

May 14th - June 13th, 2009

Paul Swenbeck and Tristin Lowe

Mocha Dick in the Invisible World

Fleisher/Ollman is pleased to announce an exhibition of new work by Tristin Lowe and Paul Swenbeck, Philadelphia artists who share a common vantage point inspired by friendship, Yankee ingenuity and a love of the disappearing natural world. This show, Lowe's second exhibition at the gallery and Swenbeck's first, presents a phantasmagoria of ideas that -from ghost nets filled with the flotsam and jetsam of extinct species, to magic circle still-life, to science fiction birth allegories- that take the viewer across the boundaries of hope and believability.

Lowe continues his work in felt, making the mundane detritus of casual consumption into a ghost shadow of inscrutable beauty. Lowe purposely uses the low-tech, humble material-felt, the oldest form of fabric known to humankind-to construct a propane tank, shipwrecked figure and a skull. Made on a sewing machine-passed down from the artist's mother, these carefully crafted, life-sized objects appear to have washed up on shore after an apocalyptic event. According to the artist, this unnamed general disaster is influenced by such unsavory things such as eight years of the Bush administration, the recent and worst space debris event which involved the collision of American and Russian satellites that has left hundreds of pieces of debris orbiting the earth, and the floating island of debris twice as large as the state of Texas that is drifting in the northern Pacific Ocean.

Mocha Dick, referenced in the title, is the great and famous leviathan that served as the model for Herman Melville's Moby Dick and which was described by the explorer Jeremiah N. Reynolds in the May 1839 issue of *The Knickerbocker*, as "an old bull whale, of prodigious size and strength...white as wool. For approximately 30 years, Mocha Dick terrorized those whalers who attempted to net him. Here Mocha Dick is a stand-in for the struggle between man and nature.

Timely in its reference to the sea, as the news media turns its cameras to recent piracy off the coast of Somalia, the works invoke the harshness of capitalism and consumption (pirateering, according to the artist, can be seen of as an early predecessor to brutal free market economics) and the wild freedoms tempered by harsh constraints of the sea.

The second half of the exhibition's title, *The Invisible World*, references Swenbeck's long-term interest in the occult, witchcraft, pagan mythology, the spiritual and the sacred. In opposition to Lowe's work, where the scars of society dominate the landscape, Swenbeck creates a world in which nature takes back a bit from civilization.

Swenbeck was born in Salem, Massachusetts, the site of the infamous witch trials that occurred in the 1690s, and as a teen worked at the Witch Dungeon Museum. He remains fascinated by the fact, fantasy and fiction associated with witchcraft and its rituals. His ceramic works resemble the mandrake plants, the roots of which resemble human figures, have hallucinogenic properties, and have long been used in witchcraft and magic. Additionally, the artist is heavily influenced by his travels in India and Nepal. Captivated by road side shrines to gods and deities, where statues are ritualistically painted (a sign of

reverence) until their bodies, over time, become featureless "blobs" but eyes remain untouched, the artist has created an installation of disembodied, yet piercing eyeballs buried in the gallery walls. A reverence for nature and animistic details of the landscapes, such as boxwork, an uncommon type of erosion pattern found in wind caves, and cairns, manmade piles of stones used as landmarks for a burial site, astronomy, mark the summit of a mountain or assembled in reverence, are also cited as sources of inspiration.

Throughout the entire gallery space, Swenbeck has visually installed a colorful creeping vine made from aluminum foil akin to invasive kudzu or poisonous ivy. Also on view will be a series of photographs, taken by the artist over the past twelve years, that utilize the low-tech device of a prism to tease out apparitions, disjunctures, time warps and other things unseen in the landscape.

Working across a variety of media, including ceramic works, sculpture, painting, drawing and photography, Swenbeck makes direct reference to the intangible beliefs, ideologies, superstitions and hopes that color our interactions with the world.

#### About the Artists

Tristin Lowe is a multi-disciplinary artist whose practice delves into the crude and rude, absurd and abject, pushing low-brow, low-tech methods and materials toward unexpected ends. The artist makes drawings from grease paint and fire, uses edible materials such as butter, chocolate and alcohol to make hilarious and sad installations (beds that wet themselves, pillows that smoke), and handcrafts exquisite reproductions of both animate and inanimate objects (a sewn felt, upended trashcan, a mangy, fake-fur fox, a two-story folding chair). Lowe's wry re-imaginings lead the viewer down a path littered with chaos, comedy and failure.

Born in Boston in 1966, Lowe received his BFA from Massachusetts College of Art and studied at Parsons School of Design and Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. He has exhibited his work extensively in Philadelphia, including at Fleisher/Ollman Gallery, Vox Populi, Girard College, The Rosenbach Museum and Library, The Samuel S. Fleisher Art Memorial, Basekamp, The Fabric Workshop and Museum, The Project Room, Abington Art Center, and Nexus Foundation for Today's Art. He has exhibited nationally and internationally at Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin; New Langton Arts, San Francisco; University of California, San Diego; Hudson D. Walker Gallery, Provincetown; Museum of Contemporary Art, Australia; and the Centre d'Art Contemporain, Switzerland. He has been awarded a Pew Fellowship, Provincetown Fine Art Work Center Fellowship, and The Fabric Workshop and Museum and Girard College Residencies. He was co-founder and co-director of the non-profit gallery Blohard. Lowe's work is in collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and The West Collection, as well as other private collections.

Concurrent with this exhibition at Fleisher/Ollman, Lowe is currently exhibiting a 52 foot

long felt sperm whale, Mocha Dick, is currently on view at the Fabric Workshop and Museum.

Paul Swenbeck's work combines sculpture, painting, photography, and craft to create installations that explore occult and spiritual themes--filtered through his own idiosyncratic perspective. Swenbeck grew up in Salem, Massachusetts a city infamously known for the witch trial hysteria in colonial America. His works are found in the West Collection in Philadelphia and The New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York. Recent exhibitions include a collaboration with his wife Joy Feasley at the Institute of Contemporary Art as part of Locally Localized Gravity in which the two built a solar oven in a greenhouse that was used in a celebration of the pagan holiday, Imbolc. Additionally, Swenbeck's work is currently included in the Dirt on Delight: Impulses that Form Clay (the Institute of Contemporary Art) which will be traveling to the Walker Art Center in July. Swenbeck graduated with a degree in ceramics from Massachusetts College of Art in 1991. He lives and works in Philadelphia.