

A TRASH COURSE IN SCULPTURE

Leonardo Drew Elevates the Value of Junk

By MICHAEL O'SULLIVAN
Washington Post Staff Writer

Freedom, as once defined by the poet Robert Frost, is "moving easy in harness."

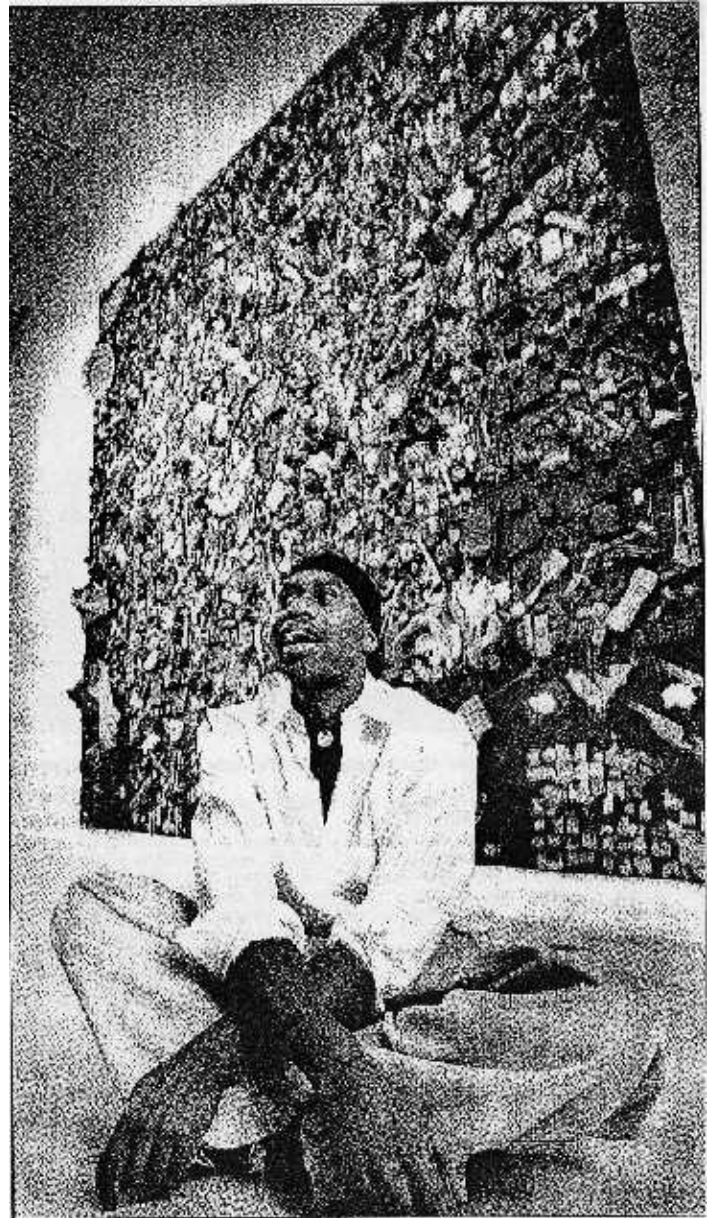
That phrase—with its evocation of muscular draft animals pulling but not straining against leather traces, with its suggestion of getting the job done despite, or perhaps because of, one's limitations—seems oddly appropriate in considering the work of sculptor Leonardo Drew, a 38-year-old artist with a dizzying but effective solo exhibit at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden.

Covering three walls of the Directions Gallery with what might be called vertical fields of junk—broken electronics, crayons, cartoons, ceramic shards, plastic utensils, rubber tubes, masking tape, appliances and an unusual number of mateless shoes mounted on wood—Drew's "Untitled (No. 75)," "Untitled (No. 76)" and "Untitled (No. 77)" do not evoke Frost because of any Podunk rusticity they share with the writer. If anything, their jangling, jazzy energy reminds one less of the farm than of the factory or the city. Seen head on, they look like giant circuit boards torn out of some CPU of the gods. From the side, they resemble topographic maps of a burned-out metropolis—sci-fi cityscapes of a nameless, post-apocalyptic urban wasteland.

But this buzzy blizzard of technological castoffs is not what makes one think of freedom and harnesses.

What conjures up Frost's definition is what lies beneath the trash, the "harness" within which this artist moves, working his deceptively easy and poetic magic.

For the undercarriage of each of his seemingly random assemblages is a meticulous modular structure based on a system of two-foot-square wood panels. Each of these units is a musical measure of sorts. On the wall, they form a composition—a song, if you will—whose melody plays



PHOTOS BY HERFORD WESTWELL — THE WASHINGTON POST
Building sculptures from scrap: Leonardo Drew and two of his untitled assemblages on display at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden.

differently depending on the order in which they are put together. Two of the works are chamber pieces: Nos. 75 and 76 are only (only!) 12 by 12 feet. At 56 feet long by 14 feet high, No. 77 is positively orchestral.

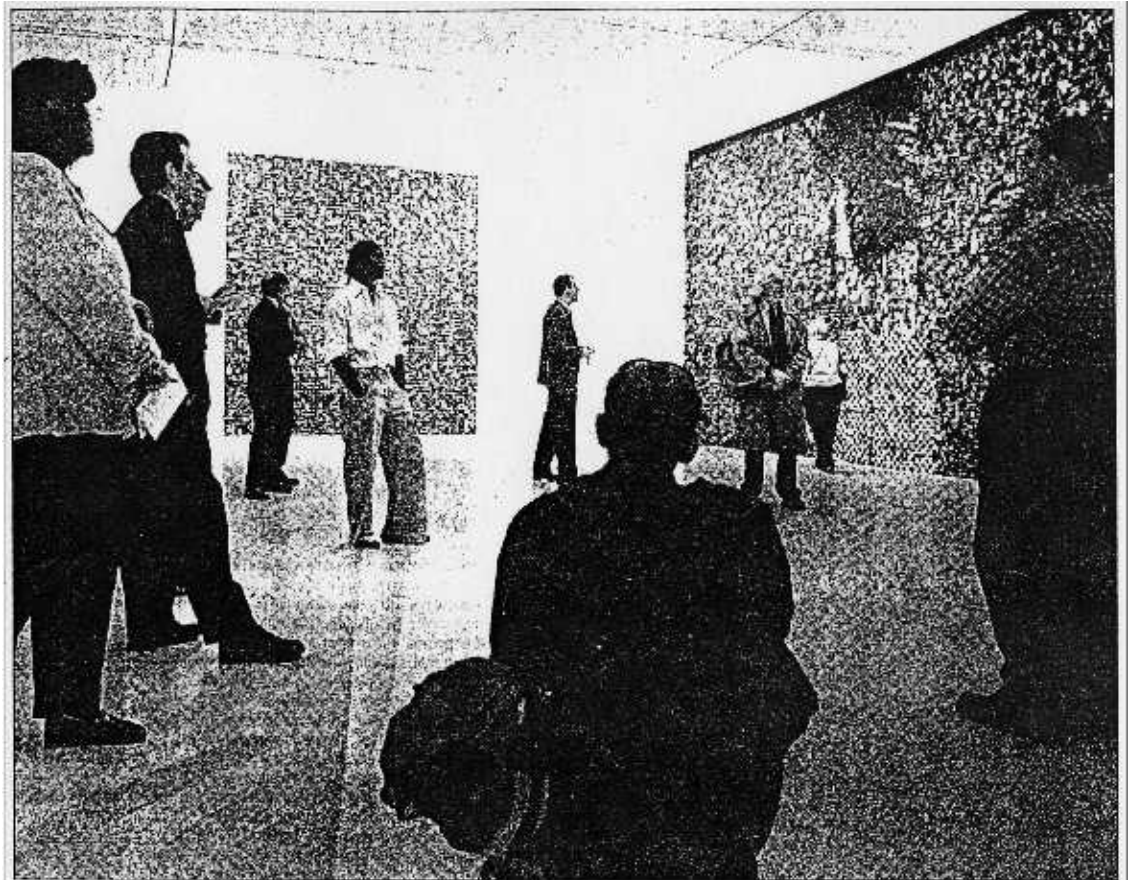
Between their birth on the floor and their display on the wall, they've been known to take on very different configurations, to evolve. Even in their present, so-called finished state, there's no guarantee that any of these three sculptures will remain forever as you see them.

"If they come back to me, they're doomed," says Drew, famous for cannibalizing his past work in the creation of future compositions. "In fact, the one piece that the Hirshhorn owns," he says, referring to

Leonardo Drew: A Man to Whom Junk Calls

"Untitled (No. 49)," not currently on view, "that same piece was on its way out, if you know what I mean, just before they bought it."

Don't be misled by Drew's casual attitude toward recombination or by the haphazard appearance, of his art. Despite the offhand look of the thrift shop, the junkyard odds and ends that make up his designs are applied not in scattershot fashion, but meticulously, each item carefully laid to rest in its designated position. Yet when asked about his working methods, Drew assures a reporter that his preferred approach is anything but calculated.



"Anything that breaks the rules," says Leonardo Drew of his works, "anything that stretches the boundaries, I'm all for it."



"These things are loud, but if you know what to listen for, they'll speak to you."

—Leonardo Drew

"It's spontaneity," he says, miming the sloshing of an

imaginary can of paint in the direction of the floor. "None of this thinking stuff."

"Anything that breaks the rules," he continues, "anything that stretches the boundaries, I'm all for it."

Why the grid, then? Isn't that an artificial restriction, an imposition he'd be better off without? "Not at all," insists the artist, who claims that the only limits on his creativity are those he encounters when he runs out of wall space. "The grid is my basis of sanity. Otherwise it would just be noise. I mean, these things are loud, but if you know what to listen for, they'll speak to you." (Be careful not to eaves-drop, though. If you lean in too far, you'll set off a piercing museum alarm.)

Noise, according to Drew, is what feeds him. The jabber of the TV set, usually tuned to the Cartoon Network or playing a music video picked up in Japan, is a constant companion at both of his studios in San Antonio and Brooklyn. He usually has the radio on, too. "It's just what I'm used to from living with four brothers," he says.

Drew knew he was an artist from the very beginning, even as his mother tried to prevent the young draftsman (named, naturally, after Leonardo da Vinci) from defacing every flat surface in sight at their home in the projects of Bridgeport, Conn. Her efforts to steer her son in other directions, he proudly reports, did not take.

If there's an overtly political content to Drew's current work, the artist is the last one to look to for assistance in sussing it out. On the one hand, his trash can be viewed as a profoundly sad commentary on wastefulness, poverty, classism and decay, while

The Scrapheap of Artistry

on the other hand, it also comes across as a joyful celebration of life's textures. Understandably, Drew is quick to distance himself from too literal or too narrow an interpretation.

"Hey, some people see the Statue of Liberty right here," he says, pointing to a vague outline of a figure in newspaper on the left side of No. 77. "I'd rather not get in the way of your seeing that, if that's what you want to see."

Drew alternately calls his works "mirrors," implying that whatever you see in them is a reflection of yourself (like Rorschach ink blots), and "emotional visualizations," hinting that they are the artist's private feelings, tumbled out of the subconscious in living color. Neither one, however; is a particularly original description of non-representational art, and both could apply just as easily to the work of every abstract expressionist to hit the pike since Jackson Pollock. In fact, it was Pollock's dribble canvases that provided the earliest inspiration for Drew, along with numerous less obvious influences including splashy painter Anselm Kiefer and metal sculptor Richard Serra.

Putting his art in the context of his life, Drew chooses not to view it in the sense of a completed project but as a search for some ineffable essence. A bit



BY GERALD MARTINEAU—THE WASHINGTON POST
Leonardo Drew and one of his works, which seem to both comment on wastefulness and celebrate life's textures.

touchy-feely, perhaps? Yes, but refreshingly uncynical coming from someone young enough to have come of artistic age in an era when art is viewed more as a commercial commodity or a ticket to fame than something as corny as a product of spiritual investigation.

"I'm standing on a lot of shoulders," he says, acknowledging the respect that his art-historical elders deserve. "I don't think any of us can ever take full credit for anything we're creating."

Comparing Drew with his forebears is a futile exercise anyhow, saying less about the significance of the artist than about the erudition of the one making the comparisons. Still, it's hard to enter or exit the Hirshhorn show and not notice similarities to such nearby works as Arman's "Door-bells," a box filled with, yes, an accumulation of old doorbells, or Jean Tinguely's "The Sorceress," a sculpture created from rusty machine parts and abandoned springs. Both were made in 1961.

Is the placement intentional? Of course not, merely a happy visual reminder that Drew speaks the truth when he modestly denies that anything like utter originality

exists.

By finding the strength to deny his own ingenuity, though, Drew reveals just how ingenious he is by deflecting the invidious, and inevitable, citations of similarity. How can you dismiss him by saying, "Didn't [fill in the blank] do the same thing 40 years ago?" when Drew already has confessed to the crime?

In the early '80s Drew gave up painting and drawing and took up sculpture. The brush and the pencil were, he says, crutches that prevented him from finding what he was looking for. It seems a paradox, but sometimes crutches can indeed prevent a man from learning how to walk.

Equally contradictory is the fact that someone so enamored of freedom would even choose a career fraught with, believe it or not, enormous limitations. Prior to last year's move to a more spacious Texas studio, the dimensions Drew worked in were circumscribed by the nine-foot ceilings of his original Brooklyn work space. His use of green is restricted by the fact, that he doesn't like the color.

Instead of purchasing material as he once did, Drew confines himself to what he can find on the street and at the city dump.

Finally and most important, by basing everything on an abstract but deeply ingrained sense of balance and composition derived from the ancient perfection of the square, by placing himself in a harness of his own design, Leonardo Drew has perhaps gone his namesake one better and taught himself how to fly.