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artpace
san antonio

International Artist-In-Residence New Works

Erick Swenson: About the Artist and Project



Erick Swenson, *Ebie*, 2002, plastic, aluminum, glass eyes, oil paint, Dimensions fully assembled: 16 x 8 x 8 inches

The room is dark. Spotlights fall on an oriental rug where a silent and unlikely struggle is taking place. Nuzzling its head against the Persian fibers (like one might expect a dog to) is a young buck. Its frame is frozen in time—fragile legs splayed and thin body taugth with the effort of rubbing velvety fur off of its antlers. Black eyes peer out of milky-white skin as if the creature has just been caught. But caught at what and by whom? No context is provided save for the incongruous rug; there is no indication of what could have occurred before or after this moment. The foreboding drama is played out with only one character.

With both the rug and buck cast in plastic this could be a study for a sci-fi movie—or is it some strange natural history museum tableaux? Neither and both. In fact it is a scene (*Untitled*, 2001) fabricated by Erick Swenson, an artist whose work flickers between the often-distinct worlds of movies, science, and visual art. In his installation *Obviously a Movie*

(1998), and pieces such as *Edgar* (1998) and *Muncie* (2000), Swenson has managed to imbue highly finished hybrid beings for the art gallery with references to both cinema and zoology.

His process is revealing. While the creatures often look manufactured, in fact Swenson himself has done all of the work by hand. Using anatomical books as research material, Swenson adjusts and readjusts steel armature until the figure looks as it does in his mind's eye. He then sculpts a model, makes a mold, and casts the piece in plastic. Each work is brought to life through the application of paint (and in the past hair and costumes), and through theatrical presentations in the gallery.

Erick Swenson's work has gradually shifted from the creation of a whole set to the careful articulation of its parts; perhaps signaling a movement away from the comprehensive world of cinema toward the object-orientated realm of art. *Obviously a Movie*, an early project, was composed of multiple characters in possible dialogue. Snow fell on two baboon-like creatures dressed expedition-style. They trampled ominously over a crude molten surface in the direction of a fleecy fawn whose head was sweetly framed by curly white tresses. *Untitled* (described above) was made three years later and an evolution is apparent. Effort has been

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concentrated on refining the surfaces of two elements locked in a one to one relationship: a buck and a carpet. The hushed focus achieved in Untitled is far from the elaborate atmosphere built up in Swenson's earlier installations.

Adding further weight to the argument that Swenson is increasingly interested in the parts is his exhibition at ArtPace. The artist has used his residency to make studies for future works. While some may be the limbs of EB, an ape-like character whose head he finished and showed in 2002, others are the beginnings of nascent creatures still unnamed. As he works Swenson checks each piece against skeleton models and academic material, yet the gestures sculpted are neither lifted from such sources nor from any other type of script. They are mostly animal, yet slightly more—hybrids infused with a humanism that evokes unexpected empathy.

Erick Swenson's blending of cinema, science, and visual art prompts numerous questions. Is there/should there be a line between pop culture and "high" art? Is it context or intention that separates the two? These kinds of uncertainties hover over works by Erick Swenson.