



L & R. Erick Swenson, *Untitled*, 2007; polyurethane resin, acrylic paint, MDF, polystyrene; 30 x 181 x 280 inches; courtesy James Cohan Gallery, New York

NEW YORK

Erick Swenson

James Cohan Gallery

"If it does its job correctly, just one object can fill a space," claims Dallas-based Erick Swenson in an interview in *Art Prostitute* (#8). This comment isn't surprising given the showstopping, bravura objects that Swenson has created since the mid nineties. Unlike site-specific installations, Swenson's installation-size works erase site altogether, capturing the attention of viewers with their workmanlike rigor, formal elegance, cinematic mise-en-scène and narrative mystique. Though the artist goes on to say that his one-work shows are a pragmatic result of the grueling logistics of fabrication, knowing this from the outset raises the artist's game to a perilous height: one piece must carry the entire show.

This is almost the case with Swenson's second solo outing at James Cohan (incidentally, one of Chelsea's most consistently interesting galleries and also the New York home for Houston-based Trenton Doyle Hancock). Depicting the mutilated, half-eaten or butchered carcass of a killer whale adrift on a crumbling ice floe, Swenson's *Untitled* is another master stroke in mood, setting and craft. Interestingly though, what is critically missing in the piece is literally the material that has been ripped away. We see the detailed jaw, teeth, throat and a long segment of the whale body ending in a flipper/fin.

What we don't see, however, is the animal's eye—that electrifying element (whether "dead or alive") that, quite simply, hooks the viewer and draws them into the narrative, away from the more practical mechanics of the work's fabrication. Consequently, the beautiful and realistically crafted floating ice is all just so much poured polyurethane resin. Eyes are important—who knew?! (Swenson does, now).

And I suspect dioramists in natural history museums do, too. Swenson's handling of materials is so like the work of those other creature builders that one might ask, how is it different? Natural history museums understand that appreciating other species is about life identifying with life (artificiality notwithstanding). In Swenson's case, an additional meta-narrative is suggested, even if that story is essentially about freezing a moment in time, *in medias res*, creating a strong, almost foreboding sensation of what has come before and what will inevitably come after.

In choosing animal subjects, Swenson continues to capitalize on an archaic shorthand for viewer projections. In past work, we have seen deer (often) in the midst of natural processes—rutting, rotting or frozen under ice and snow. Where initially Swenson altered the animals so that they were not quite of this world, his work of late has placed naturalistic animals in settings or situations that have an air of the uncanny, the unnatural. These frozen narratives allow for poetic, symbolic and dreamlike readings.

This approach veers dramatically from the mission of museum dioramas, which are designed to depict the world as we collectively know it. Swenson's tableaux, on the other hand, allow for the personal. A world seen through the mind of one person, then created illusionistically for the eyes of others. Personally, I need the eyes—be they deer, whale or orangutan—to suspend disbelief.

John Ewing is a freelance writer and editor based in New York and has written for Art Nexus and Modern Painters. He is the Copy Editor of Art Lies.