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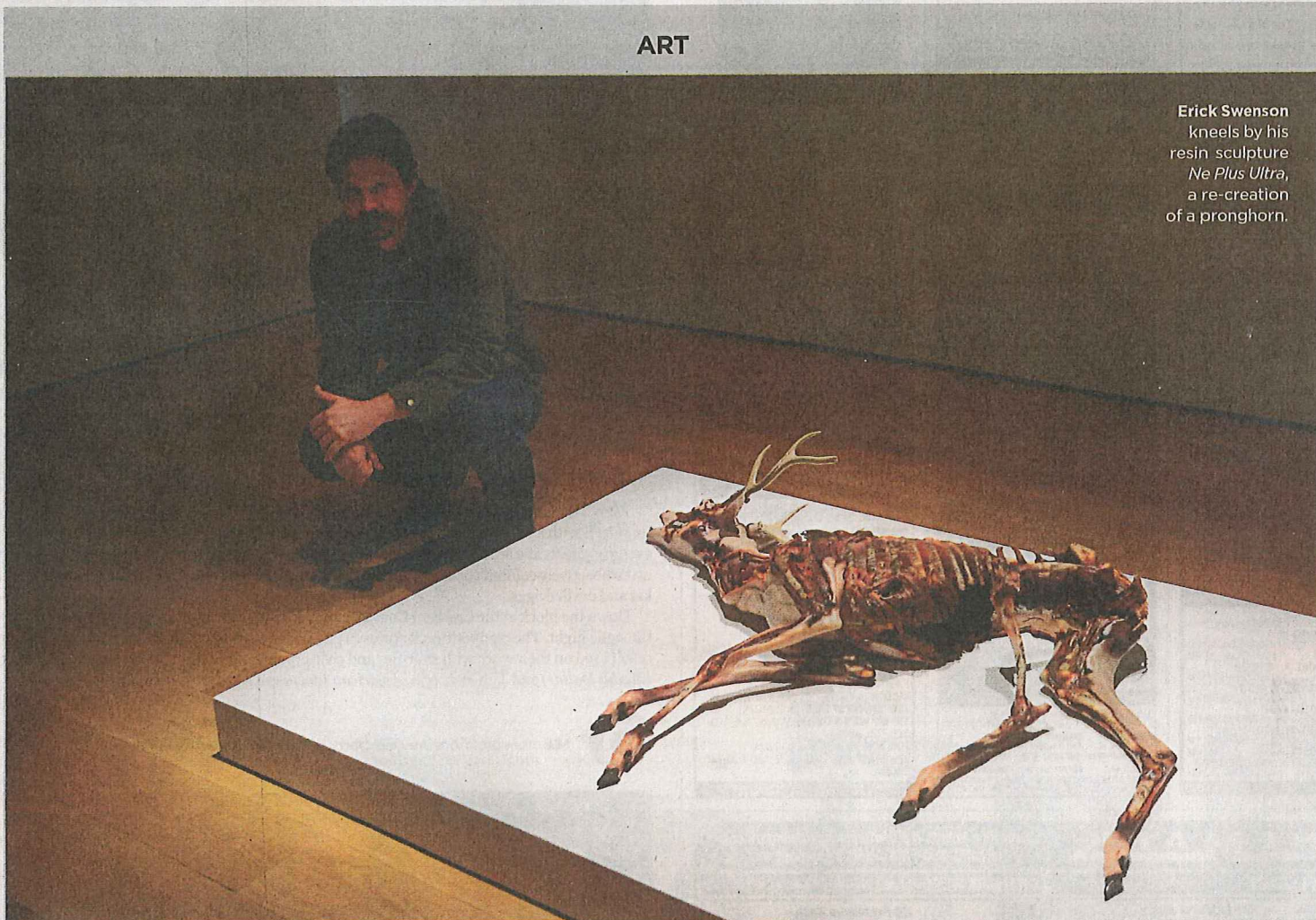
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ART

Erick Swenson
kneels by his
resin sculpture
Ne Plus Ultra,
a re-creation
of a pronghorn.



By MICHAEL GRANBERRY
Staff Writer
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Erick Swenson grew up a military kid, the son of an Army man *and* woman (his mom rose to the rank of captain). He was born in Phoenixville, Pa., "but I couldn't tell you anything about it," he says. Home became Maryland, Georgia, Colorado, even South Korea.

Finally, his family settled in dusty El Paso, where he graduated from high school, not exactly embracing conventional paths of learning. He ended up at the University of North Texas, where he graduated with an art degree and found like-minded souls in the school's Good/Bad Art Collective.

At 39, Swenson is a master of the small-scale sculpture, as evidenced by his three-piece "Sightings" on view at

the Nasher Sculpture Center through July 8. His are time-consuming works, most of which take a year to complete.

He turns to a piece called *Scuttle* and says, "It's a nautical term for sinking your own ship, so that others can't have it. It's a gastropod, wrapping around its own shell, destroying its own shell, while still inside of it. So

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SCAVENGING *for* LIFE'S MEANING

G.J. McCarthy/Staff Photographer

Sculptor scavenges for life's meaning

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it's kind of committing suicide."

If that sounds dark, so be it. Swenson admits that "everything I do is a narrative. It's about death, about the pointlessness of our existence. That's what art is, making subtler subtexts about other things."

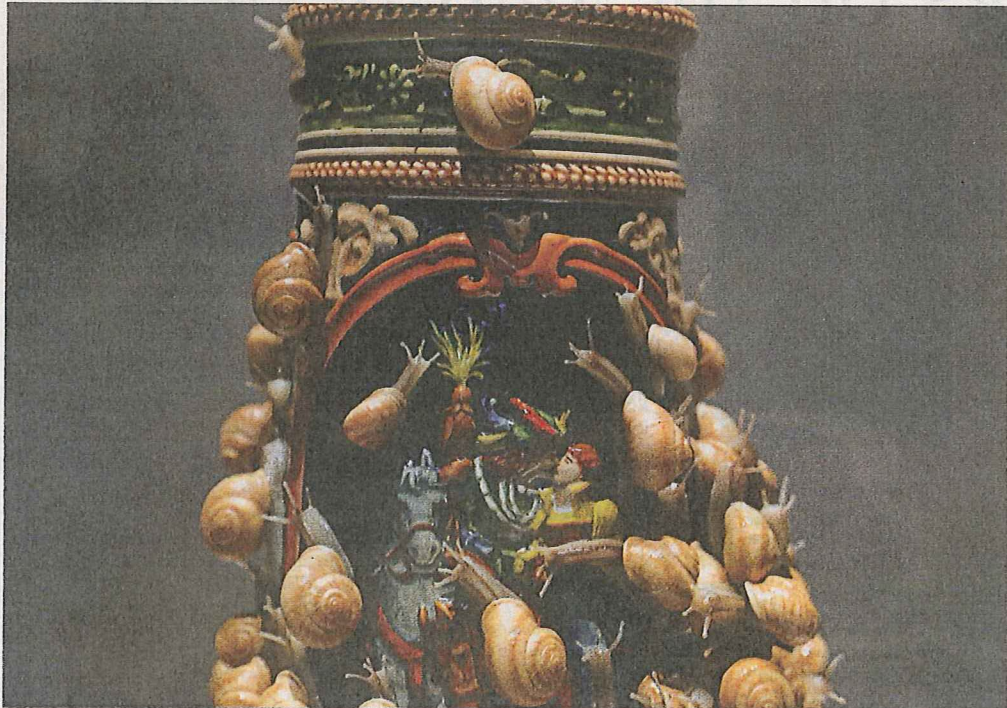
Because much of his work involves animals, as do all three pieces in the Nasher show, animal rights activists often mistake Swenson as a champion of their ideals. That isn't the case, he says, noting that "some people can be quite literal. It's not my intention, but then I can't control how people interpret things. I hope to put enough in there that people might see past it and investigate it a bit further."

"I like animals fine," adds the owner of two dogs, with a lighthearted chuckle. "I wish them well."

Talley Dunn Gallery represents Swenson locally, prompting Dunn to call Swenson "one of the most significant and important artists of his generation. His work is extraordinary ... masterful. I think that, when the audience sees the work in person, it's truly stunning and breathtaking and mesmerizing. He has a vision and a perspective that is complex and intriguing to the viewer, and we are so incredibly fortunate to have the opportunity to work with him."

Because Swenson's work takes so long to complete, the Nasher approached him more than a year ago about doing his own show, which chief curator Jed Morse says is long overdue.

"We have this artist who is well-known and well-respected nationally and internationally, and he happens to live in our city," Morse says. "He hasn't had a one-person museum show in the area to date. He's been included in exhibitions and has works in the collections of the Dallas Museum of Art and the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. But it



Snails swarm over a beer stein in *Schwärmerei*, one of three pieces by Erick Swenson on view at the Nasher Sculpture Center. Each involves animal life in the sculptor's search for the meaning of existence.

Photos by G.J. McCarthy/Staff Photographer

seemed a little overdue."

Part of what sets Swenson's work apart, Morse says, is the process he follows: "There are other sculptors who work in this kind of hyper-realist fashion, but in terms of an artist who works in that way and with the subjects he chooses and with this kind of dedication to direct, hands-on creation of the objects is incredibly rare, if not unique, in the world of art."

Swenson defies expectations in other ways. He's not one to say he was inspired by Picasso or Matisse. Rather, he feels more motivated by movies, such as *The Road*, which came from a Cormac McCarthy novel.

"Maybe that's why I got into art," Swenson says. "I didn't have the courage to make movies or direct them. I do get to write stories in these pieces and also direct them. I don't know if I'd be satisfied with, 'Hey, put the camera over here.'"

"We want happiness first, always. But that's not really how life is."



In *Scuttle*, a gastropod wraps around its own shell, in essence destroying itself.

then there's the etching process. So it's two molds per bone. It's a really, really long, involved process, and then it's assembled. And then you sculpt on that to make a final mold."

What the casual viewer might miss, however, is the detail in the animal's bones. Swenson has carved into each bone "scenes of the coastline. If you look really close, there are little towns and things. In the ribs, there are ocean waves. The skull has a ship carved into it."

At first glance, the dead pronghorn lying on its side engenders shock. "It's obviously a graphic, horrifying object," Swenson says. "At first, some people don't want to get past that. It's a roadblock, but if you stick your nose up into it, you'll start to see the story of this animal's life."

"We want happiness first, always," he says. "But that's not really how life is. It's filled with tragedy. This, in a sense, is what we end up as in the end, whether we believe in heaven or not. It's my sentiment of the pointlessness of existence, but it's also very beautiful in the end."

Like many other artists, regardless of the discipline, whether it's songwriting, the theater or sculpture, Swenson doesn't disagree with the notion that art chose him.

"Sometimes, I think I shouldn't be doing this," he says. "There's too much stress. To be corny, though, I do feel compelled. I don't know how to do anything else. I'm terrible at computers, awful at directions. I don't drive very well."

He admits despising the business side of art, saying it's feast or famine, then adding with a laugh, "Well, it's never really feast. But I'm still doing it."

Plan your life

Through July 8 at the Nasher Sculpture Center, 2001 Flora St., Dallas. 214-242-5100. NasherSculptureCenter.org.

It's not hard to look at Swenson's existential art and see that fear plays a prominent role.

"I'm a fairly anxious person," he admits. "Everything gets filtered unfortunately through myself. Subconscious things end up in the work. It's the things I'm interested in, the unfairness ... like in *The Road*, for example."

The most compelling piece in the Nasher exhibition is *Ne Plus Ultra*, Swenson's incredibly detailed sculpture of a pronghorn skeleton. A pronghorn is a North American antelope. Swenson acquired a pronghorn skeleton and painstakingly re-created it from urethane resin, the material in each of the three pieces.

"We cast all of the bones," he says. "Over 200 some-odd bones. We make molds of each bone, all the leg bones, everything. Each rib is cast in a mold that's made for it, and

