
Fleisher Ollman

1216 Arch Street – 5A
Philadelphia PA 19107
tel / 215-545-7562
215-545-6140 / fax
fleisherollman.com

Paul Swenbeck: *Holothurians Purring*

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In *Holothurians Purring*, Paul Swenbeck continues his ongoing exploration of primordial life by way of ceramic sculpture, prints, photographs, and video projection which takes a recent experience of handling a holothurian, or sea cucumber, during a SCUBA dive in the Caribbean, as his point of departure. Swenbeck has long been fascinated by the plants and animals of the evolutionary past fusing elements of real and imaginary creatures in sculptures that allude to the fossil record. In *Holothurians Purring*, Swenbeck returns to the marine environment he explored in the paleontology-inspired installation *Dor and Oranur*, his last solo show at Fleisher/Ollman in 2012. His new work merges first-hand exploration of the watery depths with European folk-culture myths about mer-people like the Nix and the Vodyanoy. Fantastical underwater castles and magical, fog-shrouded islands are the setting for a new suite of monotypes created at Second State Press. Swenbeck's ceramic sculptures flesh out his vision of a mythical world of water spirits and aquatic creatures. A collaborative video made with artist Aaron Igler suggests a portal that connects the sea and landscape through the lens of a microscope. The title *Holothurians Purring* refers to a composition by Erik Satie, who described holothurians as making sounds like cats, though this has yet to be substantiated by science. It makes sense that Swenbeck would be attracted to these creatures for their unusual qualities and alien-like disposition—they can regurgitate their entire digestive system and regenerate a new one in a matter of days (the expelled guts Satie described as “disgusting silky threads”); their appearance is both otherworldly and decidedly ancient; as their name implies, they look like plants but are actually animals—a hybridity that Swenbeck finds appealing. The in-between space of reality and science fiction has been an ongoing touchstone for Swenbeck, where creatures, half-plant and half-animal, commingle with psychedelic imagery suggesting narratives steeped in both natural history and the occult.

Paul Swenbeck has exhibited at Fleisher/Ollman; Fabric Workshop and Museum; Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania; Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Charles Addams Fine Arts Gallery at the University of Pennsylvania, and Rosenwald-Wolf Gallery at the University of the Arts, among other venues in the Philadelphia area. He has shown elsewhere at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN; New Museum, New York, NY; JTT, New York, NY; Adams and Ollman, Portland, OR; Lump Projects, Raleigh, NC; and the Stephen D. Paine Gallery at MassArt, Boston, MA, among others. His work is owned by the West Collection, Oaks, PA and the Altoids Curiously Strong Collection. He received a Pew Fellowship in the Arts in 2013.