



# MARC SWANSON

*A Memorial to Ice at the Dead Deer Disco*



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MASS MoCA

THOMAS COLE



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Kristy Edmunds & Elizabeth B. Jacks

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# INTRODUCTIONS

*Kristy Edmunds*  
Director, MASS MoCA

There is something vivid and grounding in MASS MoCA's relationship with artists and their singular creative practices. Contrary to what many imagine, exhibitions and installations don't land on the museum's calendar after a 'proof of concept' is proposed and finalized, and funding obtained. Nope. It all begins at the very human scale of a curator exchanging ideas with an artist over many studio visits, meals, and discussions, where the shared belief in a project becomes a curatorial and artistic commitment to dive headlong into the ambiguities and explorations ahead. From that moment, their commitment to proceed spreads out to envelop the entire organization, and the museum becomes the 'backing band' to support how an artist's ideas will find both form and a public. Long before shape, contour, dimension, and the material life of the art is fully known, MASS MoCA's team members become expert travelers on a journey that is fueled by the spirited possibility of what it can become. With Marc Swanson, that journey resulted in an entirely new body of work—his most ambitious to date—one so vast that it led to a companion exhibition at the Thomas Cole National Historic Site, yet another collaborative relationship linking MASS MoCA to our neighbor in Catskill, New York. MASS MoCA's excellent art fabrication team facilitated the sculpture-making for both venues in our workshop and in Swanson's studio, sustaining the process of collaboration for the two exhibitions over three consecutive years.

These particular three years warrant additional comment. They happened to span the chaotic end of the Trump presidency, the staggering losses of the global coronavirus pandemic, a national reckoning with systemic racism and inequity, and the lived reality that our cultural

institutions may not make it after decades of minimal 'rainy day funds,' as well as the acceleration of natural disasters across every region of the country/planet that viscerally upended the perniciously unfounded confidence that we have 'plenty of time' to reverse climate change (if we are still even capable of absorbing scientific facts, which remains actively unclear).

While I was not in the room when Swanson and curator Denise Markonish were conceiving the project, I cannot fathom that the changing realities wrought through the circumstances briefly mentioned above did not weigh mightily along the way. All the more reason that *A Memorial to Ice at the Dead Deer Disco*





is a towering achievement in the persistence of vision, the creative manifestation of bearing witness, and the singular capacity to willingly create a gift of perspective that lives at the complexity of how the end of things might feel.

*A Memorial to Ice at the Dead Deer Disco* is resplendent. The level of material detail offers ebullience in a direct parallel with evoking full-scale lament. Walking through the space is like being amidst the visual poetic of a wailing howl suspended in stillness, and then *perfectly* interrupted by poignant wit. It is indeed a memorial in frozen ceremony, where our profound aloneness exists in equal measure with our mutual belonging to a world under permanent duress. Unmistakably, Swanson calibrates an unfolding drama through the lens of queer survival, and the tools well practiced in generating sublime relief that herald resilience, elegance, and celebration. His uncommon linkages assure that we encounter

ambiguous epiphanies from continuously unfolding juxtapositions, materials, *mis-en-scènes*, and, in the end, they crack the solar plexus (a nod to hope).

Projects like this don't just happen; they are forged out of love, the free-flowing exchange of knowledge, leaps of faith, willingness, collaboration, and vision. With that I want to acknowledge Denise Markonish, our art fab/registrarial team (Megan Tamás, Spencer Byrne-Seres, Peter Mahoney, Tavish Costello, Nina Ruelle, Emily Timmerman, Andy Slemenda, Lewis Turley, Randi Renate, Tom Friedmann, Grace Clark, and Ben Westbrook); Amy Chen, who designed this book; the writers who enlivened it (Kate Menconeri, Susannah Sayler and Edward Morris, and Jack Ferver); our excellent partners at the Thomas Cole National Historic Site (Betsy Jacks, Kate Menconeri, Amanda Malmstrom, Jennifer Greim); and Marc Swanson forever.





# Elizabeth B. Jacks

Executive Director,  
Thomas Cole National Historic Site

Thomas Cole (1801–1848) believed that art was not for mere entertainment, nor was it just “nice to have,” but rather that it was absolutely critical if there was to be any hope for what he saw as a deeply flawed human existence. That is a message that we carry forward today: art is essential. It can pierce through our complacency, our assumptions, our unthinking routines, by speaking to a different part of our brains than logical arguments alone. “Without art, Man would scarce be human,” wrote Thomas Cole in his “Lecture on Art” one hundred seventy-five years ago.

Because his yellow-brick house in Catskill, New York, was the home of an artist, it was saved from the wrecking ball in the 20th century, and opened to the public as the Thomas Cole National Historic Site in the 21st. But it was also home to at least four other artists: Frederic Church, Cole’s most famous pupil; his lesser-known student, Benjamin McConkey; his sister, Sarah Cole, who painted throughout her adult life; and Cole’s daughter, Emily Cole, who created botanical artwork and exhibited in the New Studio her father designed. This is a place that nurtures and inspires artists, both then and now. Through our many collaborations with contemporary artists, we have learned

to see this historic site and its art and history in surprising and mind-shifting new ways, especially through our *OPEN HOUSE* series, in which contemporary artists are invited to create installations within and in response to the 19th-century artist’s home and studios.

I like to imagine that Thomas Cole would have been deeply excited by the work of artist Marc Swanson, as it carries the same urgency and also the simultaneous expression of both hope and despair. Both artists notice and respond to the unchecked destruction that we humans are wreaking upon our environment—only the scale of the destruction has changed. To Marc Swanson I would like to express my heartfelt thanks. Swanson’s visionary work courageously forges difficult yet critical and needed conversations at this historic site, allowing for communal and cathartic mourning amidst environmental crisis and human loss.

The recent reawakening of this historic site as a place for living artists is due in large part to the vision of our chief curator, Kate Menconeri, and associate curator, Amanda Malmstrom, whose belief in the power of art comes through in all of the extraordinary exhibitions that they invite and create here. I would like to take this opportunity to express my profound appreciation for them and their work. I would also like to extend my sincere gratitude to the Thomas Cole Board of Trustees and the staff who have supported this project, including Matthew Alexander, Nichole Burke, Heather Christensen, Meg DiStefano, Jessica Goon, Jennifer Greim, Traci Horgen, Garry Nack, Pjeter Noci, and Heather Paroubek; and to our incredible team of Educators and Fellows: Vicente Cayuela, Sofia D’Amico, Kristen Marchetti, Oriana Tang, and Beth Wynne. Together, we thank the writers who contributed to this publication and the exceptional staff at MASS MoCA for partnering with us on this exhibition and publication—especially the senior curator and director of exhibitions, Denise Markonish, who provided leadership and expertise.



**A MONUMENT  
TO FUTURE RUINS:  
MARC SWANSON'S  
A MEMORIAL  
TO ICE AT THE  
DEAD DEER DISCO**

“A stupendous mirror of departed empires.”

— P.T. Barnum<sup>1</sup>

## Denise Markonish

Senior Curator and Director of Exhibitions,  
MASS MoCA

Marc Swanson’s work exposes the relationships between humans, culture, and the natural world, through installations that both celebrate and mourn our effect on the world around us. His new exhibitions at MASS MoCA and the Thomas Cole National Historic Site address a longing for the present and 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 that could have been avoided, but now comes with consequences beyond our control. Writer Timothy Morton refers to climate change as a “hyperobject,” something so large we cannot comprehend it and therefore distance ourselves from its effects, like climate change, and like mourning. He states “Hyperobjects invoke a terror beyond the sublime...beyond the normal scope of our comprehension.”<sup>2</sup>

It’s almost as if P.T. Barnum predicted our current moment with his “stupendous mirrors of departed empires,” a moment where the landscape as we know it will no longer exist, and we can only posit what that may look like for future generations.

*A Memorial to Ice at the Dead Deer Disco* pays tribute to both monument and celebration, but tinged with melancholy. Of the inspiration for the exhibition, Swanson states: “The two spaces I have felt the most comfortable and spiritually connected with are the nightclubs of my youth

and in the woods today.”<sup>3</sup> 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 exhibitions are also inspired by the writings of 19th-century Hudson River School painter Thomas Cole on the negative effects of development along Catskill Creek and 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. He was an early proto-environmentalist, and often advocated against the industrial development that was quickly transforming the landscape around him. He was aware of the widespread deforestation resulting from the influx of leather tanneries, mills, and the incoming railroad. This shift in land use continued in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when ice was harvested from the Hudson and shipped to New York City and the Caribbean. Together these industries led to vast development and depletion of resources in 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.

1. Bluford Adams, *E Pluribus Barnum: The Great Showman and the Making of U.S. Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 188.

2. Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 131.

3. From an email to the writer, December 16, 2021

In his 1841 *Essay on 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.”<sup>4</sup> 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. From 1827 to 1845 Cole created his most sustained series of a singular landscape. In this series, Cole paints the Catskill Creek and Mountains in the background as a landscape in transition across time, in which we see a lone canoer (*On Catskill Creek, Sunset*, 1845–47) or picnickers enjoying the bucolic view (*View on the Catskill—Early Autumn*, 1836–37) (see images on p. 28–29).<sup>5</sup> But it is an early painting from the series from 1828 to 1829 that seems most emblematic, *View Near Catskill*. In this work, Cole paints a blazing red and orange peak fall landscape; in the foreground is a young man about to go fishing, and in the

background we see smoke emerging from a chimney. These signs of human intervention become a predecessor for his works like *The Course of Empire* (1833–36), a five-painting series that showed the gradual decay of the landscape and civilization. The series cycles through what Cole titled *The Savage State*, *The Arcadian or Pastoral State*, *The Consummation of Empire*, *Destruction*, and finally, *Desolation*. The last painting is uninhabited with the remains of classical architecture—or, in Swanson’s terms, “future ruins.”

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, the speculation of *The Course of Empire* on its way to being fulfilled. Swanson sees the current Catskill landscape as a twofold memorial: to what things like ice farming and industrialization destroyed, and a future monument to a land ravaged by climate change. Therefore, at the Thomas Cole National Historic Site, Swanson takes the opportunity to reckon with 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

4. <https://thomascole.org/wp-content/uploads/Essay-on-American-Scenery.pdf>
5. One of Cole’s most painted views of the creek is actually the backyard of Swanson’s home in Catskill, which he realized after seeing a Cole painting in 2014 at the Thomas Cole National Historic Site.

BELOW: Thomas Cole, *The Course of Empire: The Savage State*, c.1834, oil on canvas, 39 ¼ × 63 ¼ in. New-York Historical Society, gift of the New-York Gallery of the Fine Arts, 1858.1



6. Thomas Cole, *Thoughts and Occurrences, 1834–1848*, March 2, 1843, Thomas Cole Papers, Box 4a, Folder 1, New York State Library, Albany.



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. This was a very common practice among Hudson River School painters who would often create paintings out of compiled sketches to create idealized, unpopulated, and unravaged scenery. 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. In his journals, Cole discussed the wonders of ice, stating: “Here + there suspended from the projecting rocks that form the *eaves[sic]* of the great gallery are groups + ranks of icicles in every variety of size + number some of them are 20 or 30 feet in length, glittering in the sun-light they formed a magnificent fringe to the dark rock... They looked like gorgeous chandeliers or the richest pendants of a Gothick[sic] Cathedral.”<sup>6</sup> These chandeliers of ice are like a prophecy for Swanson’s work which memorializes a landscape frozen in time, where the ice will never melt. In addition to sculptures, Swanson also exhibits



large wall works that include collages made from images of ice surrounded by mosaics of cut mirrors and rhinestones, adding a Victorian melancholy tinged with Hollywood glamour. Seeing these works situated inside Cole’s austere home entwines Swanson’s narrative with Cole’s, through the conflation past and present, conservation and memorial.

At MASS MoCA, Swanson expands his own icy landscape, creating 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, “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



7. <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2015/10/taxidermy-animal-habitat-dioramas/410401/>
8. [https://www.gutenberg.org/files/15043/15043-h/15043-h.htm#A\\_PHILOSOPHICAL\\_INQUIRY](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/15043/15043-h/15043-h.htm#A_PHILOSOPHICAL_INQUIRY)

natural world. Dioramas represent an attempt to make sense of nature, but they also reveal humans' deeply complicated relationship with it."<sup>77</sup> This longing becomes even more pronounced in Swanson's work as his sculptures drip with fabricated icicles, tree branches, and taxidermy animal 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. At the same time, Swanson also references notions of the sublime, which Edmund Burke described in his treatise *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*

(1757) as "whatever is fitting in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling."<sup>78</sup> This balance of beauty and fear stretches across Swanson's exhibitions at both the Cole Site and MASS MoCA.

At MASS MoCA, Swanson further breaks apart the sublime, arresting the landscape and disassembling the diorama, and instead creates a series of open structure tableaux populated





Felix Gonzalez-Torres' *Untitled (Go-Go Dancing Platform)*, 1991. This theatricality allows for a distancing, a recognition of both climate change and the grief wrought by AIDS as hyperobjects. The theatrical distances, the putting of these concepts on a stage/exhibition, are what allow us to fully see them and process their pain.

This becomes all the more palpable in the next chapter of Swanson's exhibition. Serving as a transition from one gallery to the next, at the end of the front space is a large staircase, a theatrical performance space that will serve as a site of collaboration with Swanson and choreographer/dancer Jack Ferver, conflating camp, memorial, and climate change. Ferver has previously collaborated with Swanson on *Chambre* (2015),<sup>9</sup> a theatrical production looking at notions of otherness, gender politics, celerity culture, and class division. Swanson designed sets for this production inspired by Jean Genet's play *Les Bonnes (The Maids)*, 1947, based on the Papin murder case of 1933. So, when Swanson was conceiving of *A Memorial to Ice at the Dead Deer Disco*, he wanted to create a space for Ferver to engage with. In an email exchange between Swanson and Ferver, Ferver wrote: "I'm thinking about the distance the queer artist has, an almost journalistic one, as someone who grows up being completely rejected by society. How that distance allows for a view of an end to existence that isn't nihilism, but rather an ability to see society's violent dream of full power creating a full power outage of life itself. Its toxicity is so overwhelming that it can be near impossible to cope with. Camp may indeed be able to create ventilation around our global failures, so that we can get enough objectification to orient ourselves better to our truths."<sup>10</sup>

Ferver sees this through the lens of Antonin Artaud, in particular his 1933 essay, "The Theatre and the Plague." In the text, which is an eerie predecessor to the AIDS crisis and our current dual plagues of the Covid-19 pandemic and climate change, Artaud writes "It is right that from time to time cataclysms occur which compel us to return to nature, i.e., to rediscover life. The old totemism of animals, stones, objects capable of discharging thunderbolts, costumes impregnated with bestial essences—everything, in short, that might determine, disclose, and direct the secret forces of the universe..."<sup>11</sup> This alignment of plague, nature, and theater permeates the

9. <http://www.jackferver.com/chambre>

10. From an email to Marc Swanson, May 21, 2021

11. Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, trans., Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove Press, 1958), p. 10.

by taxidermy mounts. These mounts, which are usually covered by the hide of the animal, are a pale yellow color and highlight the musculature of the deer or cat, yet are eerily devoid of details. These animals have a ghostly and tender presence. In one sculpture, two small headless deer embrace on a platform—both fighting each other off and holding one another up. In another work, two bobcats are perched inside a white frame dripping with plaster icicles and flanked by a ghostly white tree branch. Structured much like a traditional diorama with animals in the landscape, by keeping the frame open Swanson allows us to see through to other works in the room until all begin to collapse into one another to form one scene. In one corner you may see an image of Leonard Frey from the seminal 1970's queer film *The Boys in the Band*, and through another vantage point you may see shimmering curtains of Mylar and chains. The room is punctuated with theatrical lights, some directly installed onto the pedestals as a reference to

second gallery in Swanson's MASS MoCA exhibition, where he more deeply references the nightclub, and the unbridled celebration he felt as a young queer man. Swanson 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 and wholly yourself. He also remembers the flip side to this freedom, for this glamour was filled with loss and the ghosts of loved ones who died from AIDS. Swanson remembers the euphoric release of the club but also the tangible fear as the AIDS crisis became full-blown, when 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. In one corner hanging from the ceiling is a grouping of rhinestone deer antlers slowly spinning with disco lighting to create reflections across the wall. This work is also a nod to Swanson's earlier pieces of rhinestone deer from the early 2000s, in which he queers the traditional masculine hunting trophy. Here

the antlers become an extended memorial to Swanson's own past, as well as a eulogy to the future loss of nature. Also, in this room is a large sculpture inspired by a pietà with a deer standing in for the Christ figure. The deer is vulnerably prone on its back, while a bodiless structure made of draped plaster bandages reaches its arms out and tenderly holds it up. This figure is reminiscent of Mary but also of John Singer Sargent's painting *Fumée d'ambre gris* (*Smoke of Ambergris*), 1880, with its central

BELOW: Rehearsals for Jack Ferver, *Is Global Warming Camp? and other forms of theatrical distance at the end of the world*, Summer 2022





12. John Berger, *About Looking* (New York: Vintage International, 1980) p. 4.

13. <https://grist.org/article/what-the-queer-community-brings-to-the-fight-for-climate-justice/>

14. Cole, "Essay on American Scenery"

ABOVE: John Singer Sargent, *Funée d'ambre gris (Smoke of Amberggris)*, 1880, oil on canvas. Acquired by Sterling Clark, 1914. The Clark Art Institute, 1955.<sup>15</sup>

figure holding up her garment, which drapes in white around her head. What is so moving here is that the deer is not merely limp, but its neck muscles and head are striving for survival. It is hard not to conjure John Berger's essay, "Why Look at Animals?" in particular the statement that "animals first entered the imagination as messengers and promises."<sup>12</sup> Here the deer promises to remember as it is surrounded by a sentinel of other draped plaster sculptures, all of which reference gravestone statuary, and become like witnesses to this struggle. In this singular gesture 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."<sup>13</sup> This shared vision for equity and sustainability face off in Swanson's show with the mourning of both past and future.

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 evident the construction of nature, and how the disco isn'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. Thomas Cole once again makes this evident, writing "But American associations are not so much about the past as of the present and the future...in looking over the uncultivated scene, the mind can travel far into futurity. Where the wolf roams, the plough shall glisten; on the gray crag shall rise temple and tower; mighty deeds shall be done in the yet pathless wilderness; and poets yet unborn shall sanctify the soil."<sup>14</sup> 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.

**Thomas Cole, excerpt from *The Lament of the Forest*, 1838**

Our doom is near: behold from east to west  
The skies are darkened by ascending smoke;  
Each hill and every valley is become  
An altar unto Mammon, and the gods  
Of man's idolatry—the victims we.  
Missouri's floods are ruffled as by storm,  
And Hudson's rugged hills at midnight glow  
By light of man-projected meteors.  
We feed ten thousand fires: in our short day  
The woodland growth of centuries is consumed.

A few short years!—these valleys, greenly clad,  
These slumbering mountains, resting in our arms,  
Shall naked glare beneath the scorching sun,  
And all their wimpling rivulets be dry.  
No more the deer shall haunt these bosky glens,  
Nor the pert squirrel chatter near his store.  
A few short years!—our ancient race shall be,  
Like Israel's, scattered 'mong the tribes of men.

Thomas Cole, excerpts from "The Lament of the Forest," 1838, in Thomas Cole's Poetry, ed. Marshall B. Tymn (Liberty Cap Books, York, PA, 1972), p. 112.





# WHAT LIGHT THAT IS LEFT

*Jack Ferwer*

Imagine you are nine years old and something bad has happened at school and something worse is going to happen when you get home. It's December and it's cold and it's getting dark tonight because it is going to snow, and you are walking home and seeing kids running into their houses and you are seeing houses that don't have kids. Some houses have cars parked in front and some haven't gotten back from work yet. You have seen all of these houses before. This is the house that has the cone-shaped hedge and this is the house that always has brown patches of grass in the summer. This house is where the best candy is at Halloween and this house is where you see a deer hung upside down with its ribs splayed shortly after Halloween. All of these houses look different, but they all look the same. Imagine you are nine years old, walking home feeling very lonely and wishing you were dead, and noticing how so many of these houses have a lantern on their front porch or by their front door. Who is the lantern for? It is not for you. Except on Halloween when you are in a costume and they don't know who you are. Some of these lanterns have a fire inside them. The flame is fake. It's just a flickering yellow and red light bulb to look like a flame inside of its glass house. When you are hurt you are told it is your fault and it feels better to go along with this because it gives you a sense of

control. But now, looking at these fake flames, you question that. You wanted kids to like you. You wanted to have friends. You had tried to be nice to everyone. You had been good. You really had. You don't understand why your peers hate you, teachers ignore you, your parents are uneasy. But you have been told it is your fault. These fake flames tell you otherwise. They are so fake they are hilarious. And the people who got them think they are charming. And now you know how dumb most things are.

Decades later, you and your collaborator will scream over these electric flame lanterns. The "camp" of them, how they were used at gay bars, and you will be praised or criticized for using them in your art show that remembers the dead deer and hidden places in the woods and haunted mirrors and dead queers.

Did you know that across from my apartment in Brooklyn there are these two queens and outside of their building they put an electric flame lantern? It stays on all night. I've sat in my window smoking and looking at it and crying and thinking about too many things. It's on right now as I'm writing this at 2:04 am because I can't sleep, and I'm thinking of your artwork and I'm thinking about grief and I'm thinking about non-consensual reality and I'm so tired and I miss that you don't live





where you used to live because we would be neighbors and maybe we could walk by the East River...but that, like so many things, didn't time out right.

Marc Swanson is a visual artist who is able to craft feelings of loneliness and longing for the melancholic queer that is frequently found by rivers or late at night. The woods themselves go with Swanson, because Swanson is able to call upon them as protection for those of us who need their mystery close as we walk in his dioramas. In our encounters with his sculptures we can also find glints of a queen dreaming of the Hollywood screen that she will only ever get to watch and never participate in. But perhaps it's better that way. Don't meet your idols, they say.

What's that Stanley Cavell quote? Something about stars being dead and we only see the light of them created while filming.

The stars are beautiful aren't they?

Marc once told me to go out and look at them when I was having a bad time. I always see Orion first. I have since I was nine years old.

Which constellation do you first see?





# SWANSON'S DARK ECOLOGICAL DISCO

**“The ecological society to come, then, must be a bit haphazard, broken, lame, twisted, ironic, silly, sad... There needs to be this ambiguous space between art and kitsch, beauty and disgust... A world of seduction and repulsion rather than authority.”**

—Timothy Morton<sup>1</sup>

**“What is dark ecology? It is ecological awareness, dark-depressing. Yet ecological awareness is also dark-uncanny. And strangely it is dark-sweet.”**

—Timothy Morton<sup>2</sup>

## *Sayler/Morris*

In *Dark Ecology*, Timothy Morton articulates three sequential phases of ecological awareness—grief, bewilderment, and love—and there is no cheating. You have to do them in order. As Maggie Nelson wrote in reference to coping with climate despair, “...one must move through negative affects and not around them.”<sup>3</sup> So, by this logic, you can’t really get to a profound ecological bewilderment without going through grief, and you can’t really get to a profound ecological love—meaning a feeling of intimacy and care with fellow beings great and small, even sentient and non-sentient—without going through bewilderment. It’s just the price you have to pay. Marc Swanson’s installations at MASS

MoCA and the Thomas Cole National Historic Site, *A Memorial to Ice at the Dead Deer Disco*, follow this trajectory. It is a mise-en-scène of the process of deep ecological attunement in our time of the sixth extinction.<sup>4</sup>

In creating this work, Swanson takes a novel and poignant approach to the problem of representing what Morton calls a hyperobject. A hyperobject is a real thing in the world that has real effects, but which he describes as being “massively distributed in time and space such that we can’t directly see or touch” it. The hyperobject involves “such knotty relationships between gigantic and intimate

1. Timothy Morton, *All Art is Ecological* (London: Penguin Random House, 2018), p. 17.
2. Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), p. 5.
3. Maggie Nelson, *On Freedom* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2021), p. 203.
4. The sixth extinction is the even larger hyperobject in which climate change is embedded and, for us,





is a more effective frame for understanding affects of our present ecological crisis because it better captures the stakes and urgency. However, given that Swanson frames his own work in terms of the climate crisis, we have adopted that as the primary signifier in this essay.

5. Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects*, as quoted in a footnote from Emily Eliza Scott, "Archives of the Present-Future: On Climate Change and Representational Breakdown," <https://averyreview.com/issues/16/archives-of-the-present-future>.
6. Jodi Dean, "The Anamorphic Politics of Climate Change," *e-flux journal* 69 (January 2016), [www.e-flux.com/journal/the-anamorphic-politics-of-climate-change](http://www.e-flux.com/journal/the-anamorphic-politics-of-climate-change).

scales that the social and psychic tools we use to measure them are utterly confounded.<sup>75</sup> Climate change is Morton's paradigmatic example of a hyperobject. It is everywhere and affects everything, yet can't be seen or even independently verified. It is incomprehensibly complex and overwhelming and yet also crushingly intimate, because it is there in your backyard with your prematurely blossoming plum trees and in your car keys too, as you turn the ignition.

One can appreciate the value of defining such things as climate change and the sixth extinction as hyperobjects when presented with the problem of how to represent them—a problem with which we have been consistently concerned in our own work as artists. How exactly do you represent something that you can't see or touch and that exists on both gigantic and intimate scales simultaneously? Jodi Dean argues that one way is by "escaping the fascination of the picture by adopting another perspective—a partial or partisan perspective, the perspective of a part."<sup>76</sup>

Emily Eliza Scott elaborates on Dean's insight by focusing on archival assemblages, such as Amy Balkin's *A People's Archive of Sinking and Melting* (2011–present), that are suitably "fractured and muddy" (Scott's words) for this task.<sup>77</sup>

Swanson takes a different approach. His work is also a type of assemblage, or more precisely a bricolage, but it is not archival in its impulse. On the contrary, it is both personal and allegorical—an odd-fellows combination that in an uncanny way links the work stylistically to the painter Thomas Cole, despite the lack of any other formal resemblance between the two. (Swanson has said that he and Cole have a kind of haunted connection within the forests around Catskill, New York, where Cole painted and where Swanson has his home and studio.) Swanson's work is representational while also escaping the fascination of the picture, yet not in a way that emphasizes a partial or a partisan approach, as in Scott's examples. Swanson's work is effective, because rather than seeking to represent climate change from the outside



as an object for contemplation, he represents climate change from the inside as an experience—in terms of climate change’s aesthetic effects, which, in fact, is the only way that we come to know it. A hyperobject can only be understood through attunement (it can’t be seen or touched, etc.) and this attunement is a highly personal, intimate process. Swanson’s work gives us a richly vulnerable exposure to this.

The first step in this process is grief. Thomas Cole felt it too—“...the ravages of the axe are daily increasing,” he lamented in 1836.<sup>8</sup> Cole’s brand of environmentalism, with its emphasis on the preservation of putatively wild places and its ignorance of the fullness of indigenous life, can feel outdated and privileged from today’s perspective. Yet all grief is honest grief. The destruction of forests and the undermining of ecological integrity was a real trauma for Cole that he poured into his painting. He keenly felt the impact of unchecked industrialization when few others at the time could really see it. The effect this produced in Cole, which he translated into his paintings, is absolutely immutable in

time, and has, therefore, more solidity than any mere “fact.” For, contrary to what we customarily assume, facts are far less durable than emotions, particularly those produced by trauma. Traumatic emotions are carried in the collective memory of present and future bodies, whereas facts are detached and constantly mutating through their interpretations, erasures, and resuscitations.

What matters to us now, to paraphrase artist Walid Raad, is not so much the accuracy of any detail about Cole himself or any particular correspondence between the landscapes he created and some “actual” place, but rather the complex mediations by which these facts acquire their immediacy.<sup>9</sup> (Walter Benjamin: “To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was.’ It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.”<sup>10</sup>) This is how artists engaging with contemporary issues also become *de facto* historians—whether or not that is their intention. The thick air of Cole’s grief is the medium that allows his voice to reach Swanson today and allows Swanson

7. Scott, “Archives of the Present-Future: On Climate Change and Representational Breakdown.”

8. Thomas Cole, “Essay on American Scenery,” *The American Monthly Magazine*, vol. 7, January 1836, p. 12.

9. Walid Raad interviewed in *Bomb* magazine, “Walid Raad by Alan Gilbert,” October 1, 2002, #81, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/walid-raad/>.

10. Walter Benjamin, “On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress,” in *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 474.



11. Many reviews of Swanson's work mention kitsch in some way. The phrase "illicit allure" in this context is taken from a description of Swanson's work on the Saatchi Gallery website: [www.saatchigallery.com/artist/marc\\_swanson](http://www.saatchigallery.com/artist/marc_swanson), accessed April 2022.

12. Nelson uses this term throughout *On Freedom*. In a footnote, she connects it to the notion of the future perfect in relation to psychoanalysis, citing Laplanche and Pontalis; and to the future anterior or "hauntological time" in relation to blackness, citing Simone White in particular.

13. Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet, trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 63.

to speak back. Swanson's work is (in part) a further translation of that conversation, imperfect, as is all translation. It is not just Swanson explaining global warming and its relation to the AIDS crisis to a stunned Cole. It is a passionate Cole explaining the love of place to a disoriented Swanson. Cole tuning to Swanson; Swanson tuning to Cole. Climate change tuning them both.

In Swanson's exhibitions, we attune to this grief—the same grief in a way as Cole's, albeit translated into our contemporary idiom—first through the melancholic landscape painting that initiates our path through the space; then through the personal snapshots of club scenes and people lost in time for Swanson; and then through the unrelenting gaze of the ghostly animal forms present at both MASS MoCA and the Cole Site. The video works at both venues also suggest loss, with their flickering emphasis on transient moments.

The next step is the bewilderment. At MASS MoCA, this begins to sink in as one makes one's way from the initial, more brightly lit, section of the installation into its darker interior; or at the Cole Site where one encounters a diorama built into a window containing the rotating head of a deer covered in black rhinestones. If one only vibes the spooky in Swanson's work, one is only seeing its oft-commented-upon kitsch elements and their putative illicit allure."<sup>11</sup> Yet, the weirdness here is much more profound. It is, in part, the weirdness of paranoia. Both the AIDS crisis and the climate crisis fuel such paranoia. This goes with the hyperobject territory. (It's there but can't be seen; everything is possibly a symptom; the future becomes wretchedly uncertain.) It is, in part, a temporal weirdness—the tense of the future anterior, the bafflement of what Nelson calls "folded time."<sup>12</sup> This is expressed in the very title of the exhibition. "Memorial" (human past) "Ice" (geologic time) "Dead" (human future) "Deer" (animal time) "Disco" (space of timelessness). It is, in part, a weirdness wrought by the tension between art (exquisite sculptures) and kitsch (cheap lanterns) and between seduction and repulsion; between the everyday (household framed photos) and the dreamlike (fragmented mirrors, dangling antlers)—a scene not unlike the macabre dance toward the end of Werner Herzog's *Nosferatu the Vampyre* (1979), where the bourgeois extravagantly pursue the business-as-usual pleasures of dining, dancing, and sex within the knowledge that they are each marked to die.

Most palpably, the sense of the uncanny derives from the animal forms and their gaze. Derrida pointed out that perhaps the most unassailable, if faintly ridiculous, distinction between humans and other animals is that only humans wear clothes.<sup>13</sup> By using taxidermy forms to represent animals in the installations, Swanson has rendered the animals more naked than naked. They are as raw as we are clothed and cooked in our delusions. And yet for all that, the animals in Swanson's installations are alive and watching. John Berger has pointed out that when a human is seen by an animal, "...he is being seen as his surroundings are seen by him."<sup>14</sup> This leads to an unsettling dynamic in which the animal is both seemingly indifferent—it "does not reserve a special look" for you—and yet is also somehow the "bearer of secrets" for your ears only. It is *the deer's* disco one is walking into, after all—and one is forced into that libidinal economy and language. How will you dance? Many Indigenous







14. John Berger, "Why Look at Animals?" in *About Looking* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), p. 5.

15. See, for example, accounts in Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's *Cannibal Metaphysics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014) and Giorgio Agamben's *The Open: Man and Animal* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

16. The last words in Nelson's *On Freedom*, p. 218.



cosmo-visions hold that in the beginning there was no separation between humans and animals, and many Judeo-Christian apocalyptic visions see animals and humans reunited—banquet tables with hybrid figures of human bodies and animal heads.<sup>15</sup> There is a strange viscosity to the uncanniness in the rooms, a stickiness that remains as the visitor moves from element to element in the installations.

Yet, at the same time that the installations carry this deep allegorical gravitas, they are also clearly deeply personal (Cole, too, managed this trick). The video is phone-captured and depicts places that are clearly of personal import, moments that feel like memories that could perhaps belong to us but don't. The framed photographs, too, are not from one's own life, but another's, and yet feel familiar. The entire symbology of deer, spider webs, waterfalls, and movie stars is another's personal imaginary. The space of both exhibitions feels both homey and strange, compounded by the industrial architecture at MASS MoCA, as compared to the domestic site at the Cole House. (This is the very definition of uncanny, in German, *unheimlich*, un-home-like.) It is as if one is inside Swanson's psyche as it attunes to climate change through the memory of the AIDS crisis. The submerged feeling one has walking beneath many of the installation elements, such as the stairs to a lighted empty

stage at MASS MoCA or two rhinestone deer peering out from Cole's writing room, contributes to this.

So, how is it we arrive at love and sweetness within certain sections of the installations, especially within the darkest dimmed spaces? This is the true magic of the work—a mysterious transformation. The hypnotic, calming sway of deer antlers projected onto the wall as shadows; the prismatic shimmer cast by fragmented mirrors, illuminating our own shadows as we approach a work; the imitation of Michelangelo's *Pietas* with a deer in place of Christ—a sculpture that by rights should be preposterous, but which magically works as tender, beautiful, apt (with just a hint of the silly undercutting the sublime)—how do these things come off, particularly when they are sharing space at MASS MoCA with Joseph Beuys' heavy, Germanic *Lightning with Stag in its Glare* (*Blitzschlag mit Lichtschein auf Hirsch*) (1958–85)? We cannot say exactly (this is the magic), but believe it has to do with the deeply personal nature of the work—its ability to operate on both intimate and grand scales. Finally, someone has managed to represent not the abstraction of climate or its futurity, but rather its penetrating effect on the loving human in the present moment. *All heart; no escape.*<sup>16</sup>

**Thomas Cole, excerpt from “Lecture on American Scenery,”  
delivered before the Catskill Lyceum, April 1, 1841**

I know, full well, that the forest must be felled for fuel and tillage, and that roads and canals must be constructed, but I contend that...where it is not *necessary* to destroy a tree or a grove, the hand of the woodman should be checked, and even the consideration, which alas, weighs too heavily with us, of a few paltry dollars, should be held as nought in comparison with the pure and lasting pleasure that we enjoy...

Among the inhabitants of this village, he must be dull indeed, who has not observed how, within the last ten years, the beauty of its environs has been shorn away; year by year the groves that adorned the banks of the Catskill wasted away; but in one year more fatal than the rest the whole of that noble grove by Van Vechten’s mill, through which wound what is called the Snake Road, and at the same time the ancient grove of cedar, that shadowed the Indian burying-ground, were cut down. I speak of these in particular, because I know that many of you remember them well; they have contributed to your enjoyment as well as mine; their shades were long the favorite walk and ride...This is a spot that in Europe would be considered as one of the gems of the earth; it would be sought for by the lovers of the beautiful, and protected by law from desecration.

But its beauty is gone, and that which a century cannot restore is cut down; what remains? Steep, arid banks, incapable of cultivation, and seamed by unsightly gullies, formed by the waters which find no resistance in the loamy soil. Where once was beauty, there is now barrenness.

Thomas Cole, excerpt from “Lecture on American Scenery,” delivered before the Catskill Lyceum, April 1, 1841, published in *The Northern Light* (May 1841), p. 25–26.



# A CONVERSATION WITH MARC SWANSON

*Kate Menconeri*

Chief Curator and Director of Curatorial Affairs,  
Contemporary Art & Fellowship, Thomas Cole  
National Historic Site

April 20, 2022

**Kate Menconeri: How and why did you first become interested in Thomas Cole?**

Marc Swanson: Nine years ago I bought a house and moved to Catskill, New York. I went to an exhibition at the Thomas Cole National Historic Site about Cole and Frederic Church.<sup>1</sup> The show included drawings they had done together, from when Church was Cole's student. One of the drawings was of Catskill Creek, a location where I had spent a lot of time because the house my partner, Joe, and I bought was on four acres along the creek. I looked at the drawing on view, and I said to Joe, "I think this is our backyard!" That fact was confirmed by an educator at the Site, who said it was Cole's favorite place to paint.

At the time, I was feeling stuck, reckoning with how I wanted to evolve as an artist. I'd left New York City, and was feeling conflicted about that. I didn't want to feel disconnected from the art world, yet I knew I needed time and space to change everything. I'm a big believer in serendipity and coincidence, so when I arrived in Catskill, after seeing that drawing of my backyard, I decided to look

into Cole more deeply. What are the chances that we would be able to purchase this house that happened to be right where Cole not only painted, but regularly walked and spent time?

**KM: Why does Cole matter to you now, in this moment?**

MS: I was born in New Britain, Connecticut, and grew up in New Hampshire. I was aware of the Hudson River School painters through the New Britain Museum of American Art and the Wadsworth Atheneum in Connecticut, as well as at the Currier Museum in New Hampshire and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. So, after moving to Catskill I bought a book about the Hudson River School. I had always assumed that these painters were trying to paint a landscape as best they could, before cameras, and that some were better than others. But reading that book blew all of that out of the water. They were much more in line with the Transcendentalists. Cole in particular launched this new American landscape movement that was *respected* and seen as important by the intelligentsia in the art world at the time, when Anglo-European art was the canon. At the same

1. *Master, Mentor, Master: Thomas Cole & Frederic Church*, April 30–November 2, 2014, Thomas Cole National Historic Site, Catskill, NY.





time, his concern for the landscape was similar to writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. With this research, I realized that Cole spent much of his important years as an artist in Catskill, and that he's buried in the town's graveyard—that felt crazy, that it was all right here!

From 2000 to 2003, I went to Bard College for graduate school and was familiar with the Hudson River Valley. After my first visit to the Thomas Cole Site, I became fascinated and went to see more of his work at the Albany Institute of History & Art, and read his journals at the New York State Museum. I thought I might make some outdoor sculptures on the creek, but I ended up being more engaged with how Cole thought, the melancholy, and his views on the natural environment. The Cole show at the Metropolitan Museum reinforced the many

parallels between the way I was thinking about climate change in the present and how Cole was thinking about industrial development in his own time.<sup>2</sup>

**KM: Yes, *Thomas Cole's Journey: Atlantic Crossings* at the Met was such an important exhibition that illuminated Cole's thinking about the natural environment. Cole was direct about his proto-environmentalist views. He advocated for living in balance within, and reverence for, the natural world; he would not have been in favor of further expansion and Manifest Destiny. He moved to the United States with his family in 1825, as economic migrants who had been displaced by the industrial revolution. What he found here, from 1825 to 1848, was increasingly similar to what he had witnessed in his childhood in England.**

2. *Thomas Cole's Journey: Atlantic Crossings*, January 30–May 13, 2008, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

MS: I think the way Cole painted is really interesting—being semi-self-taught, there's an earnestness to what he wants to say in the paintings, and the way he uses pastiche to communicate his ideas fascinates me. Learning this made me interested in Cole as a person, which in turn led to spending more time down at the creek.

KM: Cole loved Catskill Creek. This tributary of the Hudson River captured his imagination, and he painted it more than any other landscape over the course of fifteen years. When you look at all of his Catskill Creek paintings together, there is a cyclical story about a landscape in transition and the impact industry had on the land. Look at *View on the Catskill - Early Autumn* (1836–37), which portrays a mother and child along the creek, coexisting and very small within the landscape, in contrast to *River in the Catskills* (1843), in which Cole paints the same landscape, but now the trees have been cut down, there's a man standing with an axe, and there's smoke and a train running through the once-verdant scene. Some people feel that the Hudson River School painters were the “*National*

*Geographic*” photographers of their time, as you were saying, but Cole often embraced allegory in order to paint what he *wanted* the landscape to be, not what he actually saw. At the time he was painting, the landscape was neither wild nor pristine. There were communities of people living in the area dating back thousands of years, but also, during Cole's time in Catskill, new commercial industry was rapidly encroaching in the form of tanneries, mills, iron foundries, and the railroad. What's so resonant to me is the way he used his paintbrush and pen to advocate for balance between the natural and built worlds, expressing a warning about unchecked industrial development and the resulting deforestation.

Of Catskill Creek, he writes in his journal on August 1, 1836: “Last evening, I took a walk up the valley of the Catskill above Austin's Mill where the Railroad is now making. This was once a favorite walk; but the charm of quietness + solitude is gone. It is still lovely. Man cannot remove its mountains + he has not yet felled *all* the woods + the stream will have its course. If men were not blind + insensible to the

LEFT: Thomas Cole, *View on the Catskill—Early Autumn*, 1836–37, oil on canvas, 39 × 63 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift in memory of Jonathan Sturges by his children, 1895, 95.13.3





3. Thomas Cole, *Thoughts and Occurrences*, August 1, 1836, New York State Library, Manuscripts and Special Collections, Thomas Cole Papers, SC10635, Box 4a, folder 1.

RIGHT: Thomas Cole, *River in the Catskills*, 1843, oil on canvas, 27 1/2 x 40 3/8 in. Museum of Fine Arts Boston, gift of Martha C. Karolik for the M. and M. Karolik Collection of American Paintings, 1815–1865, 47.1201

**beauty of nature the great works necessary for the purposes of commerce might be carried on without destroying it, and at times might even contribute to her charms by rendering her more accessible—but it is not so—they desecrate whatever they touch.”<sup>3</sup>**

MS: I’m fascinated by how Cole’s writings and paintings were concurrent to the development of the Erie Canal. I’ve heard the Erie Canal referred to as the internet, or Silicon Valley, of its time, in how it opened up trade from New York City and Albany to the rest of the country. I often think about how happy Cole would be if he came back now, seeing that the development didn’t get much bigger, that there’s so much protected land, and that the land that was once clear-cut is now covered with trees. So much of what Cole disliked has seemingly been reversed (visually, at least).

**KM: To dive deeper into this history, you did a residency at Platte Clove, Elka Park, NY—can you tell me what that was like?**

MS: The Catskill Center for Conservation and Development has a residency program at the Platte Clove Reserve. When I applied, I requested a time that would be after the summer tourist crowds. So, I ended up there in September, by myself, living in a tiny cabin for a week. There was no running water, it was heated by wood, and it had an outhouse. There was a lot of day-to-day work, like going down in the morning to get a big pot of water to boil, stacking wood, etc. In many ways, it felt similar to how I imagine Cole lived. Every morning I would hike to the beautiful waterfall alone. I had every intention of making artwork there, but all I did was walk in the woods. After a couple of days, I stopped caring about the view, and started really looking at what was there. I felt so connected to this landscape—my landscape and Cole’s. I had a profound, spiritual experience. I felt at one with the woods and the forest, in a way I had not done since I was a kid.

I had previously read about the idea that there’s no such thing as nature, that Romantic notion of how we think of it as an “other,” or outside





LEFT: A view of the Catskill Creek on Marc Swanson's property. Photo by Marc Swanson

being a gay person, a queer person, I see how taxonomies affected the way people were categorized. This conversation around nature as “other,” along with notions of wild spaces, connects with the notion of queerness. A great majority of us have never spent time in a wild space in our lives, yet anything I consider “wild space” is actually managed space. We are at a tipping point where we have to vehemently protect nature, not just what we call nature. I would argue that there are no real wild places left. Though there are places that are wild, that have hardly been explored, they’re owned by somebody or some country, and they’ve been mapped. We “manage” things. Animals were hunted to extinction globally in the 19th century, and we have a false sense of security because of what is back, that we saved things. But now we’re in a new mass extinction, where conservation efforts are proving to be futile. What is alarming about the extinction that’s happening now is that we don’t even know what’s causing half of it, never mind how rapid it is.

**KM: How did you come up with the title *A Memorial to Ice at the Dead Deer Disco*, and how does ice factor into your work?**

MS: I was really inspired by the icicles at Kaaterskill Falls in the Catskills. I started making work referencing those icicles because they were so beautiful and also pointed to climate change. Ice is always used as a canary in a coal mine to determine how quickly the planet is warming and the polar caps are melting. Ice in the Northeast, however, is temporary, forming on the river and then going away naturally with the seasons, so you’d never think to memorialize ice on the Hudson River. But the Arctic ice melt and thawing permafrost are critical for the survival of certain species and to prevent rising sea levels.

When I came back from Platte Clove and started conceptualizing this project, I had a feeling of déjà vu, that my experience in nature was similar to how I felt when I was younger after I left New Hampshire for Boston. I came out, went to nightclubs, and felt so at home. Like nature, the nightclubs were the other place I felt connected, at one with everything—it was like, oh my god, I found this, I want this to last forever! Those worlds were run by queer people, who weren’t being run out of those places, they were being celebrated. It was a profound spiritual experience. But it was also

ourselves. My experience at Platte Clove was the first time I did not feel “other.” I felt a part of it. Part of me wanted to stay there forever, in that moment. But then I had this very sad, melancholic, Cole-like moment, where I thought: how long will this last? Will I be the last generation to have this kind of experience? What do I need to do to help save this? What can I do as one person? I was trying to stay in the moment, but was propelled into the ruins of the landscape of the future.

**KM: You connected so deeply with the space of the forest, but were simultaneously aware that it—that we—are under threat. “Nature,” as we are taught to understand it, is a cultural construction—we know it is mediated. Yet, we live in this physical natural world, this living ecosystem, that we are not separate from, but that we are made of; we are made of the same stuff as the stars.**

**Nature plays a prevalent role in *A Memorial to Ice at the Dead Deer Disco*. Can you talk more about this idea of a memorial—to ice and landscape?**

MS: My work is about nature and memorial, but not via scientific analysis. Instead, it comes from an emotional and spiritual place. I like using natural history dioramas as reference points. I’m interested in how they were intended for “education,” Social Darwinism, etc. However,

the height of the AIDS crisis. When I moved to Boston, and was working in a nightclub, I remember getting a flyer from the Gay Men's Health Crisis that said: "The only known forms of safe sex are dry kissing, no tongue, or mutual masturbation with gloves." So here I am, I just turned eighteen the day before I moved into my apartment, and I'm ready to take on the world, yet the specter of AIDS was haunting these nightclubs.

Though these queer spaces were being decimated, they were also the site of celebration. This is where our community was. It was an intense melancholic feeling—like being exuberant, connected, and feeling amazing, while being pulled out of the revelry by fear. I would see a beautiful boy I wanted to talk to, and would wonder if he had AIDS. No one knew. I worked with people who had AIDS, and some really intense things happened, with both friends and family. It was a heavy time, but there was still no

place I would rather have been. Now that I'm older and in a very different situation in my life, there's no place I'd rather be than in the forest. But nature, much like nightclubs with AIDS, reinforces fear of climate change. This all led to the exhibition title. I thought the show should be called *A Memorial to Ice* or *The Dead Deer Disco*. Then I realized it was both of these things—*A Memorial to Ice at the Dead Deer Disco*.

**KM: The intersection of these places where you feel most connected is deeply profound. In both places, threat leads to massive loss, which is palpable in the exhibitions.**

MS: I'm interested in how recognizing the shared culture of these places also collapses time. We are now aware of the effect of fossil fuels on our planet. We have ignored this inevitability, just as we ignored AIDS. When I moved to Boston in 1987, AIDS was decimating whole communities, and nothing was happening on a governmental level. Not surprisingly, some of the same people in government are still involved. AIDS isn't over, but more is known about it. Hopefully, we'll move into a similar place with climate change, where we don't have to be so freaked out. But unfortunately, there's no good news right now.

**KM: Many of your sculptures and environments have an experiential and theatrical aesthetic. The thick materiality of plaster comeslingles with ephemeral gestures, and there is a dynamic play between what can and cannot be seen, complete with stage sets and dramatic lighting. Do you see your work as having performative elements?**

MS: My work has always had a strong autobiographical content, yet I also really like natural history and museum displays, as well as retail displays and theatricality. It's been a challenge to make work that feels personal. But I love to lean into the artifice of these tropes. I think maybe as a gay man I had to recognize artifice to survive, I had to celebrate something that looked so close to reality, yet was theatrically removed from day-to-day life. It's a mechanism to protect yourself, it wasn't exactly who you were, it was a version of who you could be.

**KM: It's a way of creating your own world, a self-determined presentation.**

MS: Exactly. You have to create a person in the world that doesn't constantly project that





you're an other, except to the other others. I think that is why I'm drawn to dioramas; they are close to real, but they're not. They were meant to educate or to tell you something specific, but were really just from the mind of the maker. This, combined with a fascination with Hollywood—which is almost like real life, but better—creates a mediated and theatrical version of reality.

The challenge for *A Memorial to Ice at the Dead Deer Disco* is how to talk about these unfathomable concepts that don't seem like they should go together, while also creating a space for the human, emotional, and spiritual parts of these ideas to exist in a way that is not about statistics or education. I'm not providing facts; I'm inviting people to enter a space where they can have an experience. Perhaps then they can put the pieces together in a way they hadn't thought of before, in a way that relates to their own lives. I made this work very intuitively. The show at MASS MoCA goes from light to dark, where the light part is more public, and the darker part is more of the interior, showing that we live within both of these places all of the time.

**KM: How do you move through these overwhelming ideas that are so hard and traumatic to think about?**

MS: I think you have to deal with the emotional aspect of it. You have to accept that it's actually traumatic, that it's really hard, and you have to feel that, admit it to yourself, before you can do anything about it. That is how it works for me. If I try to control something that I can't control without knowing what I feel about it, it's an impossible task. So how do I move through the grief of these things? With the AIDS crisis, I had to live, even as people were dying all around me. It's a struggle to be in the moment and have a life, while at the same time move through these heartbreaking things. But the acknowledgment of moving through it rather than around it is profound. It is no different with climate change. So, in these exhibitions, that is what I am endeavoring to do, to move through it, but also to give people the space to come on that journey.

**KM: How does your own art making become part of this process of moving through?**

MS: I've never not made art. I've known since I was a kid that I wanted to be an artist. My house growing up was strange, it was a model

home, and so the downstairs was finished but the upstairs wasn't. I took over one of the unfinished rooms in high school as my art studio. It was a faux-colonial house, decorated by my parents with "antiques" that were mostly reproductions. We heated the house with wood even though we had a furnace—real New England frugality, but also an identity. There were woods right behind my house, but the town was growing rapidly and so I could also ride my bike to McDonald's. My dad, who had been a Boy Scout and was a deer hunter, loved to be in the woods. So, we spent lots of time there—we went ice fishing, camping, hunting, etc. I loved my dad, but he also had a full-time job and was traveling a lot. I didn't realize until much later that my home environment was a construction in and of itself; that we lived in a kind of diorama.

I've been reluctant to talk about how my past led to my present work. The sculptures in which I encrust deer forms with rhinestones are about my dad *and* the nightclubs. I am dyslexic, and as a result I was put into the lowest performing groups at school and became ashamed. I never focused on written language, and therefore was drawn to the visual. I used to convince my

BELOW & RIGHT:  
Marc Swanson working  
in his Catskill, NY, studio.





teachers to let me make drawings or dioramas instead of doing book reports. At the time, dyslexia was a stigma, but now we know that it is prevalent—fifty percent of the incarcerated, seventy percent of kids in youth detention, and forty percent of all self-made millionaires are dyslexic. I think the reason I never wanted to talk about my work was that I never felt as if I was smart enough to do it, and I wanted the work to speak for itself.

**KM: Those statistics and your background are really interesting, especially given that you are so articulate about your work. Moving on from this, and privileging the visual, can we talk about your use of materials? Plaster, mirrors, taxidermy animal forms, tree branches, found photographs and objects, theatrical lights, videos—these recurring elements create a dynamic visual language. How do these materials inform the themes of the work?**

MS: The first show in 1995 had a rhinestone deer head in it. I was working at the department store, Emporium, in San Francisco, and we had just taken down a Father's Day display with a plaster deer head. The antler had broken, and instead of throwing it out I took it home. I had this obsessive idea that I would cover it with rhinestones. I was thinking about designer Judith Leiber's very expensive rhinestone purses that were used in displays at a fancy department store where I also worked. In addition, I was channeling Liberace, Dolly Parton, "Rhinestone Cowboy," etc. I associated rhinestones with the fifties and Hollywood glamour. For my second show in 1996, I created a diorama containing

a full-size deer and fawn with no fur on them. That work was about vulnerability, taxonomy, and the use of psychological terms. Deer have always represented innocence to me.

This time—San Francisco in the early nineties—was ground zero for the queer culture we think about now. Queer Nation had started, and I got to hear Judith Butler and Leo Bersani speak. I was taking classes with Jonathan Katz, who was borrowing classrooms from Mission High School. In fact, he ended up starting the first official queer studies program in the country. People were deconstructing textbooks, dissecting how people were learning, and challenging all the systems, and it felt very liberating. I became interested in dioramas, especially because of Donna Haraway's writings, but also I've been fascinated with them since I was a kid. I always wondered who authored them, who painted the backdrops, made the sculptures, and what was their intention? Who decides what goes into a diorama? And, why do we believe what is in the box?

**KM: There is currently a resurgence of semiotics, postmodernism, deconstruction, and critical theory; it's amazing that you were there at its genesis. How do dioramas fit into this critical space?**

MS: The Smithsonian Natural History Museum's "Lions on the Hunt" diorama from the early 20th century depicted the male lion going out on the hunt, and the female lying with the cubs, as if waiting for daddy to bring home dinner. But in reality, the female lions are the primary hunters. In 1993, they redesigned the work to be accurate. I think people assumed the initial gender roles were a mistake; but they probably knew the truth and didn't want to challenge the idea of the nuclear family, or attack the patriarchy. So, either they didn't know and the assumption was made that male lions hunted, or they did know, and did it wrong on purpose. They took artistic license. That's why I started using dioramas, to break apart this omnipresent display seen as "fact," despite reality. As an artist, I could make dioramas that never began as fact and reveal how subjective, planned, and mediated dioramas are.

I am also interested in taxonomy, which became popular around the same time as dioramas, zoos, and museums. This paralleled



the creation of terms like “schizophrenic” and “psychotic,” but also “homosexual.” Taxonomy was used to fabricate a false hierarchy in races, and species, and psychological terms. Up until the 1970s or ’80s, homosexuality was seen as a psychological infliction akin to schizophrenia, as something that “needed to be cured.”

**KM: With this history in mind, you illustrate how the diorama becomes a critical, radical, creative space to challenge systematic and oppressive forms of knowledge production. Simultaneously, it is a space of reclamation and self-determination. You are using the language of display to overturn and take back the narrative.**

MS: For me, it’s personal. It comes from the aspiration to expose these injustices—to focus a lens on how categorization becomes the system we think within, as if they are facts, when they are far from it. That was the essence of why I was drawn to dioramas, but I also love their forms. So, it’s also a celebration of theatricality. This makes me think about how we classify what is considered fine art. For example, both Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg did commercial window-display work, and I love

that they created fine art in these spaces. I also worked for a company that made commercial sculpture for TV and trade shows in the early nineties. It was a gay-owned and -operated business, and sadly I became the head sculptor within two years because the three guys who trained me died of AIDS.

**KM: When did you start to use plaster?**

MS: I’ve been developing the plaster work for about ten or twelve years. I was inspired by Cy Twombly’s works at The Menil in Houston. I had not been familiar with his sculpture work, but fell in love with it. The forms are like lumps of plaster with a flower or a stick emerging from them. I found them moving and beautiful. I knew Twombly made a lot of them in Rome, and I was interested in how he was influenced by the thousand-year-old Greek and Roman sculptures that surrounded him. So, I started to use plaster drape (like that used in casts for broken bones), but with my own flourish. People bring up Greek and Roman sculpture all the time, but I wasn’t really thinking about that. I was thinking about Twombly, but also about a work by Jasper Johns where he created a beautiful drape shape based on an IV tube.



I really like the metaphor of the bandages, which somehow fits in with the melancholy nature of Cole, too. I like to use loaded materials. I have injured my hands a number of times, once in a very traumatic table-saw accident. Another time, in the eighth grade, I dislocated and broke my fingers and had a cast. My grandfather drew the bones of my hand, a skeleton hand, on my cast. I thought that was cool, and it made it something I was proud of. I am drawn to materials that allow me to signal these autobiographical moments, while making something beautiful out of trauma.

Along with the drape, I started using plaster to make the icicles. I love plaster as a stand-in for material we think we know. I use plaster to render icicles opaque—they're not clear, they're not shiny, they're not wet. I love how making icicles from

plaster has this interesting effect—they appear to be melting, but are frozen in time; they are ragged, and as far away from ice as you can get.

**KM: I love the allegory around the bandages and damage/trauma. Cole would definitely embrace that, especially in light of this project being, in part, “a memorial to ice.” To that end, could you talk about what it was like to make work for two very different spaces—the former mill buildings of MASS MoCA and the historic artist’s home and studios of Thomas Cole?**

MS: I began by tackling the MASS MoCA space, since the show opened there first, and it is a really large space with double-height ceilings. I didn't want to just divide the space into a series of rooms or make one huge thing; instead I wanted to use the work to create space. So, I made sculptures that you could see through, that would carry through the space and would never shut down the space like a wall. Additionally, I realized I could use light to define space. The sculptures themselves become like dioramas and framing devices. To me, what was really important was the overall view and how things collapsed together so that when you step back the composition is always intact. I've always been interested in how you can create conditions for sculptures to flatten into a pictorial space, but then expand as you walk into it. In my mind, the whole show functions like walking through a giant diorama or a series of dioramas, a view the traditional diorama doesn't afford.

At the Cole house, it is almost the opposite. I needed to figure out how to escape the confines of the rooms. How do I create and reference dioramas in a place that is basically already a series of dioramas? How can I talk about disco, AIDS, and climate change in a space that is a throwback to a time over a century before these things? But Cole again was an inspiration, in particular his use of pictorial space and pastiche. So, I leaned on these visual languages to create a different approach to an installation, one that has similar psychological effects as at MASS MoCA, but is born from Cole's development of pictorial space.

In the end, I want my sculpture to be about the gesture, immediacy, vulnerability, and urgency that go along with what I'm trying to talk about intuitively.



# MASS MoCA INSTALLATION























**THOMAS COLE  
NATIONAL  
HISTORIC SITE  
INSTALLATION**



























# CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES

**Marc Swanson** received his MFA from the Milton Avery Graduate School of the Arts at Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, in 2004, attended Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in 2000, and was faculty at Skowhegan in 2014. He is a contemporary American artist whose handmade work brings together formal preoccupations and references to personal history and identity conflict. He works in a variety of media, including sculpture, drawing, video, photography, and complex installations. As art critic David Velasco notes, “Swanson is an automythologist, one who excels in crafting sparkling, enigmatic totems from the messiness of his own history; there kitsch and confession dovetail to reveal, not obscure, visceral thirsts.” His work has been exhibited widely, including at the Whitney Museum of American Art, MoMA PS1, Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, Walker Art Center, ICA Boston, Tensta Konsthall, MASS MoCA, and the Thomas Cole National Historic Site.

**Jack Ferver** is a New York-based writer, choreographer, and director. His genre-defying performances, which have been called “so extreme that they sometimes look and feel like exorcisms” (*The New Yorker*), interrogate and indict psychological and sociopolitical issues, particularly in the realms of power, gender, and sexual orientation. Ferver’s works have been presented in New York City at the New Museum; The Kitchen; New York Live Arts; The

French Institute Alliance Française, as part of Crossing the Line; Abrons Arts Center; Gibney Dance; Performance Space 122; the Museum of Arts and Design, as part of Performa 11; Danspace Project; and Dixon Place. Domestically and internationally, his works have been presented by the Richard B. Fisher Center for the Performing Arts at Bard College, NY; Portland Institute of Contemporary Art, OR; the Institute of Contemporary Art at MECA, ME; the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA; DiverseWorks | Contemporary Arts Museum of Houston, TX; and Théâtre de Vanves, France. Ferver’s work, which blurs boundaries between fantastic theatrics and stark naturalism, character and self, humor and horror, has received critical acclaim in *The New York Times*; *La Monde*; *Artforum*; *The New Yorker*; *Time Out NY*; *Modern Painters*; *The Financial Times*; and *The Village Voice*. He teaches at Bard College.

**Denise Markonish** is the senior curator and director of exhibitions at MASS MoCA. Her exhibitions include *Glenn Kaino: In the Light of a Shadow*; *Suffering from Realness*; *Trenton Doyle Hancock, Mind of the Mound: Critical Mass*; *Nick Cave: Until, Explode Every Day: An Inquiry into the Phenomena of Wonder*; *Teresita Fernández: As Above So Below*; *Oh, Canada*; *Nari Ward: Sub Mirage Lignum*; *These Days: Elegies for Modern Times*; and *Badlands: New Horizons in Landscape*. She edited the books *Teresita Fernández: Wayfinding* (DelMonico/

Prestel) and *Wonder: 50 Years of RISD Glass*, and co-edited *Sol LeWitt: 100 Views* (Yale University Press). Markonish has taught at Williams College and the Rhode Island School of Design, and was a visiting curator at Artpace, San Antonio, and Haystack School of Craft, Deer Isle, Maine.

**Kate Menconeri** is the chief curator and director of curatorial affairs, contemporary art & fellowship at the Thomas Cole National Historic Site. She has organized over one hundred exhibitions and publications that have spanned 19th-century American artists, from Thomas Cole to contemporary artists including Nick Cave, Jeffrey Gibson, Shi Guorui, Paula Hayes, Leslie Hewitt, and Kiki Smith. At the Cole Site, she worked with Mark Dion and

Dana Sherwood to realize *The Pollinator Pavilion*, a living public artwork, and co-curated the national touring exhibition, *Cross Pollination: Heade, Cole, Church, and Our Contemporary Moment*, which featured over 85 works by 25 artists. She conceived and curates *OPEN HOUSE: Contemporary Art in Conversation with Cole*, a series of artist-driven installations presented within the historic artist's home and studios. Curated projects have been featured in *The Brooklyn Rail*, *The New York Times*, *Sculpture Magazine*, and *Hyperallergic*, and she was awarded grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, The Henry Luce Foundation, and Terra Foundation. She has presented talks at the United Nations, Art Omi, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, The Reynolda House Museum, and the Hudson River Museum, among others. Menconeri earned an MA from the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College.

#### **Susannah Sayler and Edward Morris**

**(Sayler/Morris)** work with a variety of media, often in collaboration with others, to deepen our understanding of ecology and the poetics of relation. Their primary media are photography, video, writing, and installation, which they frequently employ toward investigations of place. They have been awarded the David Brower Center's Art/Act Award (2016), the Smithsonian Artist Research Fellowship (2014), and the Loeb Fellowship at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design (2009). Their work has been exhibited in diverse venues from art museums to public spaces and interdisciplinary institutions such as science museums, history museums, and anthropology museums, including MASS MoCA, the Cooper Hewitt National Design Museum, the Kunsthal in Rotterdam, and the Museum of Science and Industry. In 2006, Sayler/Morris co-founded The Canary Project—a collective venture to produce art and media that cultivate emotional understanding of the climate crisis. In 2020, they launched a new long-term project in Hudson, NY, called Toolshed, which gathers and shares tools that empower individuals and communities to live ecologically. Sayler/Morris currently teach at Syracuse University; their archives are collected by the Center for Art + Environment at Nevada Museum of Art, Reno.







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**THE THOMAS COLE NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE** preserves and interprets the home and studios of Thomas Cole, the founder of the Hudson River School of painting, a unique movement in American art and landscape. Located on six acres in the Hudson Valley, the site includes the 1815 Main House; Cole's 1839 Old Studio; the artist's designed, reconstructed New Studio; and gardens. It is a National Historic Landmark and an affiliated area of the National Park Service. The Cole Site's activities include guided tours, historic and contemporary art exhibitions, printed publications, online programs, activities for school groups, free community events, lectures, and innovative public programs such as the Hudson River School Art Trail—a map and website that enable visitors to see the nearby views that Cole painted. For more information about the Cole Site, visit [thomascole.org](http://thomascole.org).

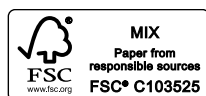
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Marc Swanson's presentation at the Thomas Cole Site is part of *OPEN HOUSE: Contemporary Art in Conversation with Cole*, an annual series of curated contemporary art installations sited within, and in response to, the historic home and studios of artist and early environmentalist Thomas Cole. Operating from the concept that all art is contemporary, the program activates conversations between artists across centuries, and is collaborative by nature. Projects may take the shape of a site-wide exhibition, performance, or other format reflecting the artist's practice and ideas. Installations and artworks have ranged from those that literally reference Cole's iconic works to those that expand on issues and themes that Cole addressed in his art and writing, including landscape, history, and balancing the built and natural worlds. Drawn from newly created or newly sited pre-existing works, *OPEN HOUSE* projects shed light on the connections between 19th-century American art and our contemporary moment.



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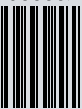
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