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QUARTLY

# WORLD ART

THE MAGAZINE OF CONTEMPORARY VISUAL ARTS

## Material Witness

*Leonardo Drew's body of evidence*

## Art Objects

*Jeanette Winterson's awakening*

## Unnatural Pleasures

*Living in Virtual Geography*

## The Secret Artist

*Sophie Calle's surveillance*

## Blood & Ink!

*Ralph Steadman splatters Orwell*

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Leonardo Drew

# ma terial witr ess

Combining a love of cast-off materials and a painful historical legacy, sculptor Leonardo Drew constructs huge, lyrical allegories of decay and regeneration. George Melrod finds optimism among the ruins. JASON SCHMIDT (Courtesy Tim Nye Productions & the artist) Blackness flecked with beige; monumental scale fashioned from minute detail; rags and peacock feathers: The contrasts that define Leonardo Drew's sculptures are dramatic and powerful. Still in his early 30s, Drew is among the most intriguing and potentially significant American artists to emerge in the last five years. His work is that welcome rarity: both smart and deeply felt. The fact that he scavenges his materials from streets and urban lots does not detract from his works' handsomeness; indeed, his highly tactile (and still evolving) sculptural language is remarkable for its sensitivity to his materials' physical expressiveness and their cultural implications. But Drew also maintains an ambitious breadth of vision. His grand, abstract works allude to both black American history and Western art history- and, moreover, integrate them seamlessly.



Drawing from his love of cast-off materials - among which are such loaded or symbolically suggestive substances as cotton rust sacks rope, feathers and dead animals - Drew creates lyrical allegories of decay and regeneration. His work is both gritty and seductive, brooding and redemptive, personal and monumental. If his subject is ultimately the burden of historical memory, he never lectures his audience; rather, Drew addresses the viewer through the subjective lens of his own experience.

Instead of lessons, his works deliver haunting, richly textured prose-poems. Drew is well aware of the value of his alluring technique in engaging the viewer to explore the works' potent subtexts. "It's kind of a black hole, to drag you in, he laughs, sitting among the detritus of his studio. "It's a complicity. You become part of the work, part of the experience." And for just a moment, one



a junkyard and a Zen garden; a landscape of black and rust and beige, scattered



with mountains of detritus. Mounds of newly painted, blackened cardboard squares litter the floor. A pair of vast, wall-sized panels, made up of choppy, rectangular protrusions, are painted night-black.

A static of white linen squares covers the right-hand panel. The one on the left is affixed with pushpins, rags, bits of string and twine, and gem-colored cloth tatters. As Drew works, a pile of animal pelts sits at his feet along with two white plastic buckets- one filled with rags; the other with peacock feathers. Over the past four years, Drew has had two solo shows at Thread Waxing Space, one of New York's premier alternative spaces, and is now the sole artist represented by Tim Nye, who founded the space. Last winter he created a stage set for the Merce Cunningham Dance Company (right), which was received with accolades. In the summer of 1995, he was exhibited alongside some of the country's top artists in a group show about place

and displacement at the Chicago Institute of Art, and was selected by Richard Armstrong for inclusion in the 1995 Carnegie International. This past fall, he was an artist-in-residence at the Pace Roberts Foundation in San Antonio, Texas, and the subject of a solo show at the San Diego Contemporary Art Museum.

His roots are somewhat less glamorous. Born in Tallahassee, Florida, Drew was brought up in the housing projects of Bridgeport, Connecticut. "Drugs, shooting, that kind of energy, I grew up with that stuff," Drew observes. From an early age, he used his art-making as a way to escape, comment on, and ultimately transcend the degeneration around him. From the age of 13, he



showed his work in community-sponsored exhibitions and eventually attended the Parsons School of Design and Cooper Union. Drew's first artistic influence, revealingly, was Jackson Pollock, whose work he got to know - in black and white - through a cheap booklet. Although the gestural immediacy of Abstract Expressionism is a world away from Drew's laborious, time-consuming process, one can see Pollock's approach to 'all-over' composition in Drew's own work. That painterly influence is also evident in Drew's frequent use of rectangular armatures set against a wall.

The work that crystalized Drew's aesthetic was a 1988 piece entitled Number 8 (for all their implicit poetry, Drew titles his works numerically). A soot-black tangle of rope, flecked with shards of wood, feathers, fabric and debris, and hanging off the wall from a horizontal trestle, Number 8 evokes the gnarled, happenstance tapestry of a dying homeless person's life. In its stringy insubstantiality and its unraveled squalor, it is one of Drew's most despairing works, but it is nonetheless mesmerizing. In his ensuing works, Drew used that dichotomy to maximum effect, playing off the dark symbolism of his materials against their handsome, ritualistic composition with solemn aplomb.

His 1992 solo show emphasized cotton. Certainly, if any material is associated with Negro labor and suffering in United States history it is "King Cotton," which was at the heart of the economy of the ante-bellum South, was central to the history of American slavery, and even after the Civil War, ,

remained a staple of many sharecroppers. Drew's sculptures compose creamy raw cotton in various - ways: stacked between layers of rusted metal in square bales; as in Number 17; stacked into a wall-sized barrier across the gallery, as in Number 25; or nailed to a 10-foot, 1-foot-long wall in endless tiny shelves, as in Number 23. Interspersed with them is a featuring canvas sacks series of works smeared with brownish rust.. Arranged in - various formats - hanging off the wall " along wooden beams (Number 26), or from the ceiling (Number 29), piled together in a heap (Number 28) these works sag limply, as if under the weight of history; empty vessels waiting to be filled through human labor.

Some of the best works, such as Number 24 and Number 34, combine these themes, dabbing cotton into walls of rusty metal or onto protruding tabs. Number 27, one of Drew's strongest works, suspends cascades of rope and unbleached cotton from a horizontal beam, combining references to lynching with the webby post-Minimalist playfulness of Eva Hesse.

In his recent works, the motifs have grown yet more complex and intertwined. Number 40, the centerpiece of Drew's 1994 show, featured an army of little black boxes sealed with blackened canvas tabs resembling bandages. These boxes face a free-standing wall, from which were hung ' small, limp canvas balloons which were rubbed with rust. On the other side, a few ' scattered blocks paraded toward a towering construction of wood and glass blocks, as if toward the cul-de-sac of housing projects. Number 36 is a skeletal wooden grid (black, of course), hung regularly with tapering curls of nylon, recalling dried tobacco, and spattered with feathers. Number 43 is a vast grid of small rusty boxes stuffed with bits of string and rags. But as , in the earlier work, themes of multiplicity , and hollowness, barriers and decayed materials repeatedly reappear in different configurations. The broad field of references in Drew's work has been cited as both a problem and as one of its great

strengths. While his use of soft materials often calls to mind Hesse's pioneering sculptural experimentation, his appropriation of cotton and his geo-metric formalism more specifically suggest a tangible debt to Jannis Kounellis. Conceptually, one could even draw affinities to the staid paintings of Agnes Martin, in their coaxing of spiritual sustenance from grid-like repetition, or to the grids of Sol LeWitt, or even to the work of Louise Nevelson, black bas-reliefs

reinvented as a sort of inner-city billboard.

But these citations relate only to Drew's formal strategy: the catalyst for his work lies in the implicit sociological or historical memory of his materials. In this way, he is closer to David Hammons, who crafts ironic abstractions from such symbolic 'black' materials as kinky hair or chicken bones.

Drew's materials, too, come loaded with cultural baggage - but neither so specifically nor satirically. Rather, he engages his materials as featured elements in a broad historical allegory. Clearly, cotton (slavery) and rope (lynching) still carry the sting of a history lesson. Rags are a more general symbol of the down-and-out scavenger. While Scott Joplin's signature 'ragtime' earned its name from its ragged syncopations, images of capering 'darkies' dressed in ragged clothes were also a cliché of that era.

Rust is a broader symbol, and one Drew has made uniquely his own. (Indeed, Drew has become a rust connoisseur, and has evolved his own trademark methods of creating and applying it). Implying negligence, decay, and ultimately, regeneration, rust is at the heart

of Drew's oeuvre. Although they are dark and often brooding, his works can also be read as icons of redemption, beginning with their basic strategy of remolding something cast-off into something beautiful. That rubbed rust also resembles blood, and skin pigmentation, adds to the layering of metaphors. By the same token, his inclusion of dead birds and animals is a graphic reminder of mortality,





but also suggests a sacrifice on an altar and integration into a larger cycle of regeneration. Drew's use of feathers adds a note of morbid delicacy, as well as another tactile, metaphorically multilayered material. Scattered across Drew's blackened surfaces, they suggest evidence of a begrimed urban phoenix, who, though charred in the flame of affliction, rises again, soot-black, from the ashes.

The implication of redemption that offsets the works' otherwise morose tone is one of their most appealing qualities. It's "kind of like a teeter-totter," Drew says, "fatalistic, idealistic: like in life, you want to have both of those things." Yet as compelling as his themes are, it is the raw physicality of the work and its beguiling technique that bring it to life. For all their obsessive repetitiveness, Drew's sculptures are never dull. Rather than skimming the whole picture, you find yourself pushing up against it in order to discover the intimate details. Drew's recent work uses a two-part structure. 6 x 207 in. By contrasting density and airiness, as in his backdrop for Merce Cunningham, or juxtaposing two dissimilar surfaces, Drew is adding an element of counterpoint that enriches the work's cadences, and compels the viewer's eye into a state of greater attentiveness. "I guess that's part of the poetics of the work," he reflects.



However, the very fact that Drew employs a language of formalist abstraction is noteworthy, if merely because many other contemporary black artists use a far more didactic voice which emphasizes racial divisions. Drew, in contrast, addresses the viewer through a lens of commonality; his work is inclusive rather than divisive, using his own specific history as a fulcrum to explore universal feelings. Though painter Glenn Ligon's message is far blunter, he also employs repetition as a sort of mantra of transcendence, alluding to skin colors with a stark black and white palette. For all of the dolor in Drew's art, there is something inherently optimistic about how he adapts his aesthetic roots in Western culture in order to suit his own voice. An interesting analogy could be made to the artist Janine Antoni, whose work addresses issues of the outsider through the vantage point of femininity. Discussing the references to works by male artists in her own art, Antoni noted how her dual identity- both a woman and an artist- defined her work. In a 1993 interview she explained, "I'm trying to describe a complex relationship between my identity as a woman and my identity as an artist. My work tries to incorporate both histories. I feel connected to, and alienated from, both."

In a similar way, Drew's work nurtures a dual identity, drawn from his legacy as a black American, and as an inheritor of a predominantly white modernist culture. Thus, even as his materials eloquently trumpet his identity as a social outsider, his work radiates a subtle aura of inclusiveness. The transcendence derives not just from the potentially redemptive act of art-making, but from the artist's claiming the legacy of Western abstraction as his inheritance. While Antoni puts herself at the center of her work and Drew does not, his work does involve an indirect performance element. Drew's sculptures are not the outcome of an intentional physical ordeal as with so much seminal performance art (indeed, he clearly takes delight in the process of construction) but they are very labor-intensive and directly hands-on. By his own estimation, each work takes roughly three months to complete. Yet for all the repetitive toil, his process is not about literally repeating the efforts of oppressed predecessors (thankfully), but about reinventing those events in a symbolic way, using fragments of history as a starting point for his own allegorical performance. The finished work is then presented as a sort of allegorical fetish. A comparable spirit is also evoked in the work of Ann Hamilton, who also creates sensuous, repetitive, implicitly narrative material landscapes as a ritualistic altar to human labor. He also indirectly echoes the work of Martin Puryear, who revels in his work's tangible construction and makes a fetish of the process of labor (although Drew addresses rote labor, while with Puryear, labor is realized as craft). It is tempting to define Drew's labor as a quest for personal catharsis. But how could such catharsis be possible, when the scope of the historical trauma he addresses is so overwhelming? Instead, one might say his work is about bearing witness in a personal way, while hinting at the possibility of transcendence through the act of observance, reinvention and transformation. In this way, Drew's true role models are closer to Anselm Kiefer and Christian Boltanski, who have addressed 20th century European history - specifically the cataclysm of the Holocaust - through the use of such humble materials as straw and found clothes and photographs.



Finding and fanning the spark of truth that is dormant in his materials, Drew similarly creates a sort of private eternal flame, an homage to the necessity of historical memory. For all his range of references, Drew does not rely on the previous knowledge of the viewer to inform the work, leaving it to the critics to connect the art-historical dots. His work is equally accessible to the art-world scholar and the average viewer. Indeed, Drew delights in his ability to coax reactions from viewers across a broad spectrum of backgrounds. "At times, I'd sneak up on people in the gallery and see what they're thinking," he recalls. "I'd observe their body language, how they lean this way, then that way, see their confusion, hear them talking about how they feel. We're all capable of talking at the gut level.... Each and every one of us has that in us, if not by history, then personally: that trial by fire," adding, "There's a historical experience, and there's a human experience."

In the end, one might say that it is this urge for universality that sets Drew's work apart. In a leap that is eminently empathetic, Drew invites the viewer to share his experience vicariously, to glean his or her own meanings from the work, so that it becomes a bridge between the artist, the viewer, and the experience of historical memory. "It's like the Zen idea of becoming the wall, becoming the rock," Drew observes, returning his attention to the giant, unfinished work before him. "I'm trying to experience certain emotions, to purge them; in a very concrete way, the work becomes the emotion." There's historical experience, and there's human experience. Through his ritualistic compositions of darkness, rags and rust, Leonardo Drew manages to tap into both. For an artist who so respects accumulated associations, it's nice to consider that he too is now adding to the chronicle, extending his material's memory, one tattered synapse at a time.

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