

Art in America

Leonardo Drew

**New York,
at Sikkema Jenkins**

by Mary Proenza



Number 161, a floor-to-ceiling installation winding through the gallery, was the dynamic centerpiece of this exhibition, which also included a dozen elegant wall sculptures (all works 2012). Made primarily of wood, some of it burned and much apparently found, the pieces at their best display Leonardo Drew's virtuosic ability to create forms as quietly, incontestably credible as those in nature.

Drew, an African-American artist born in Tallahassee in 1961 and raised in housing projects in Connecticut, has often alluded to sociopolitical issues in his work. His past use of such symbolically charged materials as cotton, rope, rags and rust has been cited as referring to the antebellum South, Civil Rights struggles and modern industrial America. The charred timbers of this installation suggested some such references, but the work ultimately conveyed the forces and forms of the natural world more broadly.

Visitors walked under and around the blackened assembly of beams, two-by-fours, plywood scraps, dry branches and sticks, which looked both random, like detritus after a disaster, and intricately constructed, like latticework. In its tall, attenuated structure with openings that let in light, the piece evokes fire-devastated neighborhoods or forests. Meanwhile, in its scale and snaking shape, it resembles a dinosaur skeleton. In terms of the show, the installation was rather defused by proximity to the highly realized, neighboring wall sculptures, which in turn felt crowded.

The sculptures have a more organic bent than is typical of Drew's work. The 5½-foot-wide *Number 160* looks like a giant starfish. It's surprising to realize that the visually soft, carpetlike texture of the "arms" is created by the aggregated ends of many small, unpainted wooden spikes. The center of the work—a grouping of white-painted branches and small geometric constructions that appear sun-bleached—suggests the mouth of an anemone; some of the shapes curve outward, evoking sensitive tentacles designed to trap and digest prey. This kind of energetic core is typical of many of Drew's sculptures, as is the blurring of distinctions between what's swallowing or bursting from what, and what's natural or constructed.

Like much of his previous work, *Number 162*, a mural-size assemblage on paper, spans the gap between drawing and sculpture. It reads as an enormous sketchbook in which some of the notations have taken on physical dimension. On the sides are small drawn and painted diagrams and three-dimensional models. His usual palette of black and earth tones is accented with one little stroke of sky-blue gouache. A large, burned, rootlike system fills the middle, with elements at the top and bottom pushing forward in tendrils. The area in between breaks down into small wooden modules—a hallmark of the artist's work that recalls Louise Nevelson, as has often been noted. In its quotidian aspect and combination of painted, drawn and projecting elements, the work is akin to Robert Rauschenberg's *Combines*.

Overall, this piece, which so effectively juxtaposes wild and tame, can be read as a takeover by nature. The rootlike elements, although burned, seem to embody the life force of the diagrams and models. In this, as in much of Drew's work, even when nature is in a stage of decline, it's irrepressibly generative.

Photo: View of Leonardo Drew's exhibition, showing Number 161, 2012, burned wood and paint; at Sikkema Jenkins.