

DIRECTIONS

Leonardo Drew

March 16 – June 20, 2000



Fig. 1. *Untitled (No. 8)*, 1988, rope and mixed media, 120 x 108 x 20 in. (304.8 x 274.3 x 50.8 cm). Collection of the artist.

A MERICAN ARTIST Leonardo Drew combines detritus with formal grace and randomness with order to make large wall-mounted sculptures that comment on his Black southern heritage and America's industrial past. His work harks back to the dawn of the last century when visionaries and reformists in Europe and America revolted against traditional artistic practices by integrating such items as broken glass, menu segments, ticket stubs, and portions of movie posters and daily newspapers into their work. Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, and others in the Dadaist movement of the 1910s and 1920s sought to overthrow traditional values in art and culture, designating ordinary objects, such as urinals, plumbing pipes, and wine racks, as works of art. In doing so, as one writer put it, "They reaffirmed the natural function of art: to give tangible form to value."¹ Almost a century after the Dadaists set in motion a new way of defining art, Drew has been compelled by similar sensibilities. Ever the student of art history, he has also drawn from multiple sources in post-World War II American and European art.

Drew was born in Tallahassee, Florida, in 1961, and moved to Bridgeport, Connecticut, at the age of six. As a junior high and senior high-school student, he was an enthusiast of Jackson Pollock (1912–1956), whose "allover" canvases of the 1940s and 1950s were then known to him only through black-and-white reproductions in library books. Primarily interested in painting and drawing, Drew regularly displayed his art in the banks and community centers of Bridgeport.

After graduating from high school, Drew left the housing project where he grew up and moved to New York City to seek work as an artist. Shortly after

arriving there he declined an opportunity to draw cartoons for a major magazine—a job that may have been the path to a lucrative career—and enrolled in the Parsons School of Design in 1981. A year later, committed to becoming a fine artist, he transferred to the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, where he earned a B.F.A. in painting in 1985. In 1986, Drew, by then a competent figurative painter, began to experiment with totemic images (usually eight feet tall) of cut paper mounted onto walls. Although the figures were glued and treated to look like paintings, they took on a quality akin to relief sculpture, thereby obliterating the line between painting and sculpture.

The experiments with cut paper led Drew away from two-dimensional painting altogether, and in 1988 he produced the seminal work *Untitled (No. 8)* (fig. 1). (Drew prefers to number rather than name his works.) Signifying death, lynching, suffering, and dread, *Untitled (No. 8)* has been alluded to as a kind of exorcism for the artist, who, while coming of age artistically, was also coming to terms with his historical past as an African American male. Made of blackened skeins of rope, torn rags, dead birds, and animal hides and carcasses suspended from large wood supports, the work marks the emergence of Drew's mature style. Like his other sculptures of the late 1980s and 1990s, *Untitled (No. 8)* probes the nature of materials and comments on the principles of formal abstraction while it engages artist and viewer in a personal quest for historical and cultural memories.

Drew's work encapsulates private themes and fresh ideas that are solely his own, but his investigations of form and meaning fall into a tradition of



Fig. 2. *Untitled (No. 24)*, detail, 1992, wood, rust, and cotton, 96 x 240 x 11 in. (243.8 x 609.6 x 27.9 cm). Collection of Barbara Schwartz, New York.

making art from household objects and industrial and consumer by-products that was widely accepted by the late 1980s. Like American artists Louise Nevelson (b. Russia, 1899–1988) and Robert Rauschenberg (b. 1925), Drew readily takes from his environment the materials and ideas necessary to expand the boundaries of art. In the 1950s and 1960s, Nevelson gained recognition for her constructed and painted assemblages of wood boxes (like Drew's grids), filled with pieces of scrap lumber in abstract shapes. Rauschenberg's signature "combine," *Monogram*, 1955–59 (Moderna Museet, Stockholm), consists of a stuffed Angora goat stuck in an automobile

tire and placed on top of a collage-covered platform. Drew's sensibility is often aligned with the fat and felt compositions by German artist Joseph Beuys (1921–1986), the wool, lead, and steel constructions of Arte Povera Greek sculptor Jannis Kounellis (b. 1936), and the rope, string, and wire sculptures by German-born American artist Eva Hesse (1936–1970).

Among work by fellow African American artists, the fetishlike objects of Thornton Dial (b. 1928) and Joyce Scott (b. 1948) and the abject art of David Hammons (b. 1943) invite comparisons with Drew's sculptures. Like Drew, these artists express personal ideas about materials and

processes and address issues of "Blackness" in complex and often indirect ways. Dial's totemic, painted wrought-iron or lawn-furniture sculptures evoke African sculpture. Scott's works, meticulously composed of beads, cloth, shells, bamboo, and the like, suggest the role of the once-subservient Black female in a White-dominated society. Street culture informs Hammons's work, which sometimes incorporates fried chicken pieces and bones, and shavings from hair found on the floors of African American barber shops; Hammons sometimes weaves hair into intricate wall hangings or places hair on top of large rocks, referring to them as "hard heads," a colloquialism for young Black males. Like these artists, Drew subtly alludes to both a noble past and street vernacular.

Recurring and opposing themes of deterioration and regeneration, and death and resurrection, distinguish Drew's sculptural compositions. He manipulates the process of degeneration by exposing the components of his works to natural elements over time. Drew believes that rusting, a sign of aging, "tells us nothing lasts forever, everything changes." Spending more than twelve hours daily engaging in labor-intensive efforts, including stripping, scraping, cutting, burning, and rusting materials in large rust-filled vats, Drew creates prolifically, with differences in works being determined by materials and the locales from which they were gleaned (often city dumps) and the spaces in which a work is made.

Amid the mounds of debris, Drew seems the auspicious alchemist in possession of the proverbial Philosopher's Stone, systematically transforming base materials into art instead of gold. The notion of creating high art from humble materials,

complemented with intensive labor, is sometimes associated in African American culture with the struggles of Blacks in the rural South and the industrial North. Made of wood, rust, and cotton, *Untitled (No. 24)*, 1992 (fig. 2), evokes "King Cotton," a stand-in for the antebellum South with its flourishing agricultural economy and outwardly genteel society built on forced or exploited labor of slaves and sharecroppers. While the rich symbolism in Drew's art deals with issues of race and ethnicity, his work is not confrontational, nor is it conceived as a medium for social and political action.

For Drew, emotional weight is articulated through disparate materials tediously transformed into elaborate, monolithic, compartmentalized installations. His ever-present but not always obvious grid is constructed from small blocks of wood, joined together and then connected onto unifying plywood backings, allowing even the largest works to be installed in relatively small and portable sections. A number of Drew's works take on epic proportions (as much as 12 feet in height and more than 20 feet in width), often impacting the viewer in much the same way that classical history or religious paintings engage the patriotic and the devout, each compartment containing a record of a previous time, life, experience, or memory. *Untitled (No. 49)*, 1995 (fig. 3), is an evocative twenty-three-foot-wide charred relief of wood, rust, fabric, and other media. Overlaying the grid with a patina of rust, Drew unites texture and content with embedded found objects that push forward, pull inward, obscure boundaries, and extend into the viewer's space.

Drew's three wall-mounted sculptures made for this exhibition were in process as this brochure went to press



Fig. 3. *Untitled (No. 49)*, 1995, wood, rust, fabric, and mixed media, 137 x 287 x 8 in. (887.2 x 1855 x 51.6 cm). Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden; Fractional and Promised Gift of Paul Hoffmann and Camille Oliver-Hoffmann, 1996.

and are therefore not illustrated. Drew stated that he has recently embarked upon a new direction while returning almost full circle to his earlier references. "For me [the new work] is an epiphany. Everything I've ever done has led me to this point," he said. Marking a return to the influence of Jackson Pollock, the new sculptures attain characteristics germane to painting, as Drew has recently reduced his use of rust and added color. In this installation, two works on opposite walls flank an overflowing grand centerpiece. In these "allover canvases" that are "painted" with objects, larger-than-life images made of many kinds of materials are woven into the surfaces, calling to mind medieval and Renaissance tapestries. Drew is interested in viewers' reactions to and interpretations of his work. Believing that art has a special relationship to the community that surrounds it, Drew

transforms the detritus of society into an art of formal invention and personal revelation.

Teresia Bush
Senior Educator

1. Leach, Frederick D., "The Found Object," in Oscar Bailey and Charles Swedlund, *Found Objects: Mid-Century Genre* (New York: State University College at Buffalo, 1969), 7.

Author's Note: The quotes by Drew were made to the author in November 1999 at Drew's studio in San Antonio, Texas, where he created the works for this exhibition. The author wishes to acknowledge the artist for his hospitality during visits there and to his studio in Brooklyn. Thanks go to Mary Boone Gallery, New York, for assistance in coordinating the exhibition; the Finesilver Gallery, San Antonio; Anna Brooke, Hirshhorn Librarian, who prepared the Selected Exhibitions and Bibliography; interns Amy Hunter, who provided research support and compiled documents, and David Merhib, who assisted in numerous ways; and Neal Benezra, former Assistant Director for Art and Public Programs, for his encouragement during the planning of the exhibition.

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1992 San Francisco Art Institute, San Francisco;
Thread Waxing Space, New York
- 1994 Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art,
Ithaca, New York; Barbara Toll Fine Arts,
New York; Thread Waxing Space,
New York
- 1995 Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego
- 1996 University at Buffalo Art Gallery,
Research Center in Art and Culture,
Buffalo, New York; Mary Boone Gallery,
New York; St. Louis Art Museum
- 1998 Mary Boone Gallery, New York
- 1999 Madison Art Center, Wisconsin, and tour

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1989 "Pillar to Post," Kenkeleba Gallery,
New York
- 1991 "From the Studio: Artists-in-Residence,
1990-1991," The Studio Museum,
New York
- 1992 "Sculpture: Leonardo Drew, Lisa Hoke,
Brad Kahlhamer," Thread Waxing Space,
New York
- 1995 "About Place, Recent Art of the Americas:
Seventy-Sixth American Exhibition," The
Art Institute of Chicago; "Carnegie
International 1995," The Carnegie
Museum of Art, Pittsburgh
- 1996 "Leonardo Drew, Mark Francis, Oliver
Herring," Mary Boone Gallery, New York
- 1997 "New Work: Words and Images," Miami
Art Museum
- 1998 "Inner Eye," Samuel P. Harn Museum of
Art, University of Florida, Gainesville

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CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

All works are wood and mixed media,
1999-2000, and lent courtesy of the artist.

Untitled (No. 75), 144 x 144 x 7 in.
(365.8 x 365.8 x 17.8 cm)

Untitled (No. 76), 144 x 144 x 24 in.
(365.8 x 365.8 x 61 cm)

Untitled (No. 77), 168 x 672 x 58 in.
(426.7 x 1,706.9 x 147.3 cm)

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