



MARC SWANSON

A Memorial to Ice at the Dead Deer Disco

MASS MoCA





A Monument to Future Ruins: Marc Swanson's *A Memorial to Ice at the Dead Deer Disco*

By Denise Markonish

"A stupendous mirror of departed empires."

—PT Barnum

Marc Swanson works across diverse media, creating sculptures and environments that look at the relationships between humans, culture, and the natural world. His new installation at MASS MoCA, and a concurrent summer exhibition at Thomas Cole National Historic Site in Catskill, NY (July 13 – November 13, 2022), address a longing for the present caused by our shared experience of living in the ruins of our future. These ruins symbolize a bleak future resulting from the impending loss and inevitable results of climate change, a future which could have been avoided, but now comes with consequences beyond our control. There will be a time, like Barnum's stupendous mirrors of departed empires, when the landscape as we know it will no longer exist, for now we can only posit what that may look like for future generations.

A Memorial to Ice at the Dead Deer Disco encompasses both monument and celebration that are tinged with melancholy. Of the inspiration for the exhibition, Swanson states: "The two spaces I have felt the most comfortable and spiritually

connected are the nightclubs of my youth and in the woods today." Yet, despite this comfort, both places were sites of threat due to climate change and the AIDS crisis. Through his lived experience, Swanson bears witness and aims to highlight the theatricality of our current political and cultural moment, turning the landscape that is disappearing around us into memorial, monument, and ecstatic celebration.

Swanson's exhibition is also inspired by 19th-century Hudson River School painter Thomas Cole's writings on the negative effects of development along Catskill Creek and the Catskill Mountains in New York. Cole was the founder of the Hudson River School—a group of painters known for imaging idealized landscapes of America as unpopulated and unindustrialized. Cole was also an early proto-environmentalist, and often advocated against the industrial development that was quickly transforming the landscape around him. This shift in land use was evident in many forms including the rise of the ice industry along the Hudson River. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, ice was harvested from the Hudson and shipped to New York City, this along with many other industries led to vast development and depletion of resources in



Thomas Cole, *View on the Catskill—Early Autumn*, 1836–37. Oil on canvas. 39 × 63 inches.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gift in memory of Jonathan Sturges by his children, 1895.

the Catskill region. Cole's prescience perhaps reached its ironic zenith decades after his passing with the development of ice houses along the banks of his beloved Catskill Creek.

In his 1841 essay *American Scenery* Cole discusses his dismay over the industrialization of Catskill when he writes "I cannot but express my sorrow that the beauty of such landscapes are quickly passing away—the ravages of the axe are daily increasing—the most noble scenes are made desolate, and oftentimes with a wantonness and barbarism scarcely credible in a civilized nation." This longing for the bucolic past is even more evident, and more complicated, today for Swanson who now resides in Catskill. After moving there, he quickly realized that his property along Catskill Creek was a favorite painting spot of Cole's. Ironically, if Cole were alive today, he would be inspired by the return of the region's bucolic surrounds, only

to be disappointed by the environmental state of the planet. Swanson sees the current Catskill landscape as a twofold memorial: to what the ice farming and industrialization destroyed, and a future monument to a land ravaged by climate change.

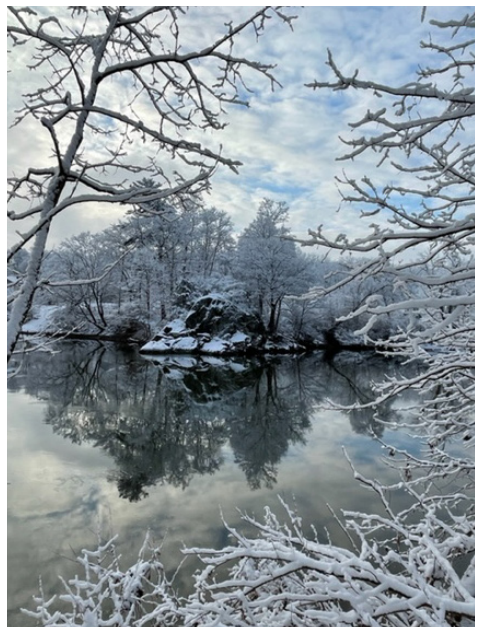
As visitors walk into MASS MoCA's second-floor galleries they are immersed in an installation based loosely on dioramas and nature displays, as well as old Hollywood glamour, queer culture and camp, and gravestones and memorial monuments. Swanson has long been interested in dioramas and natural history museums for the ways in which they seemingly preserve nature, and how what once started off as an educational tool is now another form of entertainment—much in the same way that wild spaces are also a kind of theater. In her essay, "Through the Plexiglass: A History of Museum Dioramas," Bridgitte Barclay states

that “In her book *The Breathless Zoo*, Rachel Poliquin writes that ‘taxidermy is deeply marked by human longing,’ exposing our hopes and fears about our place in the natural world. Dioramas represent an attempt to make sense of nature, but they also reveal humans’ deeply complicated relationship with it.” (*The Atlantic*, October 14, 2015). This longing becomes even more pronounced in Swanson’s work as his sculptures drip with fabricated icicles, tree branches, and taxidermy deer mounts breaking the confines of the constructions, inviting viewers into this fabricated world. The work contains nature and memorializes it with white wrapped plaster bandages, broken mirrors, and chains. Additionally, at the end of the space is a large staircase, a theatrical performance set that will serve as a site of collaboration between Swanson and choreographer/dancer Jack Ferver, conflating camp, memorial, and climate change.

In the following room, Swanson more deeply references the nightclub and the unbridled celebration he felt as a young queer man in NYC. He remembers the exuberance of once hidden gay clubs in 1980s New York, a place where people would wait in line for hours to get in, and once inside you could be glamorous wholly yourself. He also remembers the flip side to this freedom, for this glamour was also filled with the loss and the ghosts of loved ones who died from AIDS. Swanson remembers the release of the club but also the tangible fear as the AIDS crisis became full blown, and a night of ecstatic dancing would turn into inspecting oneself for Kaposi Sarcoma lesions, a telltale sign of an AIDS infection. The works in this gallery represent these conflated emotions of celebration and fear, from a grouping of rhinestone deer antlers with disco lighting to a large sculpture

inspired by a pietà with a deer standing in for the Christ figure. Swanson reminds us that within celebration there is loss and, just as palpable, survivor’s guilt.

Retracing one’s steps from the back gallery to the front, we are once again reminded of the alignment between the climate and AIDS crises, something felt even more palpably today in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, which made both plague and landscape even more present in our day-to-day experience. In their essay “What the queer community brings to the fight for climate justice,” Aletta Brady, Anthony Torres, and Phillip Brown write: “Climate justice is founded on the principles that we all deserve a planet where we can thrive and be safe. Queer and trans communities embody a model of a world that lends itself well to this vision by creating communities that sustain and celebrate all of us in our authentic being.” (Grist.org,



A view of the Catskill Creek on Marc Swanson’s property and one of Thomas Cole’s favorite painting spots.



Marc Swanson and Jack Ferver, detail from *Chambre*, 2015. Various sizes and media.

April 9, 2019). This shared vision for equity and sustainability faces off in Swanson's show with the mourning of both past and future.

Alongside the exhibition at MASS MoCA, Swanson was invited to create a companion project at the Thomas Cole National Historic Site, an opportunity to reckon with both his own landscape and the historic presence of Cole. For this exhibition, Swanson was inspired by Cole's use of pastiche and creative compositions, in which he inserts or removes people and buildings to support an overall conceptual framework of spirituality and environmentalism. Swanson sees this methodology as a very post-modern tactic. Swanson takes this history and uses it as a tool to memorialize the landscape Cole knew so well, covering animal and tree forms with draped white plaster, as well as creating an icy world from plaster bandages. The result is a memorialized landscape frozen in time, where the ice will never melt.

By creating this entwined narrative with Cole, Swanson conflates past and present, conservation and memorial.

Ultimately, *A Memorial to Ice at The Dead Deer Disco* looks at loss and our inability to control human nature and the world around us. Through his intermingling of culture and landscape, Swanson makes palpable the construction of nature and how the humans at the disco aren't much different than the woods or the cemetery; all function as culturally constructed ecosystems. For Swanson, we are nature, and nature is not a limited resource; it is not a human privilege, and the powerful loss at seeing it disappear is memorialized in this exhibition. In the end, we are reminded that nothing is stable, and we must remember the present in the present before the future takes it away and turns it into a stupendous mirror of a departed empire.

Marc Swanson (born 1969, New Britain, Connecticut) earned an MFA from the Milton Avery Graduate School of the Arts, Bard College, NY, in 2004. He has exhibited nationally and internationally in Sweden, Italy, and Mexico, and was included in the second *Greater New York* exhibition at PS1 in 2005. Swanson has worked collaboratively with choreographer/dancer Jack Ferver to create sets for *Chambre* (2014/15). Select solo exhibitions include: the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City, MO; the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY; and the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, TX (2011). Additionally, Swanson collaborated with choreographer/dancer Jack Ferver on *Chambre* at the New Museum, New York, NY, Fisher Center at Bard, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, and Institute of Contemporary Art, Maine College of Art & Design, Portland, ME. His work is included in many public collections, including those of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.; the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY; the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN; the Brooklyn Museum, NY; and the National Museum of Australia, Canberra. Swanson currently lives and works in Catskill, NY.

Marc Swanson:
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March 12, 2022–January 2023

Curated by Denise Markonish

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Cover: Marc Swanson, detail of *Once and Again*, 2016. Wood, fabric, paint, plaster, artificial doe. 78 × 57 × 10 inches.

Interior flap: Detail of Marc Swanson's studio

A companion exhibition by Swanson will be on view July 13–November 13, 2022, at the Thomas Cole National Historic Site in Catskill, NY.



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