



Marc Swanson | Death is Expensive

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Center for Maine Contemporary Art

Rockland, Maine

Marc Swanson | Death is Expensive

6
Introduction
Grant Wahlquist

10
Marc Swanson: The Glittering Edge of Loss
Harry Tafoya

16
Plates

78
Works in the Exhibition

80
Staff | Board

82
Contributors

Marc Swanson | Death is Expensive

Introduction | Grant Wahlquist

A defining voice in the queer contemporary art of his generation, Marc Swanson transforms made and found materials—photographs, taxidermy forms, ornate frames, and more—into remarkably original assemblages that conjure a faded glamor. Setting the lovingly crafted alongside the seemingly discarded, Swanson's work manages the difficult task of appearing nostalgic and unsentimental all at once. Equally indebted to the conceptual and formal strategies of Marcel Broodthaers's décors, the decidedly non-conceptual (and usually queer-coded) professions of window dressing and interior and set decoration, and the almost Brechtian theatricality of the drag, club kid, and goth scenes of the 1980s, his art is a profound reckoning with the cost of love, longing, and survival in our present moment.

The title of this exhibition, *Death is Expensive*, is drawn from a line uttered by down-at-heel Southern belle Blanche DuBois in Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*: "How in the hell do you think all that sickness and dying was paid for? Death is expensive, Miss Stella!" In *Streetcar*, DuBois's carefully maintained artifice—paste jewels passing for diamonds, borrowed elegance masking scarcity—functions as both a shield and a tenuous means of escape. The tension between luminous surface and underlying vulnerability is also present in Swanson's work, which stages a parallel drama in materials: elevating the cheap, the decaying, or the everyday into objects of genuine and often melancholic beauty that never fully conceal their provisional or humble origins. Artifice is not deception but a necessary and sometimes defiant form of grace. As with Mike Kelley's use of thrifted afghans

and stuffed animals, Swanson insists on treating the tawdry and provisional seriously, coaxing elegance from the overlooked without erasing its roots in impermanence, loss, and the working class.

Death is Expensive brings together new work alongside a careful selection of works from the past 20 years in a layered reckoning with both the artist's private history and broader shared losses. These works include diorama-like wall-mounted assemblages in wooden boxes made from 2008 onward. Incorporating objects of personal and cultural resonance, they often appear as modest reliquaries and reflect on the segmentation of memory and the framing devices that shape experience. Swanson extends his formal exploration of the frame in a selection of paintings housed in sculpted and painted frames.

Taken as a whole, *Death is Expensive* contemplates the cost of loss in all its manifestations. It recognizes death as not merely the end of a biological cycle but as the unraveling of relationships, systems, identities, and occasionally ecosystems, and in doing so invites us to acknowledge that the expense and extent of loss corresponds to the depth of love.



Marc Swanson: The Glittering Edge of Loss | Harry Tafoya

One night in November 2005, a group of drunk, half-naked idiots destroyed an artwork by Marc Swanson. The piece, titled *Fits and Starts*, had been commissioned by the Public Art Fund and acquired by DePauw University, and was prominently installed on the main campus lawn. It depicted a bucking male deer encrusted in ultra-dazzle rhinestones, an experiment in craft that both commanded the attention of anyone who stepped into the square and marked it as an unmistakable target. The sculpture was immediately subject to mockery and low-level abuse, culminating in an impromptu “rally” where a group of frat bros simulated sex on the poor creature from both ends before smashing and tearing off its antlers.

In the days and weeks that followed, DePauw's student body literally and figuratively sobered up enough to appreciate how disrespectful they had been. The more remorseful ones even wrote a series of soul-searching op-eds and hand-written apologies to the artist. The more defiant ones were concerned with protecting their reputations, arguing that they shouldn't be lumped in with the offenders or looked upon as bigots for simply disliking Swanson's work. Fair enough, but it should be acknowledged that there's a notable difference in impact between a vague presumption of insult and the actual blunt force visited upon the piece. Surveying the mauled artwork, one archaeology student assessed that “It would [have] taken [...] force, a saw, a hammer, and a desire to destroy this.” *Fits and Starts* was eventually restored, but moved out of the main campus green and into the second story of the university's art center, where it could be safely appreciated among



For Renée (detail)
2026



other artworks without venturing out into the wider world again.

Swanson envisioned the deer as a proxy for himself, a hybrid being born of the wilderness and nightlife but who didn't fully belong to either. A New Hampshire boy who immersed himself in the clubs of Boston, New York, and San Francisco, Swanson was too soft for the rugged outdoors and too provincial for the jockeying and one-upsmanship of the social scene. In his hands, rhinestones became a metaphor for both his extroversion and his estrangement, the mirrorball a mark of a permanent outsider—one foot out on the discotheque, the other planted firmly in the woods. In some ways it's also an incredibly youthful piece of work, one that corresponds to a way that many young queer people think of themselves: as misunderstood changelings in a hostile world. The attack against the sculpture had activated a familiar circuit of rejection and defiance, offering a harrowing reminder that there are real stakes to being too fey or flamboyant in public and that one is only seldom let indoors before being banished again.

As wonderful as it is that *Fits and Starts* was restored, years later you can't help but wonder what the artist might feel for the deer that had been destroyed. In his solo exhibition at the Center for Maine Contemporary Art, *Death Is Expensive*, Swanson's work draws on all kinds of showy objects that are all the more poignant for having lost their shimmer. The multimedia artist uses the glossy visual language of interior decoration to evoke a past that's enticing but impossible to inhabit. His material, which is sourced from thrift

shops, flea markets, and estate sales, evokes a grandness that is now either faded, forgotten, or totally obsolete. Taken on their own, his trim and tassels conjure an outdated style that no longer maps onto our present moment, but which Swanson revives by granting them a second life as art. To a craftsman with a magpie's eye and an all-too human understanding of loss, Swanson creates ambiguous monuments whose renewed sparkle glimmers on the edge of the void.

One of the most baffling dynamics in the art world is the tendency to sell pieces destined for people's homes while at the same time discounting work deemed too “decorative.” From the very beginning of his career, Swanson embraced the conventions of decor without fear or apology, making liberal use of crystal, lace, feathers, and gilt to accent his subject at hand. You could describe much of his work as “semiprecious,” playing up and into notions of what we value as art by elevating and humbling his material. In the spirit of a true wildling, this has often meant blurring the line between the domestic and the outdoors. Pieces like *Untitled (White Paper Wasp's Nest)*, 2008, or *Ceremony*, 2026, are confusing by design, using blown glass and bronze to simulate the waxy, hyper real texture of wilting leaves and a found wasp's nest. Elsewhere, he uses the form of diorama to guide the viewer's eye toward objects that are too brazenly weird to ever be mistaken for window dressing.

In the hands of people like Donald Judd or Jeff Koons, diorama and set design are cold and clinical, a way to artfully frame empty space or acknowledge

that the piece in front of you is pure, unambiguous merchandise. But Swanson belongs to a more eclectic, free-wheeling, and slyly psychedelic tradition, one that could slot alongside Robert Rauschenberg, Joseph Cornell, Marcel Broodthaers, Marc Camille Chaimowicz, and Charles Ray. In *Waterfall*, 2022, he juxtaposes a menagerie of real and fake animals that leap out at the viewer from their static place in the installation as if they were irritated at having been put on display. Some of the artist's very best work occurs when his materials are so interwoven that you can't distinguish between flora, fauna, and phoney. In *Still Life with Flowers*, 2022, and *Untitled (Torch)*, 2026, Swanson twists glitter, antlers, chain link, and plastic as well as actual blooms so that they writhe and ramble into knotty surrealist compositions.

The interchangeability of nature and artifice isn't just a personal signature for Swanson, but also gestures toward a much older and basic struggle over identity. The word "grotesque" originally referred to works of art where man, plant, and beast wove themselves into unseemly tangles. Swanson's art is a beautifully arranged, oddly cohesive mess of real and fake, natural and artificial, invented and biographical. It gains from setting the deeply meaningful beside the cryptic and obscure and for doing so without qualification or apology. *Untitled (88 Box)*, 2008, arranges vintage chintz, thrifted bottles, and a found branch around a ratty, threadbare t-shirt that once belonged to his good friend, Elliott Smith. *For Renée*, 2026, is centered around a mirror framed with photographs of recognizable Hollywood stars, an out-of-context, gorgeously overdrawn pair of mascaraed eyes, and

a beautiful but unknown ingenue: another friend of Swanson's who died young. But knowing the heartbreak behind these pieces isn't necessary to make out the air of melancholy that emanates from this work to detect how honorably or beatifically the artist handles his material.

Swanson's works are most emotionally legible as containers for loss, altars erected to loved ones gone too soon and to ways of being in the world that no longer track in modern life. But you could also regard his work as a beacon, a holdout against a political and cultural climate where style, subtlety, and complication are being bulldozed over or airbrushed away. In *His kind* and *And his kind* (both 2026), the artist paints an effete gentleman in black tie and plumes of cigarette smoke. The figure is elegant, dignified, soigné; a dashing rake whose name alludes to Christopher Isherwood's autobiography and who seems like the embodiment of a Cole Porter song. It is unknown whether he is based on a specific reference or drawn purely from Swanson's imagination, but either way he is inextricable from the haze that surrounds him. Without care or regard, this kind of gentleman would vanish from the culture; instead Swanson casts a glittering spotlight for us to keep him in mind.

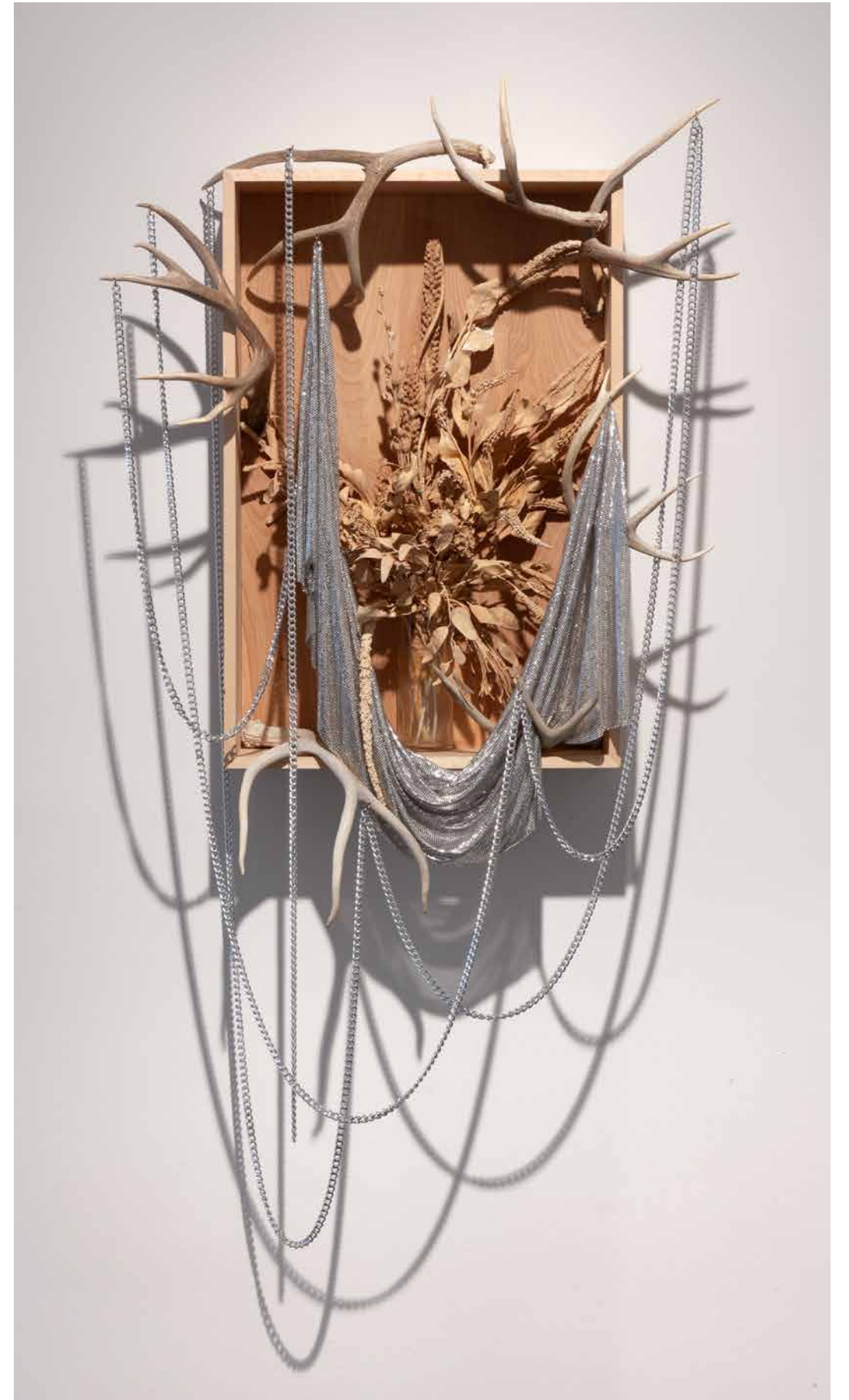
1
For Renée
2026



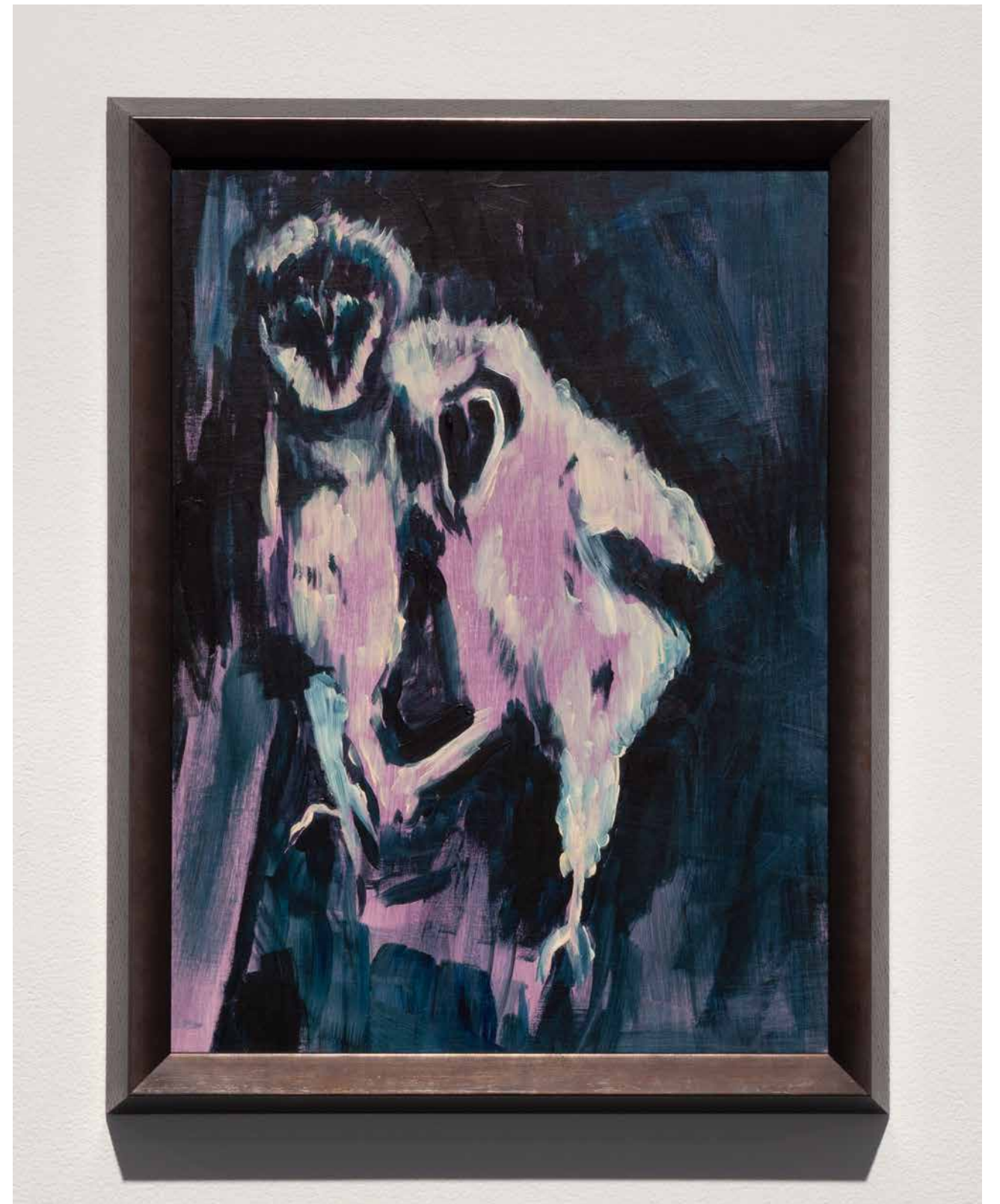




2
Still life with flowers
2022



3
Untitled (Owl pair)
2026





4
Untitled (Torch)
2026







BRUCE BROWN GALLERY

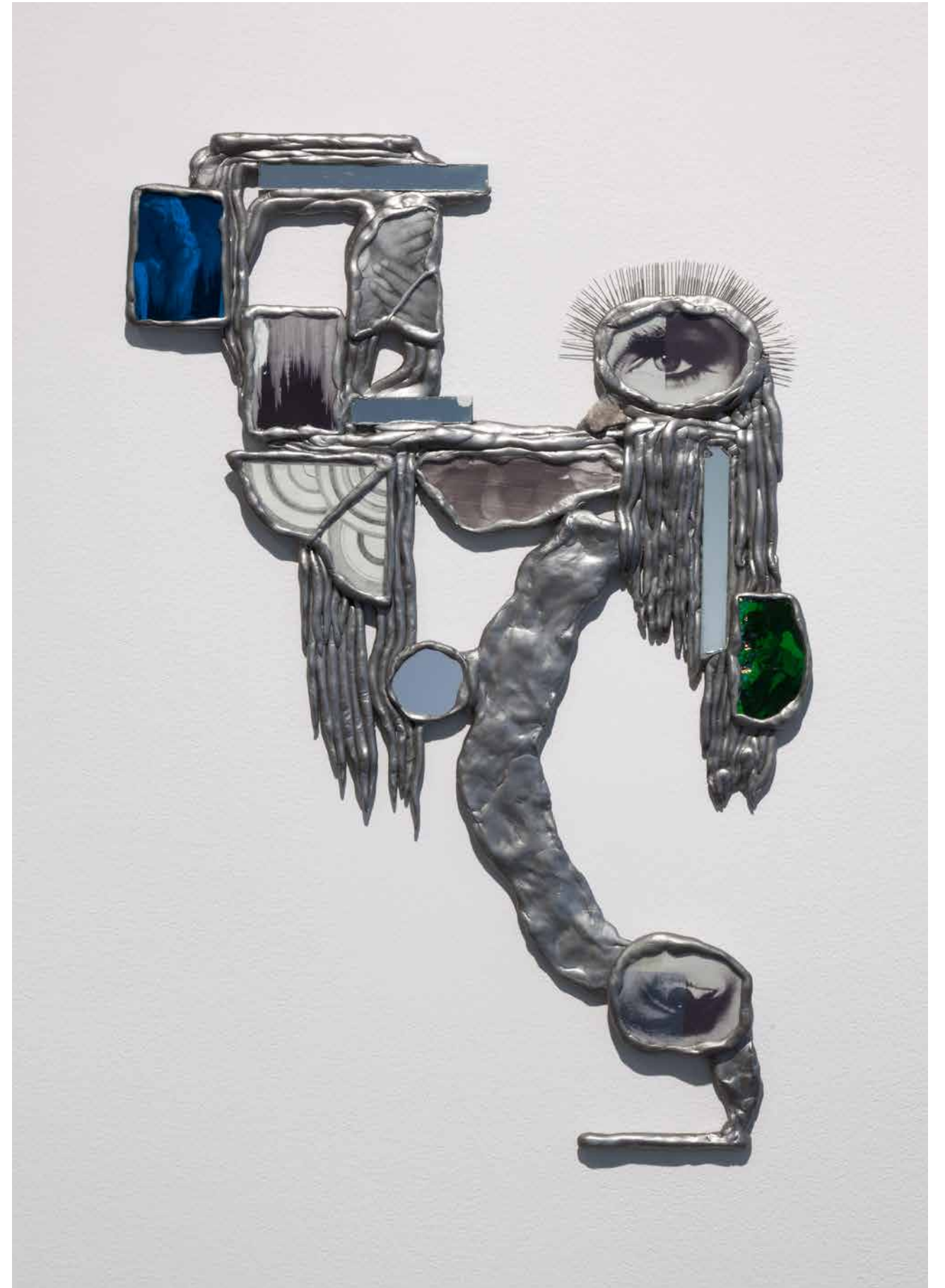
Mick Sackman | Depth of Experience

Depth of Experience is a series of works that explore the relationship between the physical and the spiritual. The works are made from a variety of materials, including wood, metal, and fabric, and are arranged in a way that suggests a journey or a path. The works are also accompanied by a series of text panels that provide a deeper understanding of the artist's vision and the meaning of the works.



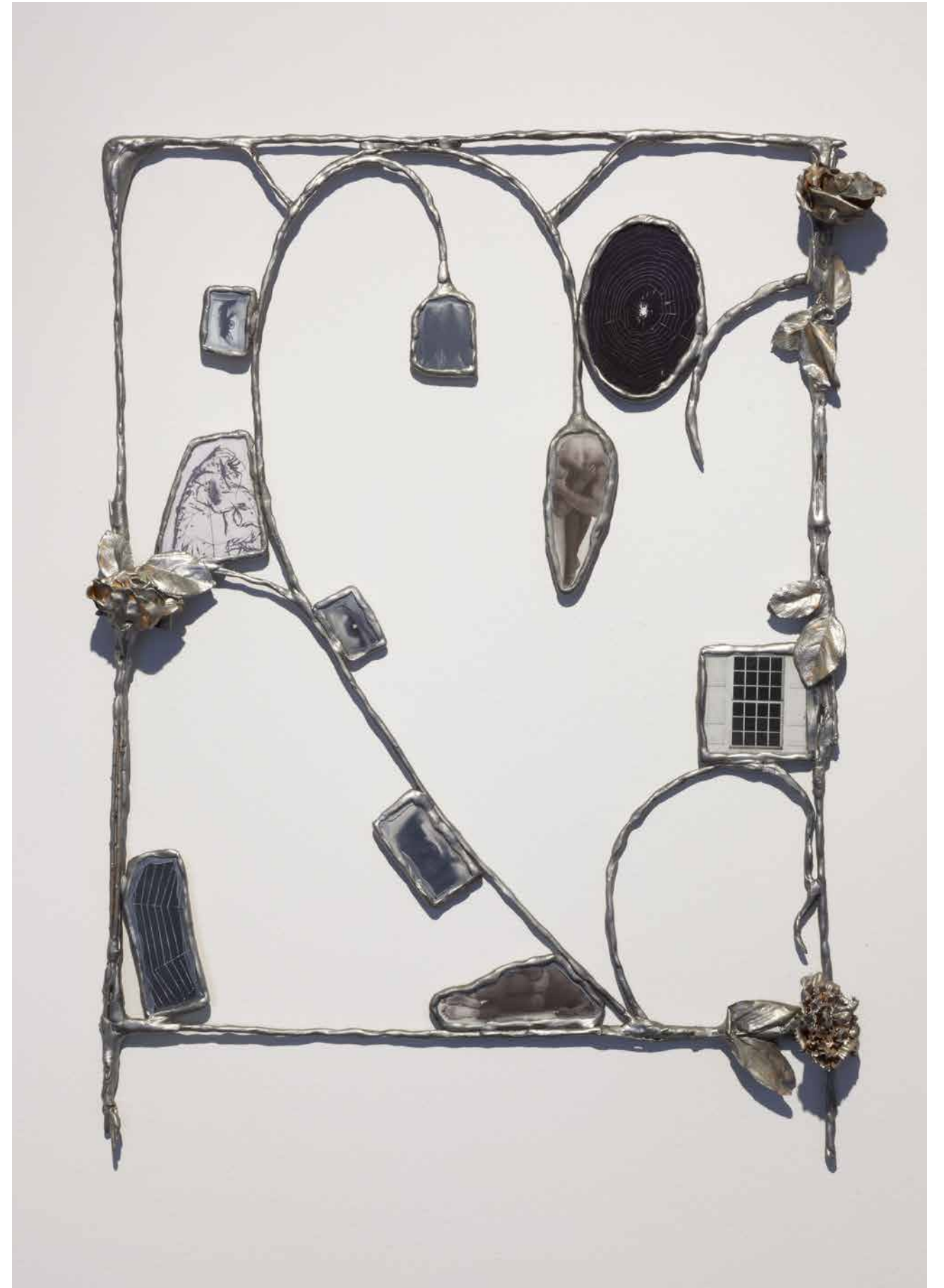
6
Untitled (88 Box)
2008





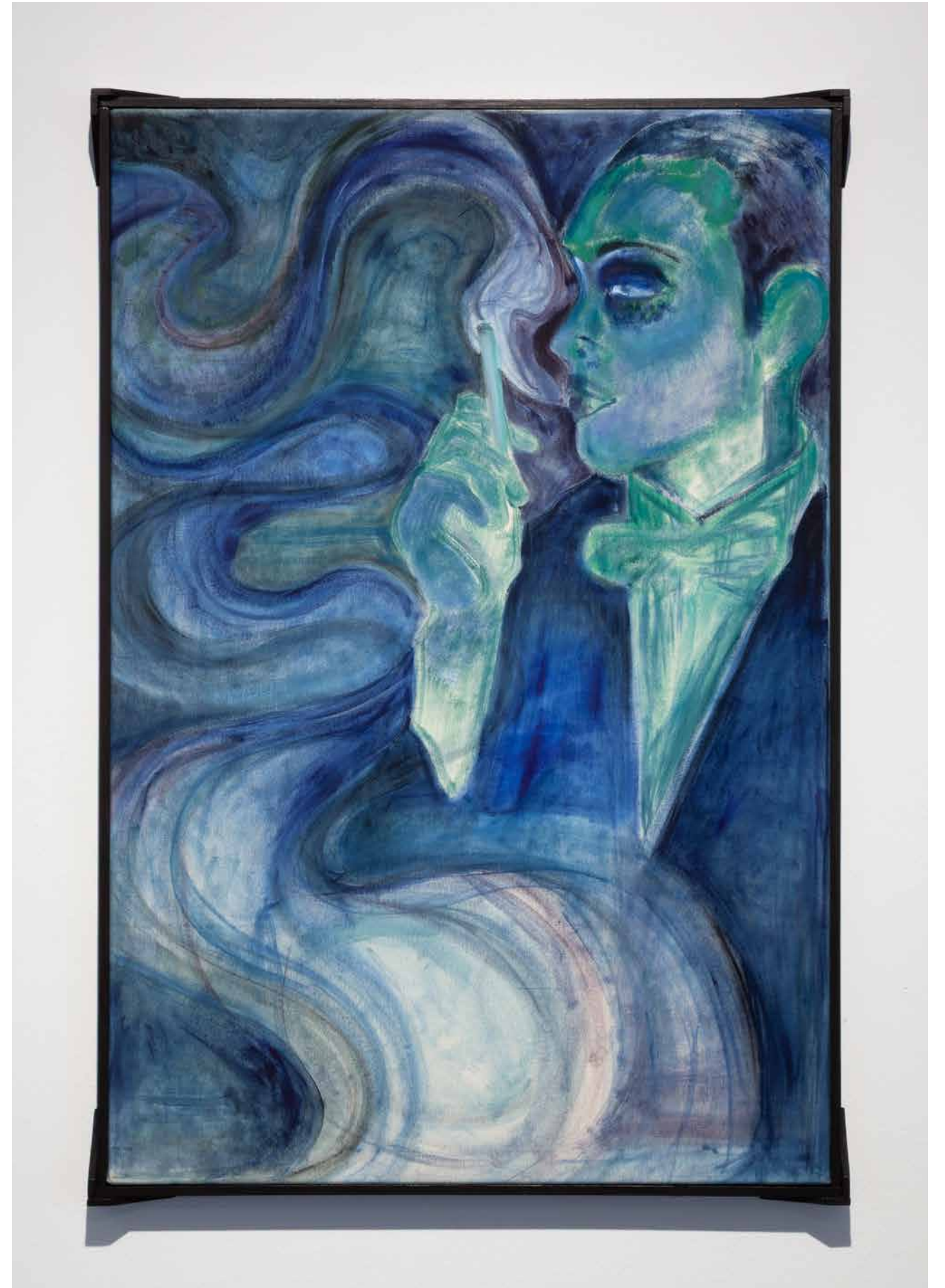
8
Arrangement
2025

Arrangement
2025





9
His kind
2025





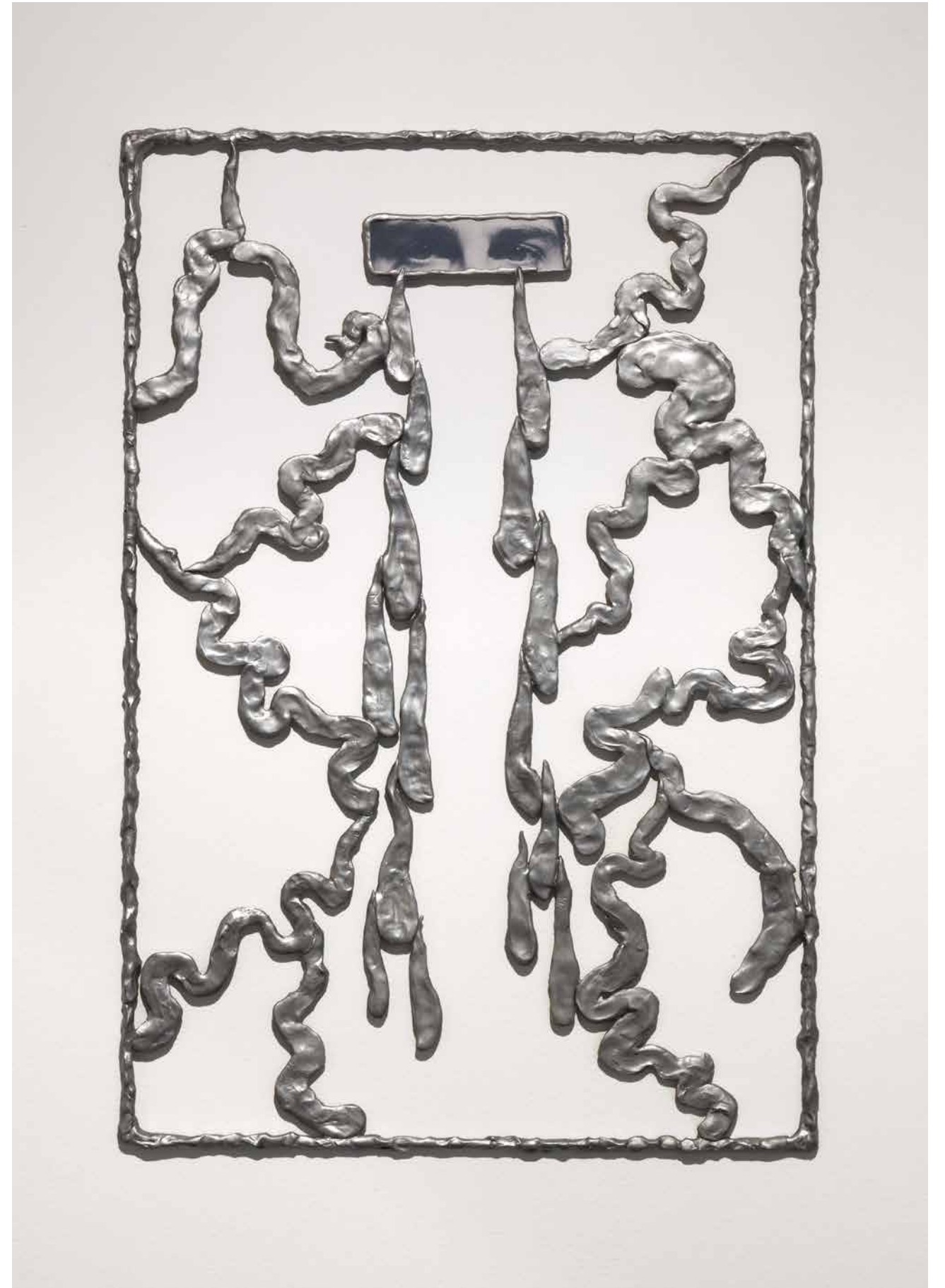


11
Waterfall
2022





12
Untitled (Looking)
2026



13
Untitled (Fringe Box)
2012











15

Untitled (White Paper Wasp's Nest)
2008



16
Untitled (Cement Shirt)
2022



17
Ghost of a Dream
2026



18
Untitled (Silver Box)
2012





19

And his kind
2026



Works in the Exhibition

All works are courtesy of the artist and the Center for Maine Contemporary Art unless otherwise indicated.

1
For Renée
2026
Wood, metal, archival tape, frames, paper, porcelain figurine, shells, flowers, metal tassels, mirror, latex and clay dust, light bulbs, paste necklace
48 x 24 x 11 inches

2
Still life with flowers
2022
Wood, chains, antlers, glass, flowers with clay dust and latex, chainmail fabric
79 x 48 x 13 inches

3
Untitled (Owl pair), 2026
Acrylic and oil on wood panel, framed
18 x 14 x 2 inches

4
Untitled (Torch)
2026
Mixed media
56 x 38 x 16 inches

5
Trident
2025
Epoxy clay, leaded paint, glass, paper, ink, metal, mirror
37 x 14 x 0.75 inches

6
Untitled (88 Box)
2008
Wood, cotton t-shirts, bottles, branch, antler, metal chain, fabric, glitter
36 x 24 x 7.5 inches

7
Entanglements
2025
Epoxy clay, paint, glass, paper, ink, metal
26.5 x 19 x 1 inches
Collection of Mark Greif

8
Arrangement
2025
Epoxy clay, paint, glass, paper, ink, metal, flowers
34 x 26 x 2.5 inches

9
His kind
2025
Oil on canvas in wood artist frame
37.25 x 25.5 x 2 inches

10
Windows
2026
Epoxy clay, glass, paper, ink, metal, flowers, metal fringe
42.5 x 25.5 x 3 inches

11
Waterfall
2022
Wood, glass, plastic chain, antlers, taxidermy egret, polyurethane foam, taxidermy forms, paint
120 x 41.5 x 36 inches

12
Untitled (Looking)
2026
Epoxy clay, paint, glass, paper, ink, metal
36 x 25.5 x 0.5 inches

13
Untitled (Fringe Box)
2012
Wood, fringe, tassels, hardware
36 x 24 x 9 inches

14
Ceremony
2026
Bronze
14.625 x 14.5 x 9 inches
Courtesy of the artist, Baldwin Gallery, and the Center for Maine Contemporary Art

15
Untitled (White Paper Wasp’s Nest)
2008
Hand-blown glass
7.75 x 16 x 10 inches

16
Untitled (Cement Shirt)
2022
Wood, plaster, paint, cement, t-shirt, light bulbs, metal, fiberglass
35 x 35 x 17 inches

17
Ghost of a Dream
2026
Acrylic and oil on canvas in artist frame (plaster, wood, flowers, latex and clay dust, paint)
23 x 22.5 x 3.75 inches

18
Untitled (Silver Box)
2012
Wood, paint, polyurethane, digital c-print, chains, metal fringe
68 x 24 x 8 inches

19
And his kind
2026
Acrylic and oil on panel in plaster, paint, and wood artist frame
33 x 26.5 x 2.5 inches

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Contributors

Marc Swanson (b. 1969) received his MFA from the Milton Avery Graduate School of the Arts at Bard College. He serves on the Board of Governors of the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, which he attended in 2000 and where he served as faculty in 2014. Swanson’s solo exhibitions include Mass MoCA, the Thomas Cole National Historic Site, the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, the Saint Louis Art Museum, the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University, the Museum of Contemporary Arts Santa Barbara, Tensta Konsthall, Baldwin Gallery, Inman Gallery, and Bellwether Gallery. His work is in numerous institutional collections, including the Bowdoin College Museum of Art, the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, the Museum of Fine Arts Houston, the Portland Museum of Art, the Perez Art Museum Miami, the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the Walker Art Center, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and many more. Swanson lives and works in Catskill, New York.

Grant Wahlquist is the Curator at the Center for Maine Contemporary Art.

Harry Tafoya is an art and music critic. He has written for Frieze, NPR Music, Art in America, Aperture, Hyperallergic, Pitchfork, and Town & Country, among other publications. He was formerly an editor at Paper. He holds an MA in Arts and Culture from Columbia University’s Graduate School of Journalism.

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