

Blaffer's Leonardo Drew survey hits a home run

By DOUGLAS BRITT
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McNay Art Museum
Leonardo Drew's *Number 33A* (1999).

By every measure, *Existed: Leonardo Drew*, the first U.S. museum survey of the sculptor's work, is a triumph.

It's a triumph for Drew, presenting a dazzling array of his monumental assemblages — along with a suite of unusually sculptural works on paper — and emphasizing pivotal moments that culminate in a show-stopping piece that effectively surveys the survey.

It's a triumph for Claudia Schmuckli, director of Blaffer Gallery, the Art Museum of the University of Houston, who curated the traveling exhibit and has conquered what may be the city's trickiest art space, making Drew's work look at home in every nook and cranny.

And it's a triumph for the Blaffer search committee that tapped Schmuckli in January to replace Terrie Sultan, who left last year to direct the Parrish Art Museum in Southampton, N.Y. The Drew survey signals that committee members got what they wanted — a truly curatorial director who won't let the demands of running a university museum undermine her ability to put together top-drawer shows.

Drew, who divides his time between Brooklyn, N.Y., and San Antonio, makes

abstract sculptures whose building blocks tend to be readily recognizable castoffs from the world around him. Take *Number 8* (1988), which Drew calls “the mother piece” from which everything that followed flowed.

“Blackened skeins of rope and scraps of wood interwoven with bones, entrails, and hides of dead animals covered in black paint hang from large wooden supports, offering an ominous vision of chaos, death and decay pulled in from the streets,” writes Schmuckli in the monograph accompanying the exhibit.

Another crucial early piece, *Number 14* (1990) — a surprisingly beautiful assemblage of oxidized metal strips — introduced what became a staple of much of Drew’s visual language: rust, which sometimes appears as a light coating; other times as a heavy, oppressive encrustation.

You see layers of history — the lives and deaths of people and cities — in so much of Drew’s work, but perhaps the hardest-hitting pieces combine rust with cotton, the cash crop that fueled slavery’s expansion. Visually, *Number 24* (1992) bears no resemblance to Jacob Lawrence’s *The Migration of the Negro* narrative painting series (1940-1941), but it strikes me as a worthy postscript. The Old South and the Rust Belt merge as raw cotton shoots out of a 24-foot grid of wood and oxidized metal slats. It’s a poetic reminder of how Northern industrialization, Southern slavery and their legacies intertwined, both during and after their heydays.

Another haunting body of works is made from paper casts of the objects that have gone into Drew’s assemblages. But he and Schmuckli save the biggest surprise for last, filling Blaffer’s most remote upstairs gallery with *Number 123* (2007).

“A sprawling installation of myriad little sculptures applied directly to the wall in a loose and airy grid, it comprised all the materials that he had employed and developed over the course of his career, effectively reading like an atlas of his oeuvre,” Schmuckli writes.

What an atlas. What an oeuvre. We’re lucky to have it with us for a few more weeks.

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