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## Transience: Influence of artist's early life evident in work



Leonardo Drew's Number 123 (2007) made of wood, paper and mixed media.

Photo Courtesy of Leonardo Drew and Sikkema Jenkins & Co.

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GREENSBORO - Growing up in a housing project in Bridgeport, Conn., in the 1960s and '70s, Leonardo Drew lived alongside the city dump. Even as a child he evidently found a special kind of beauty in the decay and corrosion he observed when exploring that site.

Drew's ventures into the Bridgeport dump turned out to be formative experiences in the development of his art career. Now in his late 50s, he has built a growing reputation for his works apparently made of aged, dilapidated and previously discarded materials.

The Weatherspoon Art Gallery is showcasing an impressive selection of his works from the last 25 years in "Leonardo Drew: Existed," a traveling exhibition on view through May 9. Organized by the Blaffer Gallery, the Art Museum of the University of Houston where it was shown last year, the exhibit brings together 20 of Drew's works, highlighting his distinctive, metaphorically potent sculptures.

Drew's comments on his forays into his old neighborhood dump are quoted in an accompanying 208-page monograph containing color reproductions of his works. His time at the dump was usually spent "mining through remnants and throw-aways, putting this with that."

Although he distinguished himself early on as an accomplished draftsman, adept at classical figure-drawing, he eventually arrived at a mode of art-making substantially influenced by those early forays into his hometown trash repository.

The show's title emphasizes life's transience, a concept fundamental to Drew's art, which is distinguished by a somber, elegiac quality. In its materials it invites comparisons to Italy's *Arte Povera* and the work of black vernacular artists like Thornton Dial. In its structural dimension it references minimal art and recalls the work of Louise Nevelson. But Drew has his own material vocabulary and range of thematic concerns.

Drew identifies his works by numerical titles that sequentially track the chronology of their making. (In the titles of seven small works on paper at the Weatherspoon, the numbers are followed by individual letters, which he uses as a shorthand means of referencing particular aspects of a few of his pieces).

The show's earliest work, *Number 8*, dates from 1988. Measuring 9-by-10 feet and 4-inches deep, it's a dark tapestry densely configured from an assortment of stained scraps and fragments that might well have been salvaged from a trash dump -- paper, rope, twine, bits of lumber and the carcasses of several small birds and/or other animals -- all supported on, and attached by rusty nails to, a frame of narrow, blackened wood strips.

In fact, *Number 8* is one of Drew's few works to incorporate actual found objects and materials. He fabricates most of his pieces in his studio, using commercially acquired materials that he subjects to various chemical processes in order to efficiently corrode, discolor or degrade them. The results bring to mind evidence of physical abuse, long exposure to the elements and endurance under harsh conditions.

Drew's art alludes to painful, anxiety-generating experiences and physically debilitating processes of the kind that all sentient beings undergo in the course of our lives. More specifically, some works-- including *Number 8*-- can be read as metaphors for the painful history of slavery and second-class citizenship that black men and women have suffered in the centuries since the European colonization of Africa began. As a black man raised within the social confines of a 20th-century urban-housing project (and more recently moved by his historically evocative experiences traveling in Africa), Drew might rightfully be expected to hold these issues close to heart.

Clear allusions to black history can also be found in several other works here. For example, the rusty canvas bags aligned on four weathered-looking horizontal boards in *Number 26* (1992) call to mind dirty, blood-stained cotton-picking bags stored for their next round of use by slaves or sharecroppers. The densely aligned, detritus-stuffed, tightly stacked compartments of *Number 43* (1994) and *Number 59* (1997), meanwhile, suggest high-rise housing projects like the one where Drew grew up, as well as the prison cells to which black men are disproportionately confined in this country.

Relief from the darkness of such works can be found in *Number 79*, another of Drew's rare pieces incorporating found objects, and the exhibition's most colorful work. This wall-mounted, grid-format piece from 2000 -- with its assortment of broken plastic toys, electronic components and other small, street-scavenged objects -- was inspired by the bright colors he saw several years earlier during a residency in Brazil, according to Xandra Eden, the Weatherspoon's exhibitions curator.

Also chromatically contrasting with the show's darker pieces are Drew's *Number 92* (2003) and *Number 94* (2006), made largely from white-paper casts of various found objects, rather than the objects themselves. These pieces have a ghostly quality, alluding to death and the cultures of Japan, where Drew has traveled and nurtured an interest in Zen.

The show's largest and most physically imposing piece is *Number 123* (2007), a selection of small sculptures made of wood, fabric, rusty wire

screen and uniformly shredded comic strips, among other worn-looking materials, all gathered from Drew's studio in Texas in preparation for a subsequent move to New York. Installed on three walls of the museum's atrium, it greets entering visitors, providing ample enticement to go upstairs and see the rest of this striking exhibition, well worth a trip to Greensboro in the next two weeks.

"Leonardo Drew: Existed" is on view through May 9 at the Weatherspoon Art Museum, on the UNC-Greensboro campus at Spring Garden and Tate streets. For more information, call 334-5770.