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DALLAS ART FAIR
CHRIS BYRNE AND JOHN SUGHRUE *EXCLUSIVE*

BREAKING THE MOLD
SCULPTOR ERICK SWENSON AT THE NASHER

PURPOSE-DRIVEN
SEVEN YOUNG PASSIONATE PATRONS

ALSO
Margaret Hunt Hill Bridge Steps Out
Reinhard Ziegler's Fashion-Forward Home

BY STEVE CARTER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY NAN COULTER

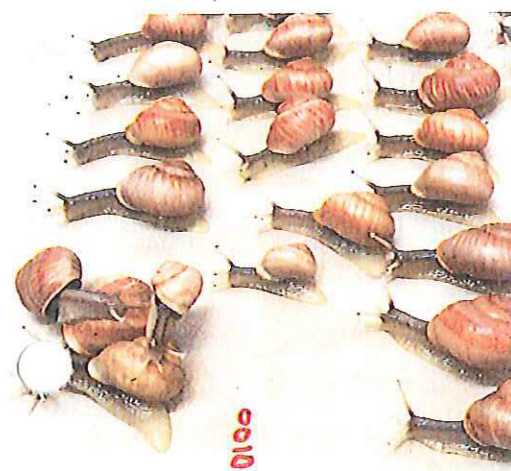
THE HUMAN CONDI- TION



SCULPTOR ERICK SWENSON'S ASTONISHINGLY LIFELIKE NATURALISTIC CREATIONS CAN BE GRISLY, NIGHTMARISH, AND BEFUDDLING, BUT ANTHROPOMORPHIZING? IT'S YOUR CALL.



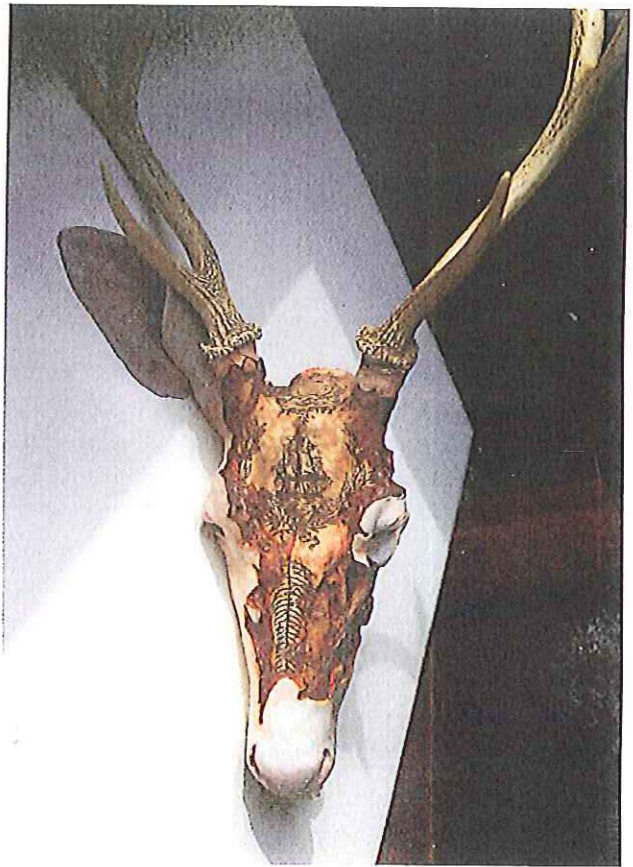
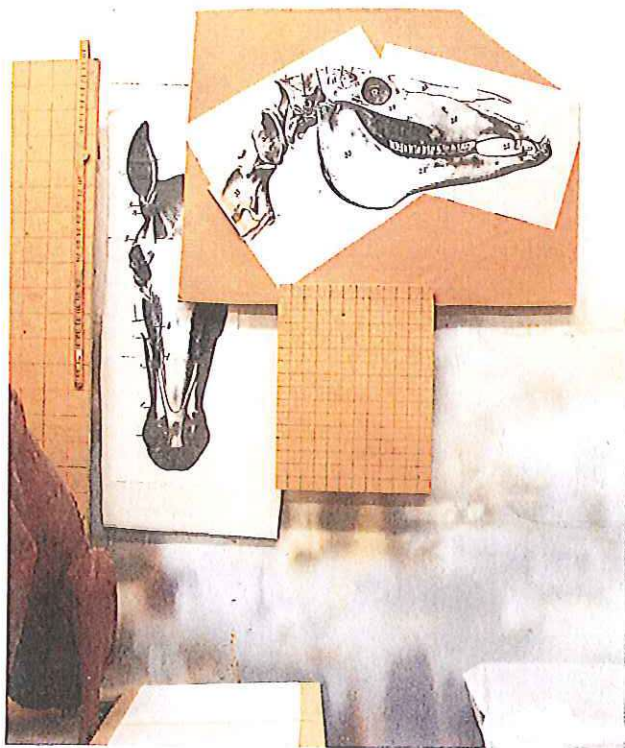
Sketch for Dressage (maquette), cast urethane
2011. Opposite: Erick Swenson in his studio.



Sculptor Erick Swenson's East Dallas studio is in a quiet state of burbling disarray. Molds, maquettes, clay models, a menagerie of polyurethane resin animals-in-progress, and drawings litter the premises, all struggling to life through a working patina of dust, cigarette ash, and deadline. He's been getting ready for his upcoming show at the Nasher Sculpture Center for about a year, and there's still *way* too much to do. At the moment, Swenson's all about resin fabrications of snails and bottomless beer steins, the components of a dazzling new work called *Schwärmeri*. He already has eight months invested in the sculpture and it's still nowhere near completion. "It's a really complicated piece," Swenson says with characteristic understatement. "I love the idea, but..." He takes a moment to check in with one of the snail molds — he's casting countless different-sized shells, and then innumerable bodies to be paired with them. Opening the mold, he carefully removes a "slug," examines it with the calculated detachment of an actual malacologist, and declares it fit for service. "He actually came out — not bad," he pronounces, with a childlike modicum of wonder.

In fact, "wonder" is one of the first words that springs to mind when a close encounter with Swenson's singular creative vision occurs. But it's no wonder that the artist's *Untitled*, part of the permanent collection of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, and his *Untitled*, at the DMA, are both so popular with museum goers—disconcerting, head-turning, arresting, astonishing, baffling, and more than a bit frightening, the pieces demand engagement. On April 14, and continuing through July 8, new work by Erick Swenson will be on view at the Nasher's Lower Level Gallery as part of its *Sightings* series. Curator Jed Morse explains, "Erick's work draws you in with this incredible realism, and also an unexpected combination or encounter...there's this kind of quirky mystery about it that keeps you looking and thinking even more. And I think that oftentimes the works really generate a sense of empathy with the subjects. It often gives you the sense that these are stand-ins for ourselves, for people."

The 39-year-old UNT art school alum has been making a name for himself, both nationally and internationally, since 1998. That year, *Obviously a Movie*, his first solo exhibition in Dallas at Angstrom Gallery, was a breakthrough; even the venerable *Art in America* stood up and took notice. The Angstrom installation was a telling precursor of work to come: each of the three tableau involved sculpted animals or "what the hell?" hybridizations, poised on eerily fabricated snowy terrains. Since that auspicious debut, Swenson's reputation has soared. Besides the DMA and Fort Worth's Modern, his work's also in the permanent collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, London's the Saatchi Collection, Honolulu's Contemporary Museum, and the University of Nebraska. He's exhibited in Germany, Switzerland, China, Australia, NYC, and LA, among other ports of call, and in 2004 he was invited to show at the Whitney Biennial. Swenson's repre-



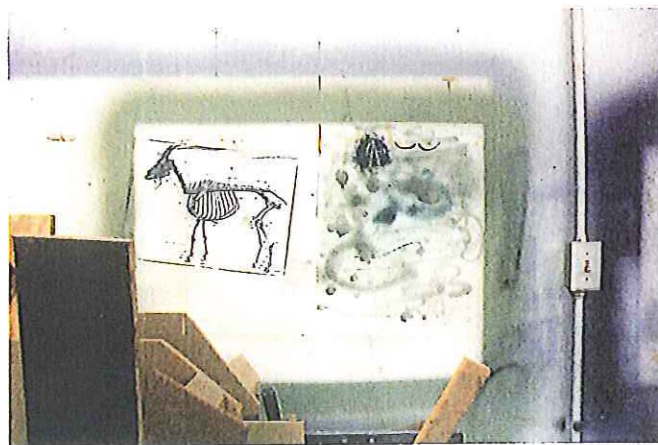
This page, above left: Montfger studio view; above right: *Ne Plus Ultra*, urethane resin and acrylic paint. Opposite page, top and bottom photos: work in progress, cast urethane resin and acrylic painted snails for the *Schwärmerei* piece; center, work in progress, cast urethane resin beer steins, also for the *Schwärmerei* piece.

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-Jed Morse, Curator, Nasher Sculpture Center



Above, Mantiger studio view (*Dressage* maquette miscasts); below, Mantiger studio.

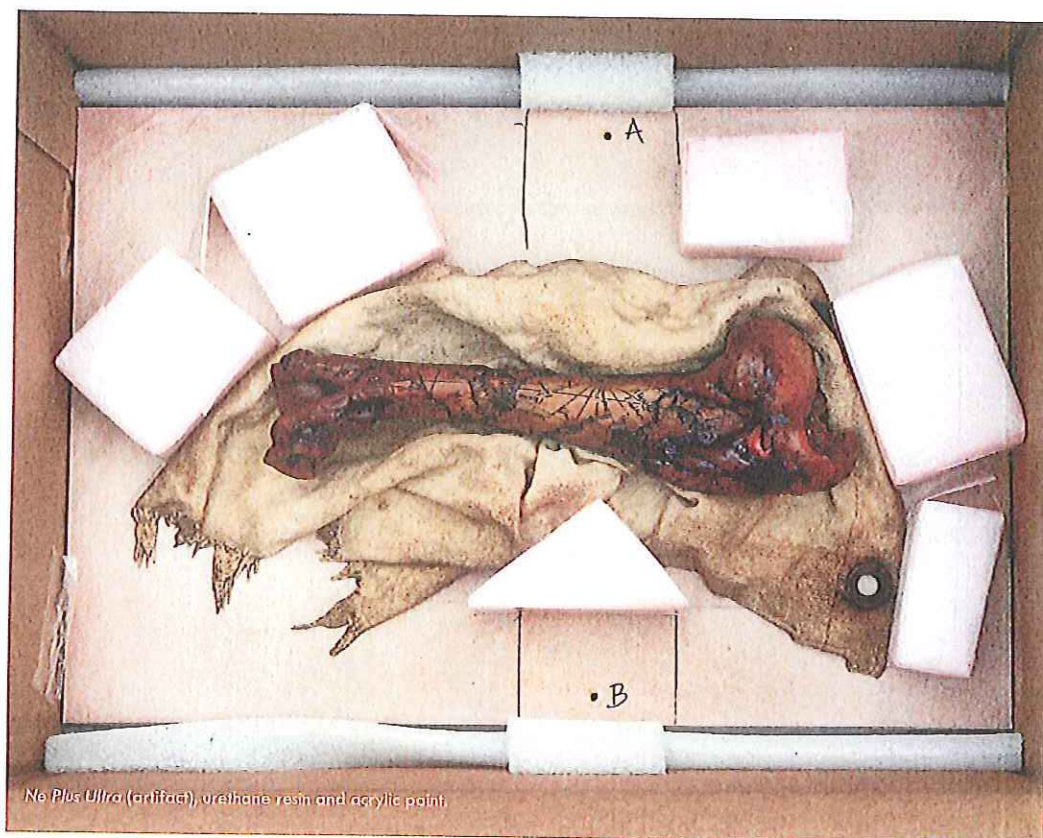


sented in Dallas by Talley Dunn Gallery, in New York by James Cohan Gallery, and in Los Angeles by David Quadrini. "You need a lot of people working for you in this business," Swenson notes with a laugh.

While he's distanced himself from some of his older work and its inspirations, his art, techniques, and concepts have continued to evolve. For some early pieces he utilized taxidermy molds; he now regards those with a twinge of embarrassment. Currently he fashions armatures for his creatures, resin cast bones that he assembles as an actual skeleton. "Proper sculpting," he calls it. And although he's degreed, Swenson still considers himself essentially self-taught, learning what he needs to know when he needs to know it—reading, trial and error, looking at other artists' work have all played a big role in his development. "You get a lot of hard lessons, because materials are really expensive and if you screw something up, oh well," he reveals philosophically. "Casting is difficult because there are so many variables."

One of the most riveting pieces in the Nasher exhibition is 2010's *Ne Plus Ultra*. A full-size fabrication of a rotting antelope carcass, the work is repellant yet fascinating. Incredibly detailed, the grisly realism is palpable, yet there's a surreality to the sculpture that defies logic: the cadaver's exposed skeleton is covered in meticulously drafted scrimshaw. "Yeah, it's pretty morose," Swenson admits. "A lot of my work is about unfairness—this particular piece obviously is about death. It's literally dead in front of you, and it's rotting, but then as the flesh rots away you see the story... These scrimshaw maps symbolize your experiences in the world, everything that you experienced. And then eventually we just fall apart and maybe somebody will find the bones one day. Maybe not. It's almost like you didn't exist, but you have all these stories, and that's what the scrimshaw represents."

Swenson's snails and steins nightmare, *Schwärmerei*, is another troubling work. His craftsmanship is brilliant, technically perfect—every detail of every gastropod and vessel impeccably rendered. *Schwärmerei* derives from the German verb meaning "to swarm," but also connotes fanatical enthusiasm, rapture, and ecstasy, swarming as bees under the queen. The shuddering creepiness of the piece suggests existential disillusionment, futility and the cognitive dissonance between expectation and reality. "I guess in the end my work isn't really about animals," the artist assesses summarily. "In a sense it's more about com-



No Plus Ultra (artifact), urethane resin and acrylic paint

mentary on the human condition, and sadness. And for me they're just better at conveying those ideas. I find I'm gravitating more towards these forms rather than figurative, literal human sculptures. Some people can pull that off but it doesn't really interest me all that much." Nasher Curator Jed Morse adds in conclusion, "I think the work belies a sense of beauty in tragedy, the kind of beauty that's inherent in

nature...it's often a hard-to-take, painful reality. It's truly extraordinary what he's doing, and I can't wait to be able to show it to everyone. I'm really thrilled about it." P

Erick Swenson, Sightings, at the Nasher Sculpture Center, April 14 through July 8, 2012. More details at www.nashersculpturecenter.org.



Winter Rusloski



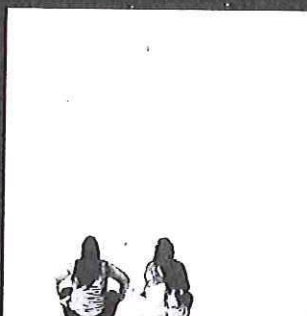
Carmen Menza

AC / OC
February 18 -
March 24, 2012



Cathy Drennan

Blair Blayre
March 31 - May 5, 2012



Blayre Stiller



Michael Blair