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Always and Nothing (detail view) Marc Swanson

Emerging Artists: Marc Swanson

by João Ribas

NEW YORK, Nov. 15, 2005 - Probing your subconscious for gems of self-wisdom comes with a caveat: You never know—and frankly might not like—what's lurking there. In Marc Swanson's case, the Brooklyn-based artist's journey into self-awareness takes place through the artistic process—and it uncovers some dazzling disquietude. Turns out, Swanson's a Yeti.

Killing Moon #3, Swanson's self-portrait as a Yeti in his lair in the boiler room of P.S. 1—a stand-out contribution to the Greater New York 2005 show held at the MoMA-affiliated museum in Queens, N.Y. this summer—was made from materials that Swanson's abominable alter-ego collected while foraging around his house and the museum.

"The idea was that I would be the Yeti and basically collect garbage for four-to-six weeks every night to make the installation," says the Connecticut-born artist. "I had to reconcile the fact that I'm an educated artist who knows about formal issues and academia, and figure out what the Yeti would make instead—these more ritualistic objects. But the Yeti also collects things in the world and then puts them together to sort of make sense of the world around him. It dawned on me that I pretty much do the same thing: so I'm the yeti and the yeti is me."

With such feral self-portraits and enigmatic dioramas—recreating creepy but meaning-laden forest environments in urban settings—Swanson's work blends personal revelation with a poignant sense of melancholy. "I'm jealous that Lucas Samaras calls everything a self-portrait," jokes the Connecticut-born artist, who, in all his art, turns personal narratives into a witty play between what can be understood by others and what remains mysterious but alluring.

From Swanson's restive imagination—filled with pop culture references and a Romantic

longing for glitter-covered symbolism—emerge some rhetorical bait-and-switch moves: hunting trophies delicately covered in rhinestones; scratched mirrors toying with the very meaning of self-reflection.

Swanson's conceptual lillies often get gilded in such uncanny ways, and his third solo show, on view at the Bellwether gallery in Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood through Dec. 3, continues to explore beauty and desire from all refracted sides. "I can't help but make pretty things. Even if they're made from trash, they're always sort of glinty. I like to challenge this postmodern idea that great art can't be beautiful," Swanson says.

Swanson's new work has him working intuitively, "building things up like a drawing or a painting and using a more formal language."

Dualities pervade in his work. Take his rhinestone covered deer head, what amounts to a Liberace deer: "There were all these dualities in my life that were really strong influences. I grew up in the most republican state in the nation, but my mom was a libertarian, and I was brought up a Unitarian. I think with the deer heads I was trying to make an object that expressed that, this pretty simple synthesis."

Some of the more perverse gestures in the show—like adding streaks of acrylic painting to a stuffed peacock—are just as seductive, if less literal.

The diaphanous glass arrows that puncture the gallery wall are impossibly beautiful for their intended purpose, a kind of reconciliation of beauty and power. "I went bow hunting with my dad as a kid, but it just didn't work—I didn't become a bow-hunting marine like my dad, but I wanted too," Swanson says. "The arrows are like a myth," Swanson explains, "that there's only one person who can shoot them into the wall without breaking."

Always and Nothing, the exhibition's large diorama made with trees from the New England landscape of Swanson's youth, evokes a sense of mystery and melancholy, a Yeti's lonely refuge of beer-bottle-filled cages, flags and wasp nests suspended from wiry tree branches.

Several etched mirrors in the show, with images of a target, a peacock or a Madonna partially scratched off, use their visual trick to, well, mirror, the issues they evoke. "When you try to focus on yourself, something always steps in the way. Your brain is finishing the image on the mirror while at the same it's bouncing to look at you; I think it brings up all these issues of insecurity and narcissism in between the two."

The combination of self-revelation and ironic gesture might make Swanson's work elusive, but it also makes it evocative. "I try to see all these things and what they mean to me. I think that these layers end up with a poetic sense that people can take something away from, even if it can't be totally nailed down."

Swanson proves this is often the case with what we find alluring, and the same might be said of the remnants of the not-so-rose-colored past that is slowly revealed in Swanson's work.



Always and Nothing



Boy in Tree



Madonna



Prelude to Sorrow