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Leonardo Drew @ Anthony Meier Fine Art

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"Number 12S", 2011, wood, 36 x 36 x 36 inches

Ravages to the urban landscape are so indelibly imprinted in the public imagination that Leonardo Drew's work, with its overriding sense of aftermath, seems harrowing in its timeliness. While the artist has frequently veered toward monumental installation, a more intimate body of seven, abstract sculptural wall pieces is no less potent in this pitch-perfect exhibition.

By numbering his works, Drew grants the viewer titular claim to collaborate on meaning. The earliest in the exhibition's sequence, *Number 11S* (2011), is a dynamic wood jumble with distressed sticks and sprawling roots. The construction extends to 108 inches in length and juts out from the wall in diverse angles to a depth of 48 inches. Hidden behind the buttress-like protrusions are colonies of wood fragments. Without direct evidence of the artist's hand, this work could

easily be a found demolition discard. As would be the case for Robert Rauschenberg's works mimicking mundane cardboard, or pieces from the *Arte Povera* movement, the context of the gallery setting elevates *Number 11S* with symbolic portent. Yet if Drew's construction were unassumingly plunked among rubble instead of installed on a pristine, chalk-white gallery wall, its dynamism would still register with a visceral charge: its forms encode a force resonating with the memory of tempestuous storms, both physical and emotional.

Born in 1961, the artist participated in his first public exhibition at age 13. In the exhibition catalogue *Existed: Leonardo Drew*, which accompanies his recent traveling mid-career survey organized by the Blaffer Gallery, University of Houston, he credits seeing reproductions of Jackson Pollock's work for his artistic awakening and measure of ambition.

Appropriately, Drew has created works that



"Number 11S", 2011, wood, 108 x 48 x 24 inches overall

translate a protean gesture into sculpture. The artist, who trained as a painter, holds his BFA from Cooper Union. His career has followed a laudable trajectory, with his current work represented in major collections ranging from the Hirshhorn in Washington, DC to the Guggenheim in Bilbao, Spain. He spent his early years in housing projects in Bridgeport, Connecticut, which overlooked an industrial refuse dump. Drew remembers “all of it, the seagulls, the summer smells, the underground fires that could not be put out...Over time I came to realize this place as ‘God’s mouth’...the beginning and the end...and the beginning again,” he told essayist Allen S. Weiss.



"Number 15S", 2011, wood and mixed media on paper, triptych, framed: 26 1/2 x 26 1/2 x 4 inches each

With its embrace of discarded materials and an underlying theme (the cyclical nature of existence) Drew’s work evinces a deep honesty. Discarded nails, plywood and other found detritus are emblematic materials that evoke urban collapse, or more broadly, mortality; while writhing organic forms connote a past reach for regeneration. Continuation is sensed as a force through the artist’s dynamic expression.

Charred wood squares, hypnotically repeated in and spiking out of the gridded structure of *Number 13S* (2011), evoke an aerial view of a decayed city, or some damaged interior landscape. Twisted limbs and the active play of light over splintered slats and different levels of protruding forms enliven the dusky surface.



"Number 13S", 2011, wood, 96 x 96 x 14 inches overall

Its square format (96 x 96”) lends a measure of restive quiet, like the uncanny respite one experiences during the eye of a hurricane, when air simply feels different.

Number 12S (2011) is by far the most dynamic work. Rendered in a charcoal black that swallows all vestiges of light, it contains details of a fragmented geometry, which is vital in its identity despite the fact that [Louise Nevelson](#)’s sculptures practically cornered this territory. The uncommon shape of *Number 12S* derives from an interior construction with a curved hull-like protrusion. Its figurehead roots grasp upwards, as if preserved in an untenable position of liberation from gravity.

In four small, spontaneous constructions encased in Plexiglas boxes, liberated fragments break out or are cast off from central entities, once again suggesting aftermaths of some explosive event. With its central oval-shaped inkblot, vertical stab of gritty wood, and white background, the triptych *Number 14S* (2011) bears a kinship to the gestures and formal opposites seen in [Robert Motherwell](#)’s poetic elegies. Drew’s dialogue in formal opposites is extended with gritty specks and delicately refined embossments from

warped paper.

In *Number 19S* (2011), mesmerizing rows of small pinched white clumps are veiled by an intricate flurry of white threads as delicate as spider's silk. The clumps are, in fact, matted pieces of toilet paper, a material consistent with the artist's unorthodox use of materials. In the past, his gridded work with cotton bales led inescapably to social texts relating to the artist's African American heritage. *Number 19S*, however, speaks more directly to a body of work following his 1997 residency in Japan, where mortality seems to be represented by the color white. *Number 19S* is a small, spectral and meditative object. As in all of the artist's works, wide interpretations are possible, including an elegant clearing after the storm—one for which we may all yearn after the endless firestorms and other tempests of our time.

–SIGNE MAYFIELD

Leonardo Drew through May 13, 2011 @ [Anthony Meier Fine Arts](#)

About the Author

Independent Curator Signe Mayfield served as Curator at the Palo Alto Art Center from 1989 to 2011. There, she mounted exhibitions featuring the art and collections of the San Francisco Bay Area. They include: *Nathan Oliveira: The Painter's Bronzes*; *Treasures from The Mexican Museum: A Spirited Legacy*; *Correspondence: Masami Teraoka & Ukiyo-e*; *Jim Campbell: Seeing Digital*; *Big Idea: The Maquettes of Robert Arneson*; and *Dominic Di Mare: A Retrospective*.