements all rendered in patently artificial ways (both deer and carpet were casts, the latter imprinted with a digitized image of its source).

At James Cohan Gallery, another, larger young stag, its antlers fully bared and covered in simulated ice, was positioned again in isolation and under similarly mysterious circumstances. Inspired by museological dioramas,

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Swenson has taken the notion of freezing a moment in time to its ultimate conclusion. A low platform twenty-three feet in length replicated an icy landscape. Toward the middle and closer to one end, a cobbled street (cast with astonishing verisimilitude) is visible beneath the surface. In the midst of this, the buck has succumbed to the pull of nature's forces. Collapsed to the ground and partially covered with snow, his body contorts as if rigor mortis had already set in. But his eyes remain open, and we wonder if he is still suffering a gradual death. Pretty and horrible, the piece recalls David Altmejd's crystal-covered werewolf corpses (another Biennial inclusion) but is in some ways an alternative to the gothic vocabulary to which they refer. Swenson has also managed to invert the equally slick and well-crafted pure black surfaces to be found in the work of Banks Violette, who likewise explores the over-wrought allure of dread and death. Despite and because of its symbolic whiteness, Swenson's newest work is a perfect allegory of isolation and inevitability, and like a horror story's chilling conclusion, it holds us tight in the grip of a persuasive artifice.