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Marc Swanson at Bellwether - New York

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Marc Swanson's second solo exhibition at Bellwether, "Live Free or Die," was an anthem to crushed dreams and hopes for the future. Conceived as a four-part installation comprising individual artworks fitted into a loosely autobiographical scenario, the show roughly conveyed the artist's coming to terms with his homosexuality and his politically conservative, rural New Hampshire roots. It also suggested a lapsed search for the possibility of renewal in a psychically devastated landscape.

The gallery was transformed into a walk-in tableau meant to recall a grungy meeting place or entertainment center filled with movie posters as well as absurd roadside souvenirs. The four narratives were "The Beginning of the End of the Beginning (Black Glitter Forest)," an allusion to eco-devastation; "Target the Rainbow," about finding one's way through the many conflicted paths of gayness; "Death Is Not the Worst of All Evils," the artist's self-deprecating examination of his values and life choices in contrast to his childhood's nativist values; and "Bucks," consisting of two fake mounted buck heads, entirely sequined, antlers in mid-clash, placed against a bright red-orange wall.

Swanson's honky-tonk environment initially seemed to be at odds with his purportedly self-revelatory intent. Each tired symbol pumped up the volume of exhausted artifice. Yet on some level, the contrivance of this deliberately awful down-and-out setting, with its dime-store mannequins and cheaply realized decor--made with, among other things, glitter, sgraffitoed Plexiglas, hockey tape, hanging T-shirts, rope nets, dirt and deerskin--seemed to offer an authentic glimpse into the artist's sense of abject futility, Goth morbidity and misplaced projection of gay fabulousness.

Injecting a tone of mock despair into essentially serious concerns can be a genuine enough way of bracing oneself with bittersweet humor in order to endure the unendurable. But the exhibition never seemed to take off beyond this coping tactic. A thin, tinny tone permeated the show, which was hobbled by overarching generalizations about the Self, Death, Rebirth, Gayness, Nature, Man, the State, etc. Some of the objects in the installation recalled private incidents in the artist's life and were not reducible to easy interpretation. But they were few and far between. Absent more of those unexpected elements, the rebel yell of "Live Free or Die" seemed more like a perfunctory murmur.