

Sculpture

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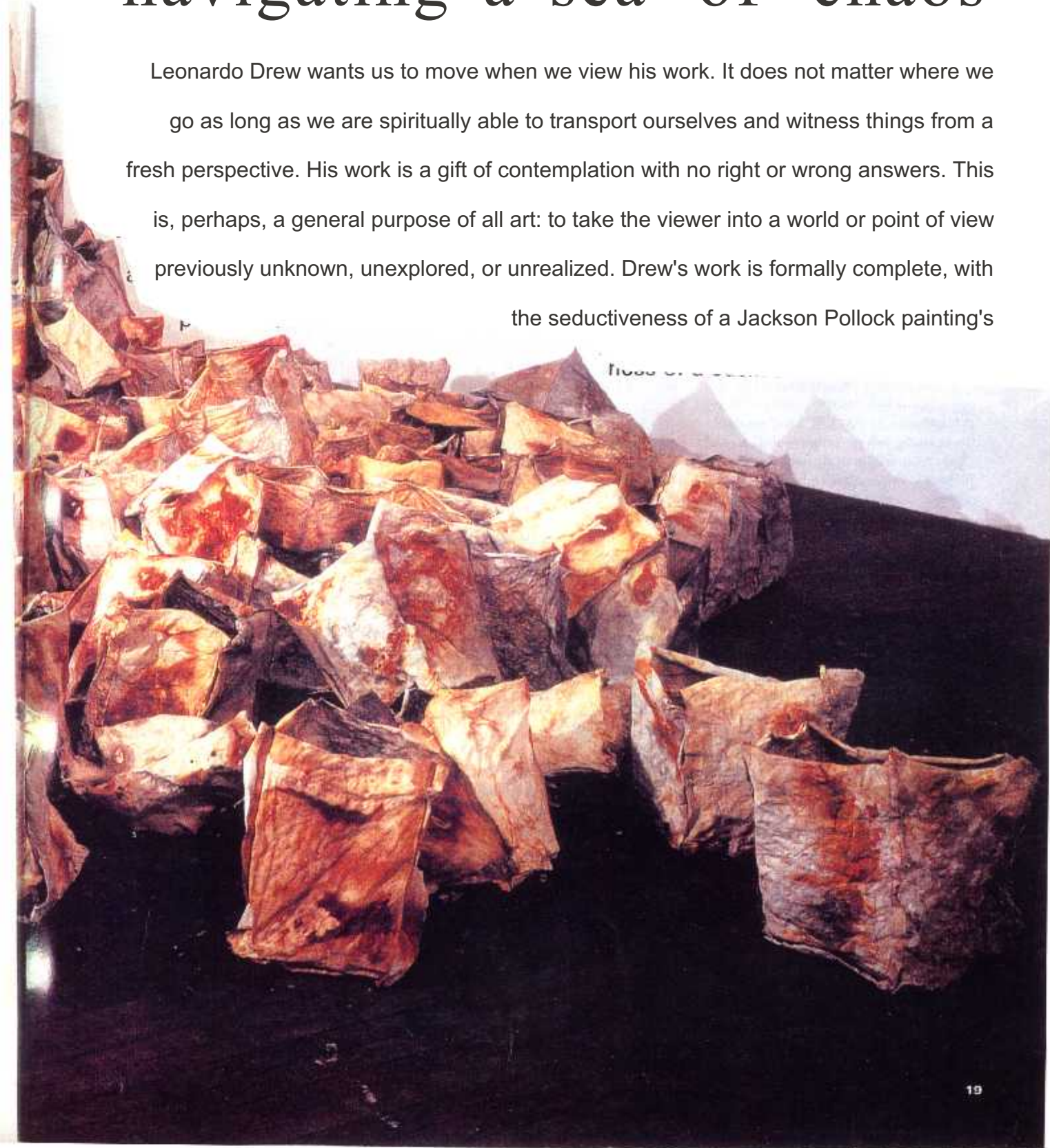


Leonardo Drew's installations demonstrate both formal beauty and metaphorical power.

by Lorraine Edwards

navigating a sea of chaos

Leonardo Drew wants us to move when we view his work. It does not matter where we go as long as we are spiritually able to transport ourselves and witness things from a fresh perspective. His work is a gift of contemplation with no right or wrong answers. This is, perhaps, a general purpose of all art: to take the viewer into a world or point of view previously unknown, unexplored, or unrealized. Drew's work is formally complete, with the seductiveness of a Jackson Pollock painting's





Above: Number 50, 1995-96. Rust, cotton, fabric, and plastic, 50 x 200 in. Previous page: Number 28, 1992. Canvas, rust, 132 x 256 x 156 in.

all-over Surface composition notion of field, and semiconscious arrangement. There is no beginning no middle, and no end: a tangible infinity sets in. While the work is enticingly beautiful, it is also bursting with metaphorical historic commentary. Barry Schwabsky has written, "Those commentators who are more sympathetic to topical Subject matter find that tile content gives depth to what might otherwise have been merely derivative form, whereas the more aesthetically inclined appreciate formal aspects that transcend mere topicality."

Drew neither titles nor signs his work. He feels that a roadmap verbally explaining what is already intrinsically clear to the eye would be redundant. The magic of his work lies in the ability of each piece to act as a looking glass for the viewer's own experiences and imagination, not exclusively as an insight into the life and times of tile artist. "Imagine that you are a tool for creating this thing and try to remove yourself just enough SO that you don't get too hogged down by ego or see yourself as an all-important Image," he counsels. This does not mean, however, that Drew does not infuse the pieces with his own Subjective understanding. His thesis is subtle and reassuring, yet horrifyingly objective.

In 1988, Drew produced a pivotal piece, Number 8, which began the prolific period that has defined his career until now. Rope, feathers, wood, fabric, and dead animals—all black from smoke, fire, or paint—hang from a large black beam attached to the wall. It reeks of decay. The sculpture's roughness permeates space without the necessity of touching it. It has the look and smell of death, yet seems to pulsate and breathe. Life and death walk in tandem in Drew's

work.

In his first solo exhibition at Thread Waxing Space in New York City in 1992, canvas hags and cotton were tile dominant media. Here was an African-American man working with cotton, yet, as George Melrod writes, "His process is not about literally repeating the efforts of oppressed predecessors, but about reinventing those events in a symbolic way, using fragments of history as a starting point for his own allegorical performance."²

Unlike the painful yet accurate image in Ben Shahn's famous Farm Security Administration photograph, Cotton Pickers at Work, Pulaski county, Arkansas, October 1935, the viewer understands these bags metaphorically. Taken literally, Number 29 (1992) could be the very same hags hung on a nail by slaves after a long day spent toiling in the fields. As in the photograph, the viewer experiences the sweat, the pain, the smallness of the human body in comparison with Drew's huge bags. They are stained with rust, a symbol of degeneration and renewal which might as easily suggest blood—the symbol of ultimate sacrifice.

The last four years have been particularly productive. From 1992 to 1996, Drew exhibited in several galleries in New York City, in museums in California and New York, and collaborated with Merce Cunningham for "Ground, Level, Overlay," a 1995 production in New York City.

The hallway of Drew's Williamsburg loft is lined with detritus from previous works (to be recycled later). Drew's front door opens into a large studio that is not as spacious as one might imagine from tile scale and number of pieces at his most recent exhibition at Mary Bootie

Gallery. The floor is littered with organized woodpiles, a new table saw, and a ladder. His equivalent of a swatch book hangs on the wall with various scraps of materials from all of his previous pieces. These "seeds" map his experience as an artist to the present and give direction to future work.

He was born in 1961 in Tallahassee, Florida, but grew up in tile projects of Bridgeport, Connecticut. He attended Parson's School of Design for a year and then received his Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from Cooper Union in 1985. Since his graduation he has been working long hours, seven days a week: for him, creation is the "juice of life." He remains unaffected by success, by attention, by distraction, or by others trying to influence him.

Drew's most recent exhibition at Mary Boone Gallery (September 7 to October 19, 1996) is a study in deterioration and renewal. This exhibition forces the viewer to explore Post-Minimalist disintegration of the grid and inexact repetition of form. These structures seem to decompose and rust before one's eyes, a meltdown of symmetrical form frozen in time an instant before tile moment of structural collapse.

Conjuring images of an aerial topographic survey or a close-up of rippled water, Number .S2 consists of plastic squares on a grid. Unlike the work of Sol LeWitt, with its symmetrical, mathematical rigidity, this grid seems to be wavering on its last legs, barely able to support the weight of its own frame. A dilapidated, collapsing, rust-stained plastic grid can also be seen in Number S6, whose squares are tagged

and numbered as though revealing a chaotic file system that does not make sense in a literal world; or, might this compulsive cataloguing be hyper-literal, lilac Philip Glass's Einstein on the Beach (1996), wherein the players count for the sheer joy of counting?

Number 53 (1996) makes reference to a bookshelf in a library as a container for memory, observations, history, and enlightenment. The piece flows from empty to full and from full to empty, emphasizing those texts which are present, as well as those which are not. It might easily be a reference to African-American history as told in pseudo-historical documentation written to perpetuate myth in some form. Or it might not. The beauty of Drew's pieces lies in their subjective significance not in the artist's need to tell us what to think.

Although maintaining Drew's vocabulary of rusted materials, Number 54 (1996) offers new diversity with the use of string, carpet, lace doilies, upholstery, rope, burlap, tattered fabrics, cardboard, a feather duster, and an old quilted jacket liner with a zipper. Some of these objects conjure specific images directly related to the legacy of slavery in America and the post-Civil War era: the feather duster of the house servants; the carpet of the

Below: Number 43, 1994-96. Cotton, fabric, rust, string, wood.

carpetbaggers; perhaps the rope of lynchings. The pieces are not limited to a single interpretation: "It's not important that you include my take on life or even my experiences. The works in themselves should act as mirrors," says Drew.

Suggesting a more universal interpretation than some other works, Number 55 (1996) is constructed of painted, black wooden boxes arranged on a grid like slotted mailboxes with a variety of objects such as murky glass, stacks of paper, and peacock feathers attached to them. Other objects such as metal, paper, and wood seem to spill or ooze out. What could be more direct than our own turbid reflection in a piece of murky glass? It confronts us with our own stunning imperfection as we regard the slots lined up like stacked tombs in the vault below a medieval cathedral.

Peacock feathers (one of: his typical materials) have, for Drew, symbolized the idea of "totality, through the blending together of all colors."³ His use of neutralizing, monochromatic rust achieves a certain oneness, creating a common denominator in all his materials. In early Christian art, peacock feathers represented immortality and the incorruptible soul. Drew's rust also possesses an eternal quality. The feathers themselves might typify Drew's own belief in the ability of art to speak truth, and its power to change things. Unification is an

Underlying theme to all of Drew's work, as is the duality inherent in life itself: good cannot exist without evil; joy cannot exist without sorrow; life cannot exist without death.

Drew's works evolve and define themselves through interaction with viewers. An act of creation is always a collaboration of some kind or another. The trick is to create something that matters not only to oneself, but to others as well. Leonardo Drew reflects, "As a person, how do I manage to navigate through this sea of chaos?"

I have found a way that's fluid for me, that allows me to work from my center, to focus, and at the same time, rise to what my responsibility is: to deal with the truth. You can't hide from yourself, right?" **■**

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Notes

- 1 Barry Schwabsky, "A Change of Scale," Leonardo Drew No. 45-A (New York: University of Buffalo Art Gallery, 1996): 44
- 2 George Melrod, "Material Witness: The Artwork of Leonardo Drew," World Art (January 1996): 39.
- 3 J. E. Cirlot, A Dictionary of Symbols, (Barnes and Noble, Inca., 1995): 251.

