

## Viewing life's decay

### Artist's boyhood memories inform his works

By Cate McQuaid, Globe Correspondent | October 30, 2010

LINCOLN — When Leonardo Drew was a boy in Bridgeport, Conn., every window in his apartment in the projects looked out on the city dump. Visitors to his scabrous, brooding, powerful midcareer survey “Existed: Leonardo Drew” at the DeCordova Sculpture Park + Museum won’t be surprised. The dump echoes everywhere.

“I remember all of it, the seagulls, the summer smells, the underground fires that could not be put out,” Drew says in critic Allen S. Weiss’s catalog essay for the show, which was organized by the Blaffer Gallery at the Art Museum of the University of Houston. “And over time I came to realize this place as ‘God’s mouth’ . . . the beginning and the end . . . and the beginning again.”

Born in 1961, Drew came of age in the 1980s. Minimalism’s sheen was dulling, and he took off in the other direction. The sculptor, long a fan of Jackson Pollock, created what he sees as his seminal work, “Number 8,” which is Pollock-like in its dense accretion of gestures. But Drew wasn’t painting. “Number 8” (1988) hangs along the wall, a black thicket of rope, bone, feathers, animal hide, and more, all suspended from a black beam. Spend time with it and you’ll discover a dead bird, a raccoon skull, and several peacock feathers.

It’s a dark, deathly curtain of muck. All that’s missing is the stench. I was inclined to run off, but I was also gripped with ghoulish fascination. “Number 8” is the embodiment of psychological shadow material — all the stuff we don’t want to touch or examine, which consequently courses with the crackling energy of the unknown, the feared, and the forbidden.

All of Drew’s works delve into decay and find life there. He often works on a massive scale, accumulating tattered, rusting items until they coalesce into a monolith of corrosion and decomposition. Yet every bit, it turns out, he carefully handcrafts. He immerses objects in water to rust them.

“Number 43” (1994) features 160 handmade boxes in a grid against the wall. Some are empty, some have spare bits of rusty junk. In some, dirty fabric spills out like vomit. Dainty gingham delicately hangs in others. The decidedly decadent grid of “Number 43” invites bit-by-bit examination, but the overall effect is organic: Opening and closing, expanding and contracting, and slowly, inevitably going to seed.

Drew, who is African-American, makes references to slavery in pieces constructed largely of cotton, such as “Number 23” (1992), which looks like a giant cabinet made of tiny cotton drawers. The artist created it after a trip to Senegal, where he visited a former slave trading post and saw the menacingly confined conditions there. But most of Drew’s pieces don’t apply to particular subjects: They are about existence, how we struggle, how time ravages us, and how even in the wasting away there are glimmers gathering in the ashes.

A bristling energy erupts from “Number 9X,” made this year. The piece — like many of Drew’s works, a sculpture that conjures paintings because it’s on the wall — features splintered wood thrusting out of a square shape, cinched at the sides. Sections of tree root escape the square like flyaway hair. With all that splintered wood, it’s still about breakdown, but there’s also a sense of breakout. The piece is smaller than many of Drew’s sculptures, and he moves from the grid to one individual square, as if shifting focus from the community to the individual. We’re left wondering what detritus, and what inspiration, he’ll find there.

## Rubber and soul

Like Drew, sculptor Martha Friedman goes straight for themes many shy away from in everyday conversation, but where Drew is dour, Friedman, 35, is puckish. Maybe you'll get the picture from the title of her exhibit, also at the DeCordova: "RUBBERS: Martha Friedman." Double-entendre intended. Her works, made out of fleshy cast rubber, are delectably all about eroticism. In one installation, "Rubbers," viewers are invited to touch the piece and make it quiver.

Who doesn't want to touch art, if only because it's usually expressly forbidden? "Rubbers" features giant rubber bands strung from floor to ceiling, set up in a grid you can walk through.

There are shades of Claes Oldenburg and his giant everyday items here, but Oldenburg was never as forthrightly sexual as Friedman gets in "Ladies Room." Two glistening three-foot-long tongues hold an olive between them like a keystone. If the tongues are phallic (and a picture in the exhibition brochure of people carrying one of them comically underlines that they are), the olive and its jutting pink pimiento refer to the female equivalent. "Ladies Room" is so cheeky, it's fun just to watch people's jaws drop, or their eyes roll, as they walk into the gallery.

Friedman tosses in food with sex (the tongues are cast from cow tongues she found at a deli). Pleasures of the flesh, visual puns, and a pop-inflected move toward abstraction are her hallmarks. In "Loaf 2," she follows through on "Ladies Room" by answering the question, "What happens when tongue and olive come together?" It's a luncheon meat, of course, also in cast rubber. But at five feet across and hanging on the wall, it looks more like an abstract painting than something you'd pile onto rye with mustard and provolone. Even so, it satisfies.

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