

SPECIAL TO THE EXPRESS-NEWS

New York artist Leonardo Drew says he sees himself in this work, titled 'No. 77,' which is now being shown at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C.

Rust in Peace

Urban fabric is sometimes literally, the wellspring of Leonardo Drew's energetic works.

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As you read this, pieces of your life - probably nothing you'd miss - just might be on display in Washington, D.C. That's because Leonardo Drew, a New York Artist, who spent much of the past year in San Antonio, scavenged dumps, alleys and railroad tracks here to find materials for his latest work, a three-part piece now on exhibit at the Hirshhorn Museum.

Drew said people find his normal energy level exhausting. But one after-noon a couple of weeks ago, at the start of an interview in his mammoth studio in the Finesilver Building downtown, he said he was in a mellow mood.

"I'm low-energy today, which is good for you," he said, explaining later, "Usually I'm on fire and it's like I'm burning up all the time."

As he spoke, he knelt on a foam-covered box, gluing thin squares of black-painted wood to larger wood panels to form a grid.

Dressed in ragged sweats with a turquoise scarf wrapped around his head, he was preparing the "canvas" for his next work. A grimy, rust-tinged TV balanced on an equally grubby cart rumbled in the background.

"It's just like energy," he said of the TV, which is always on, sometimes along with the radio.

Over the next hour, he discussed his newest work, a trio of large wall pieces he describes as part of the same family. The wildest and most intense of the three is "No. 77." At 56 feet long and 14 feet, high, it's the largest.

Definitely the dominant piece, "No. 77" challenges the audience to take it all in, from the weathered wooden planks that jut overhead from the middle of the work to the eclectic collage

of urban detritus - a toy here, a shred Drew used items found while scavenging last year in San Antonio alleys



and dumps to create 'No. 77.' The work is part of a trio of pieces of fabric there, a veritable scrapbook of lives and stories untold.

"That piece encompasses my energy level better than anything else that I have created," he said.

"When I look at it, I see myself. The work actually looks like me. And when I say it looks like me, more like it feels like me, you know. . . . I think that it burns. I think it's just the intensity of it. It's unharnessed, you know. It's out there. It's alive. It has an attitude you cannot avoid."

Drew said he chooses to number rather than name his work to leave interpretation up to the audience.

"I can't sit and tell you exactly what your experience is going to be," he said. "That's your own personal journey, and I'm going to give you 100 percent of that by giving you no titles."

Asked if he likes San Antonio, he noted that this was his second stint in the Alamo City. He was an artist-in-residence at ArtPace in 1995.

"I'm here," he said, the rhetorical 'aren't I?' silent but understood. Then he belts out a signature Drew laugh. Part piercing whoop, part easy chuckle, it fills the studio and echoes

New York artist gives new life to discarded objects

down the halls.

"I just like the energy here," he said. He noted that his concept for the Hirshhorn piece was well-formed by the time he returned to San Antonio, and he could have finished it in a number of places.

It would have happened anywhere," he said. "It was coming." ArtPace founder Linda Pace displays one of Drew's earlier works in her Terrell Hills home. "No. 48" (1996) occupies an entire wall. It so moved Pace when she first saw it that she had to have it in her collection.

"It's about decay; it's about recycling, for me," she said. "It really appeals to me on a gut level."

Drew's residency at Finesilver has been separate from the Fine-silver Gallery, said its director, Gabriela Trench.

The day after attending the March, 16 opening in Washington, she said that although she saw the piece as Drew worked, she found the final work riveting.

"I saw it all along, but it just metamorphosed so much," she said. "Ninety percent of the time the whole piece was on the floor. So yes, it was a shock when it was all up."

Having Drew at Finesilver, which is home to a mix of businesses, has been a treat, she said.

"To me it has been very inspirational to have him here and see how he works, how

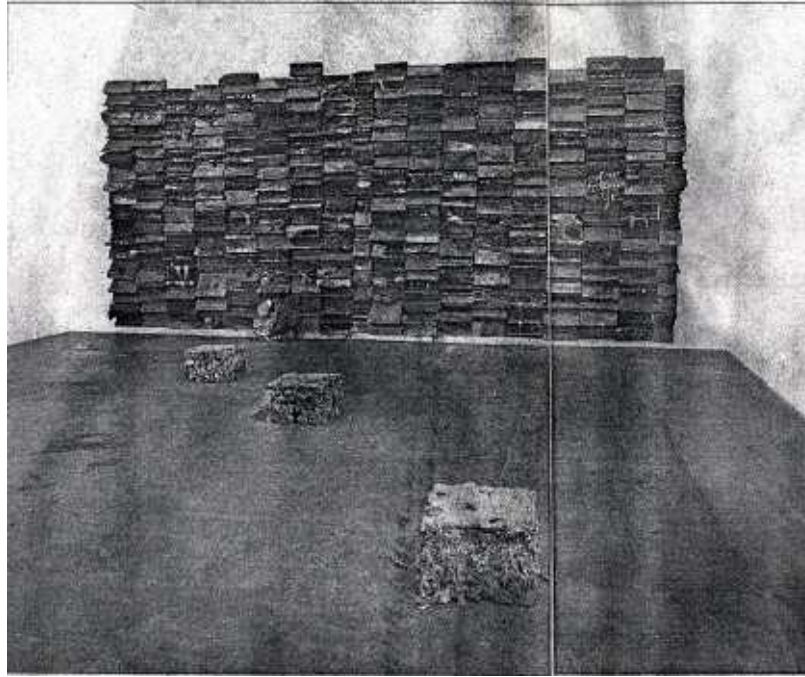
he is motivated from the inside," Trench said.

While he talked, Drew squeezed little dots of white glue onto the panels and pressed the wood squares against it. After an hour, several completed panels lay before him.

"While you were here I must have done four of those," he said. "That's a lot of

work I always do better when there are people around." More laughter. The day before he headed east for the opening, he had some last-minute details to attend to, including a final foray to one of the most, bountiful junk-finding spots in town: Nick's Auto Parts.

There they have cars always coming in and they're always trashing them, taking them apart, and all the remnants of life, different lives come falling out of them, little toys and things like that, safety pins, and all sorts of stuff," Drew said in a rush. "All these things - photographs, old photographs, 8-track tapes ..." He laughed. "Did you see some of the 8-track tapes in



the piece? If you stand up there in front of that thing long enough, you can see everything in the world."

At Nick's, Drew found a lot of the bits of whimsy and echoes of history that went into the work. He stored a cart for hauling items there, and he wanted to retrieve it before his trip.

Nick's Auto Parts is past Mission San Jose on Roosevelt Drive outside Loop 410. From Finesilver, it's a 28-mile round trip that Drew usually makes by bike.

One of Nick's sons, Freddy Campus, says the business has been in the family for 50 years. Roosters strut through the lot, a virtual museum of cars and trucks in various states of pilferage that

Campos sees as a valuable repository of history. Drew appreciates that, he said, and Campos, appreciates Drew.

"He must know every square inch of this place," Campos said as he sat on an old bench seat at the lot's entrance. "It's 10 acres of looking."

Overcast and cool, it was a good day for rummaging. But Drew limited himself to three items: a faded plastic orange juicer, bent silvertone spectacles minus the lenses, and a broken picture frame. He admired the juicer's waning color, still, bright in spots where the sun hadn't hit yet, and the speckled finish on the frame, the mystery of the eyeglass frames. These he tucked into a canvas bag.

Drew maintains a studio in



cities," he said. He usually is able to reassure cops that he really is a working artist.

Drew, who is in his late 30s but looks 10 years younger, was born in Tallahassee, Fla. His mother reared him and his four brothers alone in public housing in Bridgeport, Conn. To her credit, he says, none of the brothers has been in trouble with the law and all have grown up to be professionals.

He said his mother named him after Leonardo da Vinci because "it just had to be." He was still in grade school when he began to draw and paint and he's been showing his work since the age of 13. He earned a bachelor's in fine arts from the Cooper Union in 1985.

He's a name in the art world, and not just in this country. But he's also Leonardo, the guy with the bike and the helmet that Campos and his family know.

"There's 'things in his artwork that I recognize," Campos said while Drew leaned forward, listening. "It doesn't look like it, but there's a lot of pain, suffering and good times."

It's a sentiment that Drew expresses again and again, the notion of life, of experience, of people and of cycles.

"The defining factor in this work is the lives involved. No matter where they come from, you put them all together and the end result is the same." khunger@express.news.net

Brooklyn that he says is large by New York standards. But the 6,000-square-foot space he was offered by Finesilver owner Chris Erck proved too tempting to pass up.

Even after the Hirshhorn piece was packed and shipped, Drew's studio floor was studded with piles of loot that didn't make the cut.

Because he incorporates found objects into his art, Drew spends hours rooting around for just the right materials - feathers, shoes, a sock monkey, a roller skate. The colors, including signs of age; and decay, serve as his paint.

His style of dress and uncommon work method have caught the attention of, police in San Antonio and other