

Adams and Ollman

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Paul Swenbeck: *Cross Quarters Merry Meet*
at Adams and Ollman
August 5–September 16, 2023
Opening Reception: Saturday, August 5 from 1–4pm

Adams and Ollman is excited to present *Cross Quarters Merry Meet*, a new sculptural and sensory installation by Paul Swenbeck (b. 1967, Salem, MA; lives and works in Philadelphia, PA and Boston, MA). Working in ceramics, textiles, sound and light, and drawing from a rich do-it-yourself tradition that prioritizes immediacy, intimacy, and play, Swenbeck fashions worlds that are both earthbound and fantastical, transporting the viewer to otherworldly landscapes. In *Cross Quarters Merry Meet*, Swenbeck's latest installation, we are invited to follow an arcane narrative filled with occult and spiritual themes often to a surreal conclusion. The exhibition will open with a reception on August 5 and be on view through September 16, 2023.

For nearly 30 years, Swenbeck has been developing a lexicon of material techniques, forms, and symbols that operate with staggering fluency and precision. Indebted to the allegorical works of Hieronymus Bosch and the mystical paintings of Eugene Von Bruenchenhein, among others, Swenbeck also draws inspiration from Jungian dream psychology, Wilhelm Reich's theories of primordial cosmic energy, the natural landscape, and science fiction, employing highly abstract symbolism that intersects with formal concerns and material play. An early formative experience working at the Witch Dungeon Museum in Salem, Massachusetts, had a significant impact on his macabre aesthetic tendencies, theatricality, and interest in the possibility of older, perhaps forgotten or mythologized systems of knowledge.



For *Cross Quarters Merry Meet*, Swenbeck turns the gallery into a dream-like netherspace. The title of the exhibition references the pagan acknowledgement of the middle point between seasons, believed to be a time when the veil between material and metaphysical reality has dissolved, and magical communion is possible. In the installation, Swenbeck invites viewers to cross through a sculptural portal in order to suspend their disbelief. While inspired by the artist's travels to Muktinath, Nepal, the threshold here is provisional, fashioned from recycled plastic and discarded wood beams. Beyond this transition to the other world lies a vignette with an animistic landscape populated by a chorus of symbolic creatures—a mouse, a cat, an owl—that occupy this parallel dimension with its own logic, meaning and intention.

Throughout the exhibition, themes of transformation and rebirth pervade, with the specter of death always in proximity. In *The Silvered Maw*, a swampy garden marsh is the surreal setting for a deathbed scene where a giant flower lies ill. The avatar of the flower as both subject and object of condolence draws attention to the relationality between death and its signifiers. *Hallucigenia's Dream* takes the theme of transformation to a more extreme end, delighting in the interplay between the familiar and alien. Using imagery culled from years of dream journals, and inspired by the *Hallucigenia*, a strange worm-like creature initially discovered as a fossil in the Burgess Shale deposits, this tableau vivant references the metamorphosis of grub to chrysalis to moth in a fantasy that is played out

Adams and Ollman

amongst a cohort of creatures that become lost in reverie and transmute in wild and unnerving ways. Ambient throughout the presentation is a new audio work by Guest Host that features a call and response of electronic voices, and references spell-casting and echolocation, human-environmental interaction, and the ambivalence of causality.

Paul Swenbeck (b.1967, Salem, MA; lives and works in Philadelphia, PA and Boston, MA) received his BFA from Massachusetts College of Art, Boston, MA. His work has been exhibited at John Michael Kohler Art Center, Sheboygan, WI; the Institute of Contemporary Art, The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Temple Gallery, Tyler School of Art, all Philadelphia, PA; The Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN; Massachusetts College of Art and Design, Boston, MA; and Maine Contemporary Art, Rockland, ME. Swenbeck also has a long history of working with artist-run spaces including Vox Populi, The Project Room, Basekamp, Space 1026, all Philadelphia, PA; and Lump Projects, Raleigh, NC. Swenbeck currently teaches experimental clay at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA. In 2013, the artist was awarded a Pew Fellowship in the Arts.

Paul Swenbeck, *The Bog Hag's Trap*, 2023, digital image.