A first encounter with Leonardo Drew’s work is a charged, provocative experience that is physically palpable. At the same time, it challenges us to grasp the weight of the history of sculpture and to consider why some manmade structures evoke a sense of permanence while others seem ready to drift into ruins. In his early work, the artist marks out a territory of gritty minimalism that disrupts everything clean and shiny about serialization to give us rich, handmade assemblages that appear to critique the unchecked deterioration of northern cities following the industrial revolution in the 1970s and 1980s. Though using the classic tradition of the grid, Drew is nevertheless guided by esotericism and irregularity. There are no straight lines, no perfect joints, and no symmetry, no true repetition.

Evidence of Drew’s craftsmanship, combined with his deliberate incorporation of naturally occurring effects, such as the growth of rust, speaks of history, of age, of imprecision. Unlike previous investigations of seriality, his is not a statement about simplified forms, but of aberrance and messy individuality. His stacked and weathered sculptures, which appear to be built from materials taken from the street and transformed into ominous totems, evoke a mysterious and shadowy side to the everyday. However, Drew does not, as we initially assume, orchestrate order out of forgotten debris, but quite the opposite. He carefully transforms raw materials—lumber, steel, cotton—to resemble debris. This method generates an unusual and profound articulation of the chaos and entropy of the world around us.

The recent works included in this publication combine earthy connections to nature with imagery evocative of densely populated cities, and battered barricades. These brutal, yet elegant, forms built from paper, sawdust, blocks of wood, tree roots and branches, are often saturated in black or grayish-white pigment. In Number 119D (2009) (p. 84), for example, a narrative emerges from a vision of a blackened apocalyptic landscape of charred tree roots and a grid composed of blocks of wood that resembles a burnt-out city. The work unearths conflicting emotions of desire and apprehension that are rooted in our perceptions of what is natural and unnatural. The severed tree trunk suggested by the overall trapezoidal form disrupts our inclination to see nature as a symbol of growth and instead conveys a sense of its destructive powers. The composition speaks to the cycle of nature and its ability to overwhelm everything that is manmade.

Distanced views from helicopters of the devastating aftermath of raging forest fires or other natural disasters, and imagery that recalls the complete erasure of communities and the uprooting of oven the oldest trees by hurricanes and tornados, fire and flood, come to mind. Specifically, the recent epic disasters of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans or the tsunami in Japan create a visual overload—Drew taps into the way these circumstances are impossible to articulate. How can one describe an utter disruption of any sense of comfort provided by order or structure, when everything seems to have washed away or disintegrated into a black and smothering vapor? Just like these disasters, Drew’s work is something we have never encountered. It provides us with a very particular vision that is at once a general abstraction.

Drew’s wildly dark imagery is an impassioned exploration of the steady march of time. The larger work that was generated from Number 119D, Number 134 (2009) (p. 85), is an imposing fifteen-plus foot high sculpture that one might want to call monumental, except that it entirely contradicts this notion. For it is eccentric and fragmented rather than sturdy and enduring. As far as context, the particularities of placing this work in the white sanctum of the gallery ties it to the lineage of Duchamp’s installation of a zigzag of string or Arman filling a gallery with trash. Like the industrial wasteland that surrounded Drew in his youth, Number 134 is stunningly beautiful and terrifyingly hazardous. Its sheer size is so imposing as to force us to find safe distance, perhaps in an effort to resist facing our own fragility.
I grew up in the P.T. Barnum projects of Bridgeport, Connecticut. The city dump occupied every view of our apartment. I would watch the bulldozers troll back and forth over this massive landfill, the dump trucks cart and drop, the cranes lift, deposit, and bury. I remember all of it, the seagulls, the summer smells, the underground fires that could not be put out . . . and over time I came to realize this place as “God’s mouth” . . . the beginning and the end . . . and the beginning again. As I grew up I always found myself there, mining through remnants and throwaways, putting this with that. I did find something in the discarded . . . “new life.” It’s the metaphor and consistent weight of being which drives my work to this day. Though I do not use found objects in my work (my materials are fabricated in the studio), what has remained from my early explorations are the echoes of evolution . . . birth, life, death, regeneration.

Leonardo Drew has traveled far from his days as a child in Bridgeport, but his work and practice echoes the histories of that childhood, which became the catalyst for his long-standing fascination and engagement with material. In the passage above, we are privy to the infinite possibilities that scene unlocked for him as a remarkably talented and gifted child. Drew’s artistic talents first came to light when he participated in a city-sponsored children’s art program in Bridgeport. While his natural ability afforded the young prodigy entree to a career in comics and graphic design, it was his love of painting—in particular, the work of Jackson Pollock—that transformed his raw talent into the vehicle for an extraordinary artistic journey.

An astute and consummate student of the formalist art practices of the 1950s and 1960s, Drew rooted his work in the philosophical discourses that shaped abstract expressionism, minimalism, Arte Povera, and eccentric abstractionism. As with most contemporary art practices today, Drew’s emphasis on concept, materiality, and process, as well as his intent in melding it all with politics, places him squarely within the trajectory of post-minimalism and post-post-minimalism. Drew, however, is less interested in the canonical art historical rhetoric and more concerned with exploding the definitions of visual genres: his work defies the traditional constructs and mediums associated with painting and sculpture. For over twenty-five years, Drew has fastidiously constructed a deeply personal material language steeped in political, social, and artistic dialogues. The resulting work stands as an unyielding testament to the artist’s ability not only to engage a formalist tradition, but also to reshape that tradition into something new and far more encompassing than its initially narrow markers and myopic spheres. By blending minimalism and eccentric abstraction with philosophical frameworks from West Africa, Japan, and even folk traditions of the American South, Drew has enabled a reading of formalist work that is far more expansive and complex than previously known. In doing so, he has placed his own unique imprint upon the contemporary art landscape.

Drew’s initial inquiry into the elasticity of painting as an aesthetic discipline began in the late 1980s. The influence of Jackson Pollock is evident in early works, such as his seminal Number 8, 1988, which denotes Drew’s understanding of material as a concise marker of historical and cultural memory. Through a growing emphasis on materiality, Drew began to transpose painting from two to three dimensions and at the same time to engage in the idea of material as a vehicle for both evoking history and critiquing the present social and political landscape. Drew’s work can be compared to that of artists such as Eva Hesse and Jackie Winsor, both of whom interrogated the minimalist frame with works immersed in materiality.

Perhaps it is their precise and pointed use of materiality—infused with feminist utterances and rooted in deeply personal and communal narratives—that was so fully recognizable to Drew that it became something of a foundation from which the artist could critique the historical, social, and cultural legacies of nineteenth-century America, as well as contemporary issues, including the effects and aftermath of excessive consumption, the pervasive degradation of natural resources, and the growing disparities of our lives.

In 1995, Drew’s investigation into the language of materiality directly took on the formalist strategies of minimalist traditions, primarily the large-scale grid format. His use of the grid—
and works on paper function as an ancillary, yet unique, practice, they serve to reveal the
and productive period. The artist has allowed himself a period of pure, unadulterated ex-
any fixed notion of his practice. The latest work would appear to emerge from a liberating
at creating work that evokes contemplative meditation. Alternating between paintings that
of beauty. Drew is as adept at creating work that is in equal parts art and spectacle as he is
common visual chords, combined with a delicate dissonance, creates unexpected flashes
Drew's high-relief paintings not only continue to explore the tensions between sculpture
of a performance or rite.
[1083x127](Princeton: Princeton
[1102x83](New York:](New York:
[1153x24]11

right, the “drawings” here are varied. Created as singular statements or as diptychs and
tripptychs, presented as flat works or in high relief, they function as prologue, an almost
transcendental meditation on nature. The drawings feature wood in a myriad of states that
range from the “found” detritus. In doing so, he subverted one history in the service of another. He
raised questions then—as he does now in this new body of work—not only about the ori-
gins of materials, but also about their ability to retain a memory of form. Drew’s sculptural
paintings are sumptuous meditations on material topography. Moving from intimate studies to constructions monumental in scale, the works serve as a foundation for the artist’s own
philosophical directive of de/materialization.

The essence of Drew’s practice is the transformative process through which the elasticity of material as matter allows it to be de/constructed and de/materialized to reemerge as either vestiges of its former self or something wholly unrecognizable. Drew has an exceptional ability to transform material through fabrication or through combining disparate materials
to disrupt our perception of them. This radical transformation of the object—its misuse, reuse . . . deconstruction, appropriation, and reconstitution—is reminiscent of ritual con-
cceptions integral to Congolese society—a noted philosophical framework transplanted into
the folk traditions of the American South during slavery. Drew’s integration of this sophis-
ticated understanding of material and transformation into twentieth-century—and now twenty-first-century—fine art practice has imbued his work with an evocative and powerful
presence. Through his work and process, Drew has advanced a visual language built con-
sciously and unconsciously not only on the formalist art practices of the latter twentieth
century, but also on a pathos shaped by the historical legacies and radical cultural under-
pinnings of the artist’s existential self.

Building upon his recent twenty-year survey, this new body of work, created over the past
two years, points to a new direction in the artist’s practice. Drew’s sculpture grid composi-
tions have disappeared, and in their stead the artist has introduced a series of organic ges-
tures that are as materially provocative as they are poetic. Having mastered the technique
of playing upon the tension created between order and chaos, Drew has now shifted his
visual focus from the Minimalist grid to organic form, adding yet another layer to his con-
ceptual framework. To that end, he has limited the materials he uses, but has allowed for
maximum explorations of form. However organically formed these new works may be, the
artist retains his codification of material, as well as his signature laborious and methodically
orchestrated process, rendering each work as much a finished product as it is the residue of a performance or rite.

Made almost exclusively in wood—ground, chopped, burnt, painted—these works mark a
new epoch in the artist’s practice. Minimal relief paintings, monumental sculpture, and
works on paper have been meticulously crafted into works infused with aesthetic inference
Drew’s high-relief paintings not only continue to explore the tensions between sculpture and
painting, but exploit their slippages as well. The result is lyrical as the artist’s use of un-
common visual chords, combined with a delicate dissonance, creates unexpected flashes
of beauty. Drew is as adept at creating work that is in equal parts art and spectacle as he is
at creating work that evokes contemplative meditation. Alternating between paintings that
are densely composed organic forms and expansive monumental wall works, he undermines
any fixed notion of his practice. The latest work would appear to emerge from a liberating
and productive period. The artist has allowed himself a period of pure, unadulterated ex-
ploration. And the payoff has been significant.

As in past years, Drew juxtaposes his drawings with his relief paintings. Since the drawings
and works on paper function as an ancillary, yet unique, practice, they serve to reveal the
artist’s间ial dialogue and cast light on his often enigmatic process. A counterbalance to his
more expansive paintings and monumental work, intimate yet powerful in their own

Gallery, University of Houston, 2010), p. 20.
2. See Kirk Varnedoe, Pictures of Nothing: Art Since Pollock (Princeton: Princeton
4. Leonard Koren, Wabi-Sabi: for Artists, Designers, Poets and Philosophers (Berkeley: Stone
Bridge Press, 1994).
LIST OF WORKS

14–15
Number 163, 2012
Wood, paint, paper, metal
156 x 216 x 72 in.
396.2 x 548.6 x 182.9 cm
Installation view:

16–17
Number 160, 2012
Wood, paint
66 x 58 x 43 in.
167.6 x 147.3 x 109.2 cm

18–19
Number 162, 2012
Wood, wood, metal, paint, gouache, thumbtacks, ballpoint pen, graphite, paper
123 x 185 x 24 in.
312.4 x 469.9 x 61 cm

20
Number 135D, 2012
Wood, paint on paper in Plexiglas box
40 x 45 x 18 7/8 in.
101.6 x 114.3 x 47.9 cm

21–27
Number 161, 2012
Burnt wood, paint
Site-specific installation, dimensions variable
Installation view:

28–29
Number 166, 2012
Wood
32 1/2 x 38 1/2 x 14 1/2 in.
82.6 x 97.8 x 36.8 cm

30
Number 165, 2012
Wood, paint
44 x 29 x 22 in.
111.8 x 73.7 x 55.9 cm

31
Number 154, 2012
Wood
38 x 57 x 41 1/2 in.
96.5 x 144.8 x 105.4 cm

32
Number 157, 2012
Wood, paint
111 x 12 x 2 1/2 in.
281.9 x 30.5 x 6.4 cm

33
Number 134D, 2012
Wood, paint chips, acrylic, graphite on paper in Plexiglas box
37 1/4 x 37 1/4 x 13 7/8 in.
95.9 x 95.9 x 35.2 cm

34–35
Number 136D, 2012
Wood, paper, graphite on paper in Plexiglas box
37 1/2 x 37 1/2 x 21 1/2 in.
95.3 x 95.3 x 54.6 cm

36–39
Number 159, 2012
Wood and aluminium
114 x 186 x 71 in.
289.6 x 472.4 x 180.3 cm

40
Number 137D, 2012
Wood, aluminium, paint, graphite on paper in Plexiglas box
37 1/2 x 43 x 25 1/2 in.
95.3 x 109.2 x 64.8 cm

41–43
Number 155, 2012
Wood
55 x 58 x 61 in.
139.7 x 147.3 x 154.9 cm

44
Number 156, 2012
Wood, paint
109 x 10 x 9 in.
276.9 x 25.4 x 22.9 cm

45
Number 164, 2012
Wood
45 x 39 x 25 1/2 in.
114.3 x 98.1 x 64.8 cm

46
Number 158, 2012
Wood, paint
24 x 24 x 16 1/2 in.
61 x 61 x 41.9 cm
**BIOGRAPHY**

Born in Tallahassee, Florida, 1961
Lives and works in Brooklyn, New York

**Education**
1985. BFA, The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, New York

**Solo Exhibitions**
2011. Anthony Meier Fine Arts, San Francisco
Vigo, London
Galleria Napoleonisima, Naples, Italy
Window Works: Leonardo Drew, Artspac, San Antonio
Fine Art Society, London
2006. Palazzo delle Papesse, Centro Arte Contemporanea, Siena
2002. The Fabric Workshop, Philadelphia
Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin
2000. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC
1999. Madison Art Center, Madison, Wisconsin
Travelled to: The Bruce Museum of the Arts, New York
1996. University at Buffalo Art Gallery, Center for the Arts, State University of New York, Buffalo
Mary Boone Gallery, New York
Currents: Leonardo Drew, Saint Louis Art Museum, Saint Louis
The Pace Roberts Foundation for Contemporary Art, San Antonio
Ground Level Overlay (Merce Cunningham Dance Company Collaboration), City Center, New York
1994. Walter and McBean Galleries, San Francisco Art Institute, San Francisco
Thread Waxing Space, New York
Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca
1981. Bridgeport Public Library, Bridgeport, Connecticut
The Inn at Longshore, Westport, Connecticut
1978. Bridgeport Public Library, Bridgeport, Connecticut
Bridgeport City Hall, Bridgeport, Connecticut

**Select Collections**
Caldec Collection, Rotterdam
Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit
Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC
Linda Pace Foundation, San Antonio
Menil Museum of Art, St. Antonio
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Miami Art Museum, Miami
Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles
Philadelphia Art Museum, Philadelphia
Princeton University Art Museum, Princeton, New Jersey
Progressive Art Collection, Mayfield Village, Ohio
Saint Louis Art Museum, St. Louis
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York
Sorique Foundation Collection, Lérida, Spain
Studio Museum in Harlem, New York
Weatherpoon Art Museum, Greensboro, North Carolina
West Collection, Oaks, Pennsylvania
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