

nio Dittborn Leonardo
Graham Ann Hamilto
arry Johnson Guillerm
e Marden Kerry James
ere **About Place** Smit
Steinman Jeff Wall Ar
Zittel Vija Celmins Eug
o Drew Felix Gonzalez
Kuitca Jac Leirner Brice
Marshall Doris Salcedo

For his large sculptural installation, Number 43 (pls. 8-9), **Leonardo Drew** has chosen cotton rags and other detritus such as wood, rope, canvas, and nails, all of which have been made to carry a reddish dusting of surface rust and thereby rendered chromatically harmonious and compatible. In that Drew's materials are mostly "found," and found in forsaken places like an industrial refuse dump near the housing project in Bridgeport, Connecticut, where the artist grew up, his sculptures literally arise from and resonate with a gritty but crumbling urban life and history. Furthermore, Drew's incorporation of raw and/or processed and discarded cotton in this and earlier works serves symbolically to invoke the history of the American South (Drew was born in Tallahassee, Florida) and commemorate the African and African-American plantation slaves upon whom the labor-intensive cultivation of "king cotton" once depended. As if in mimetic homage to his ancestors' labor, Drew's sculptures are all intensely worked; and they convey in their painstakingly obsessive accumulations of cast-off stuffs both the rude but fastidiously detailed handicraft and the talismanic folk mysticism of Southern black or outsider art. 137 Paradoxically, from such humble, neglected, and even disreputable materials and working methods, Drew constructs highly complex and powerfully integrated epic sculptures-wall-bound sculptures that are like panoramic barriers or dense curtain walls oriented as much toward pictorial as toward real space.

Drew's working method looks as much to postwar New York art-making as to black folk art or to an imaginary reconception of the procedural essence of Southern black labor. At a very early age, Drew became acquainted through photographs with Jackson Pollock's late "all-over" compositions. What interested him was less "the sublimated Pollock,"¹³⁸ that is, that quality of Pollock's paintings indicative either of the unconscious or an unattainable metaphysicality, than the aggressive, even violent physicality of Pollock's technique. This energy allowed not only for large "gesture," but also for the action of gravity and the irruption onto the canvas of unlikely banal materials: "a residue of 'dumping'... a heterogeneity of trash-nails, buttons, tacks, keys, coins, cigarettes, matches."¹³⁹ Drew learned from Pollock the potential visceral charge that the evidences of process can pack; and retaining the imprint of his hand or touch in a manipulation of his materials, Drew has gone on to develop a working method similarly capable of transforming gesture into art and, in this case, into sculpture.¹⁴⁰ Number 43, however, as an homage to consuming labor, whether voluntary or involuntary-the labor "of the slave... [as well as] of the artist"¹⁴¹-goes beyond being an essay in process and artistic performance to plumb persistent personal and cultural memories. Every inch of this mammoth but oddly delicate work is conspicuously touched, fingered, adjusted, manipulated, rehandled, and rethought so that Number 43 reverberates as if it were a living body with an active residue of generative energy, vigorously entertained recollection, and ongoing desire.

Not unexpectedly, as an additional means of sharpening the vulnerable physical character of his work, Drew has made use of processes of weathering and corrosion and decay. He has, in fact, taught himself how to modulate both the rate and the intensity of rusting, employing the range of oxide or dry earth-red colors that result from his "chemistry" to arresting and often moving compositional ends. That Drew welcomes a certain controlled deterioration of his sculpture's constituent materials links his practice to that of the Italian Arte Povera school and somewhat less directly to Robert Smithson's sculptural

investigations of entropy (see fig. 29). The latter's "lifelong fascination with the disorder of the industrial landscape, particularly that of his native New Jersey,"¹⁴² also finds a parallel in Drew's interest in the outcast sites and dumping areas and the accumulating detritus of urban collapse. In Number 43, Drew salvaged his distressed and cast-off materials by creating for them a new domicile within the vast field of small boxlike containers comprising the sculpture. Crude stuffs, which, because they have been processed, used, worn, and roughly thrown away, inescapably evoke a sometime human presence, are gathered up by the artist and ordered, stored, arrested in their decay, and at last preserved and transformed.

Compositionally Drew's Number 43, not unlike a number of sculptures by Eva Hesse (see fig. 30), recasts the Minimalist grid and its structuring by systematic progression into a more vulnerable and irregular form. Drew's sculpture shares with several Hesse pieces a shallow, wall-oriented, frontal format that automatically relates these works to painting; but in Drew's case, this type of arrangement-with its "frontal and diagrammatically two-dimensional look"¹⁴³-together with the incorporation of unorthodox materials such as nails, bits of wire, string, and padded cloth, also recalls traditional African totemic forms. Number 43 seems weighted, gravity bound, and obdurately physical, where a Hesse sculpture may seem frail as a breath. By means of its literal size and presence, Number 43 powerfully fixes the viewer in the space he or she temporarily inhabits with the piece. In addition, the work's constituent boxlike units-each "box" visually unique from and only loosely dependent upon the next-together comprise a gridlike facade that imaginatively resembles an anonymous urban landscape or towering wall: the sculpture presents a metaphorical image of social ruin and/or frustration. Yet from the discarded "materials" of a social system founded upon a long history of racism, economic deprivation, and human waste, Drew dedicates himself to constructing, piece by piece, a redemptive and inclusive counter-order. This commanding wall is but a lively crowding of little containers, each one of them frayed, elaborately worked, and only seemingly anarchically thrown together with its companions. Every unit has been made to abut the next, precariously and provisionally, but also agreeably: gaps and fissures, crevices and perforations, announce the fact that Drew does not force a joining of divergent parts, but instead allows a chaotically variegated, yet composed, field to emerge. This method describes on its maker's part "an urae... to structurally, and thus fundamentally, connect or knit or heal without, however, in the least suppressing any local particularity; to draw disparate elements together by means of a kind of thoughtfully permissive... association."¹⁴⁴ The hypnotically intricate, as well as forceful formal, arrangements that Drew constructs, and the meticulously detailed and obsessively repetitive nature of his working methods are evidence of a restless drive on this artist's part to rescue his material-which by metaphorical expansion is all his subject matter-and to give this material an abiding home. Fig. 30.

Eva Hesse (American, born Germany, 1936-1970)

Sans II 1968 Fiberglass

38 x 1703/4 x 61/e inches (96.5 x 433.7 x 15.6 cm)

Whitney Museum of American Art, Purchase, with funds from Ethelyn and Lester J. Honig and the Albert A. List Family



Plate 8. Leonardo Drew Number 43, 1994
Wood, rust, fabric, string, and mixed media Courtesy of the artist and Tim Nye,
New York Cat. no. 8

Plate 9. Number 43 (detail) 69



Leonardo Drew

Born 1961, Tallahassee, Florida Lives in New York

Education

1982-85 The Cooper Union School for the Advancement of Science and Art,
New York, BFA

1981 -82 Parsons School of Design, New York Selected Exhibitions

With formal complexity and use of such detritus as charred wooden slats and rusted metal in combination with cotton fabric and mortar, Leonardo Drew's large-scale sculptural assemblages powerfully merge the political, the personal, and the aesthetic. Simultaneously evoking African-American history and a rich artistic legacy, Drew's achievement has been recognized in exhibitions since 1974. Following a series of early solo exhibitions in Westport and Bridgeport, Connecticut, where he grew up, Drew's work was included in "Pillar to Post" at Kenkeleba House, New York (1985) and "Outside the Clock" at Scott Hansen Gallery, New York (1989). His work gained further attention during Drew's artist's residency at The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York (1991), where his work was included in "From the Studio: Artists in Residence, 1990-91" (1991). Since then, he has had solo exhibitions at Thread Waxing Space, New York (1992, 1994); the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York (1994); Barbara Toll Fine Arts, New York (1994); and the Walter/McBean Gallery, San Francisco Art Institute (1994). He has participated in group shows at Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York (1992); in "Three Sculptors: Leonardo Drew, Lisa Hoke, Brad Kahlhamer" at Thread Waxing Space, New York (1992); at Kunsthalle, New York (1992); in "Markets of Resistance" at White Columns, New York (1993); and in "Promising Suspects" at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, Connecticut (1994).

His work was also featured in "Biennial Dakar," Senegal, (1992). This is Leonardo Drew's first exhibition in Chicago.

Selected Further Reading

Als, Hilton. "Openings: Leonardo Drew." *Artforum* 6 (Feb. 1993), p. 94.
Glueck, Grace. "Three Favorite Exhibitions of 1992: Matisse, New York Museum of Modern Art; Magritte, Metropolitan Museum of Art; Leonardo Drew, Thread Waxing Space." *art 1* (Jan. 1993), p. 104.
Heartney, Eleanor. "Leonardo Drew at Thread Waxing Space." *Art in America* 3 (Mar. 1993), pp. 112-113.
Cotter, Holland. "Art in Review: Leonardo Drew." *The New York Times*, April 1, 1994, Section C, p. 20.
New York, Thread Waxing Space. Leonardo Drew. Essay by Thomas McEvelly and interview by Tim Nye. Exh. cat. 1992.

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Foreword

"About Place: Recent Art of the Americas" takes as its point of departure
The Art Institute of Chicago's long-established "American Exhibition," of

which this is the 76th incarnation since the series began in 1888. Dedicated to bringing the most outstanding current developments in contemporary art to Chicago audiences, the "American Exhibitions" have consistently been among the most innovative, influential, and challenging exhibitions of contemporary art presented in the Midwest. They have also proved to be the primary vehicle through which the Art Institute has demonstrated its enduring commitment to contemporary art. For the current exhibition, the museum has cast its geographic net farther out, bringing together a cross-generational gathering of emerging, under-recognized, and established artists from Canada and Latin America as well as the United States. Although hemispheric in scope, this exhibition does not purport to be a comprehensive or an equally apportioned geo-graphic overview of contemporary art. In fact, the number of artists included here has been limited to sixteen, so that each artist may be represented in some depth. Nonetheless, the range of media in this exhibition is far-ranging: in addition to painting and sculpture, "About Place" features computer-generated imagery, photography, new site-specific installations, and performance.

The exhibition's north-south axis is particularly appropriate today given the increasing economic, social, and cultural inter-dependence among nations. The ratification of the North American Free Trade Agreement and the recent Western Hemisphere summit meeting should provide the framework for a "Free Trade Area of the Americas" by 2005. Starting in 1995, a common market will be established among Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay; meanwhile, Colombia, Mexico, and Venezuela have pledged to erase all tariffs and quotas between the three countries over the next ten years. This economic interweaving-not to mention the concurrent migration of people, images, and ideas across borders-signals a need for an exhibition that looks at the hemi-sphere as a whole.

"About Place" does not mark the first time that the Art Institute has looked to a hemispheric framework for an exhibition. In 1959 the noted Chicago collector and museum patron Joseph R. Shapiro organized "The United States Collects Pan American Art," an exhibition of contemporary Canadian and Latin American paintings. His prescient remarks then serve to remind us that while "styles and traditions become exhausted and change what remains is the individual artist. . . who by the expressiveness of his art, at once personal and universal, has revealed a poetic insight into the quality of human experience."

We, too, wish to emphasize that this exhibition does not concern itself so much with national identity or heritage as with artistic expression. No doubt the works in this exhibition resonate deeply with references to the artists' cultures, but they also thwart any narrow reading that would have us confine them to a purely didactic or political plane. The works represented here have been selected for being both formally and thematically accomplished. We are indebted to these artists for bringing us to a greater awareness of place.

James N. Wood Director and President The Art Institute of Chicago

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