



Marc Swanson | Death is Expensive
May 23 – September 13, 2026
Opening Reception: May 23rd, 3 – 5 pm

Rockland, ME – The Center for Maine Contemporary Art (“CMCA”) is thrilled to announce Marc Swanson’s first solo exhibition in Maine, *Death is Expensive*. Organized by CMCA Curator Grant Wahlquist and accompanied by a fully-illustrated publication with an essay by Harry Tafoya, the exhibition runs from May 23 – September 13, 2026. An opening reception will occur on Saturday, May 23rd, from 3 – 5 pm.

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

The exhibition’s title is drawn from a line uttered by down-at-heel Southern belle Blanche DuBois in Tennessee Williams’s *A Streetcar Named Desire*: “How in the hell do you think all that sickness and dying was paid for? Death is expensive, Miss Stella!” In *Streetcar*, DuBois’s carefully maintained artifice—paste jewels passing for diamonds, borrowed elegance masking scarcity—functions as both a shield and a tenuous means of escape. The tension between luminous surface and underlying vulnerability is also present in Swanson’s work, which stages a parallel drama in materials: elevating the cheap, the decaying, or the everyday into objects of genuine and often melancholic beauty that never fully conceal their provisional or humble origins. Artifice is not deception but a necessary and sometimes defiant form of grace. As with Mike Kelley’s use of thrifted afghans and stuffed animals, Swanson insists on treating the tawdry and provisional seriously, coaxing elegance from the overlooked without erasing its roots in impermanence, loss, and the working class.

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

Taken as a whole, *Death is Expensive* contemplates the cost of loss in all its manifestations. It recognizes death as not merely the end of a biological cycle but as the



unraveling of relationships, systems, identities, and occasionally ecosystems, and in doing so invites us to acknowledge that the expense and extent of loss corresponds to the depth of love.

The exhibition was made possible by the generous support of the Roxanne Quimby Foundation.

About the Artist

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



Marc Swanson

Still life with flowers, 2022

Wood, chains, antlers, glass, flowers with clay dust and latex, chainmail fabric

79 x 48 x 13 inches

Courtesy of the artist and the Center for Maine Contemporary Art



About CMCA | cmcanow.org

Located in downtown Rockland, Maine, CMCA is a contemporary arts institution presenting year-round exhibitions and educational programs for all ages.

- Location: 21 Winter Street, Rockland, ME, 04841.
- Winter Hours (Nov. 1 – May 24): Wednesday - Saturday, 10 am to 5 pm, Sunday 12 to 5 pm.
- Summer Hours (May 26 – Oct. 31): Monday - Saturday, 10 am to 5 pm; Sunday 12 to 5 pm.
- Closed Federal holidays.

Admission is \$10; seniors 65+ and students with ID are \$8; children under 18 are free; CMCA members are free. For more information, please contact Grant Wahlquist (gwahlquist@cmcanow.org, 207.245.5732).