

# BELLWETHER

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May 2008

## Marc Swanson BELLWETHER GALLERY

Marc Swanson is not a colorist. Like his contemporary Terence Koh, Swanson prefers the absoluteness of white and black when crafting his sylvan-themed sculptures and strange mixed-media panels. When he does dabble with nonabsolutes, he does so with reticence, employing natural, lower-luminance hues: gold, the sepia of faded celluloid, or the amber blond of shellac. When he wants impact, he uses texture, making his work shimmer, sparkle, or reflect. Like other young artists (David Altmejd, Cristina Lei Rodriguez, and Kristian Kozul, to name a few), Swanson borrows from the tool kit of kitsch, arriving at something a bit outside that term's stubborn connotations.

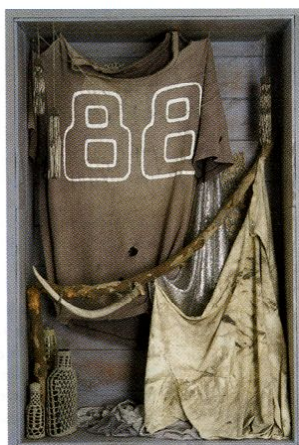
So the muted, pale blue-gray in 88, 2006–2008—a dolorous, Joseph Cornell-inspired box assemblage in the front room of “The Saint at Large,” Swanson’s fourth solo exhibition at Bellwether—marked something of a shift, however humble. At the heart of the work hung a threadbare Stephen Sprouse T-shirt (screen-printed, in Atari-style lettering, with the eponymous 88) that the artist purchased in 1988. A token with aura to spare, the shirt had been for a time in the possession of Swanson’s friend the singer-songwriter Elliott Smith, returning to Swanson following Smith’s suicide in 2003.

A tentative memorial, 88 was also the exhibition’s *mise en abyme*. Inside, a tiny antler evoked the sequined *Untitled (Black Antler Pile)*, 2007–2008, set precariously on the floor of the front room; motes of glitter recalled the sparkling black wall installed in the room beyond; a canted stick of wood suggested a prototype for two white latex-covered branches strung from the ceiling; bottle covers crocheted by the artist’s grandmother seemed like templates for the stark geometric patterns delineated throughout the exhibition; and so on.

The work also memorializes the exhibition’s title. It was in 1988, after all, that The Saint—a storied East Village palace of gay hedonism—closed and morphed into The Saint at Large, a company responsible for producing the annual Black Party and White Party, two of New York’s largest gay bashes. The connection between this allusion and Swanson’s choice of palette is plain (and indeed, a 1999 exhibition of his work at San Francisco’s ESP Gallery was titled “The Black Party”), though more noteworthy is the sentimental trajectory of this lineage. This is Swanson’s milieu: nostalgia for nostalgia, the Sisyphean task of mourning faded glory. Another box work in the main gallery, featuring a muzzy reprint of a still from the beginning of *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), cinched the exhibition’s analeptic modality.

The exhibition also featured a short video titled *Love Is All Around*, 2007, made by Swanson and Neil Gust, a friend and former

Marc Swanson,  
*Untitled (T-shirt and  
Chains)*, 2007–2008,  
mixed media,  
81 ½ x 81 ½ x 9”.



bandmate of Smith’s. In contrast to its saccharine title, the video is a homoerotic, epileptic collage of butch men, red lightbulbs, foil curtains, and projections of geometric patterns. It seems to pay as much tribute to Fabien Baron’s video for Madonna’s single “Erotica” (1992) as it does to the queer film pantheon of Kenneth Anger, Andy Warhol, and James Bidgood. The video played in a room lined with black Plexiglas that reflected the images on all sides, producing an unsettling mirage that simultaneously evoked the lubricious backroom exploits of another erstwhile East Village gay bar.

Swanson plumbs his life for material with which to organize an otherwise loose network of people, places, and sensibilities, from the kitschy pastoralism of his antlers to former gay meccas, his grandmother’s knitted keepsakes, and the tragic saga of an indie-music star. 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.

—David Velasco