

JAMES COHAN GALLERY

Leffingwell, Edward, "Erick Swenson at James Cohan," *Art in America*, October 2004

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

Dioramas attract through more or less convincing representations of occurrences in the history of nature or culture. In that tradition, an untitled three-dimensional work from 2004 by Erick Swenson imaginatively depicts the death of a 10-point white buck. This thin and fragile ruminant appears to be frozen to a field of cobblestones slick with melting ice and trampled snow. In the course of a year, Swenson modeled these elements, then cast and painted them.

The tableau recalls his untitled work of 2001 that also features a white buck, rubbing the velvet from his rack against a polyurethane cast of a Persian rug. (The work was exhibited at the UCLA Hammer Museum in 2003 and included in the 2004 Whitney Biennial.) That work in turn reflects an untitled sculpture of 2000 in which a white fawn appears to rise skyward in the unlikely grasp of a billowing cape, suggesting the myth of Jupiter and Ganymede.

Swenson invites the consideration of such narratives to vivify his new work. Sculpted of polyurethane resin and acrylic paint, the tableau rests on a shallow platform about 23 feet long and 14 feet wide. At the edges of the platform, flocking looks like new-blown snow, pristine in the clear light of day; within the field it looks trampled, exposing a paving of cobblestones that shines with an acrylic resin simulating a glaze of ice. The buck is frozen to a mound of ice and snow. He twists upward on his hind legs in a posture of defiance or terror. Icicles hang from his antlers and raised right hind leg. There is no sign of a wound, and no indication of predators--no dogs or hunters, which are part of the usual iconography of such events.

Swenson evokes northern traditions--the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich or Odd Nerdrum that place the figure in a solitary landscape, or those of Edwin Landseer, favoring the stag of highland and glen. In life as lived rather than as depicted, deer are not swept up to the sky by a rush of fabric, nor do rutting bucks commonly rub their tines on

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Persian rugs. Here, in Swenson's hallucinatory tableau of a vulnerable animal somehow at bay, visitors walk around the platform that serves to frame the work and establish the limits of their approach to it. It might be that his subject resides in discovery of the nature of the viewer's relationship to the artist and the artist's to the work. In this labor of creation, Swenson rehearses the precedent of Joseph Beuys explaining pictures to a dead hare, as well as Pygmalion breathing life into stone.