

Existed explores death and decay

By DOUGLAS BRITT
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EXISTED: LEONARDO DREW

When: Reception 6-8 tonight, exhibit through Aug. 1

Where: Blaffer Gallery, 120 Fine Arts Building, University of Houston; 713-743-9530. Free.

Everyone on the Blaffer Gallery crew that's working to install *Existed*, Leonardo Drew's midcareer survey, has gone to lunch.

Except Drew. He's sorting through what must be hundreds of empty rust-covered canvas bags, deciding how to mount *Number 28*, an installation he first created in 1992.

"I've seen it in San Francisco, over in Japan, Italy — it always has a different look," says Drew, who's based in San Antonio and New York.

In contrast to most of the other works — wall-mounted sculptures and works on paper spanning about 20 years — that will go on public view during Friday night's reception *Number 28*, once it's completed, will look like it's in a state of collapse, with the bags tumbling into the viewer's space. But first Drew has to figure out how it fits in with nearby artworks and the room's dimensions.

"I can screw this piece up if I don't tune in to what it needs for this space," he says.

Screwing up the installation would be a rare misstep in a career that began in 1975 at age 13, when Drew had his first exhibit at a bank in Bridgeport, Conn., and has included more than two dozen solo exhibitions, international group shows and inclusion in such prestigious collections as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Chronologically, *Existed* begins with *Number 8* (1988), which Drew dubs “the mother piece of all the work,” the culmination of a five-year period when he was moving away from work that was merely technically impressive to a more demanding abstract visual language.

“Dark and foreboding, *Number 8* assaults with a power so raw and unhinged that it bespeaks a hard-won freedom of artistic expression akin to an act of exorcism,” writes Blaffer director and chief curator Claudia Schmuckli in the monograph accompanying the exhibit.

Drew says he wasn’t going for shock value, but exploring themes of decay and regeneration that have continued throughout his career. Pointing to *Number 14* (1991), an 8.5-foot-tall wall-mounted sheet of oxidized metal and rust, he says, “Same thing. We’re talking about the lifespan of materials.”

Another key piece, *Number 43* (1994), a massive, dizzying assemblage of fabric, plastic, string and wood — not to mention plenty of rust — echoes the elements of *Number 8* but coats them in the patina of *Number 14*.

Number 28 belongs to a group of cotton-themed epic-scaled works.

“Made of empty canvas bags covered in rust, they evoke the sweat and blood of a life led in the fields,” Schmuckli writes. “There is a strange beauty to these works that, while referencing a dark chapter of African-American history, celebrates the endurance of a people in the face of adversity.”

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