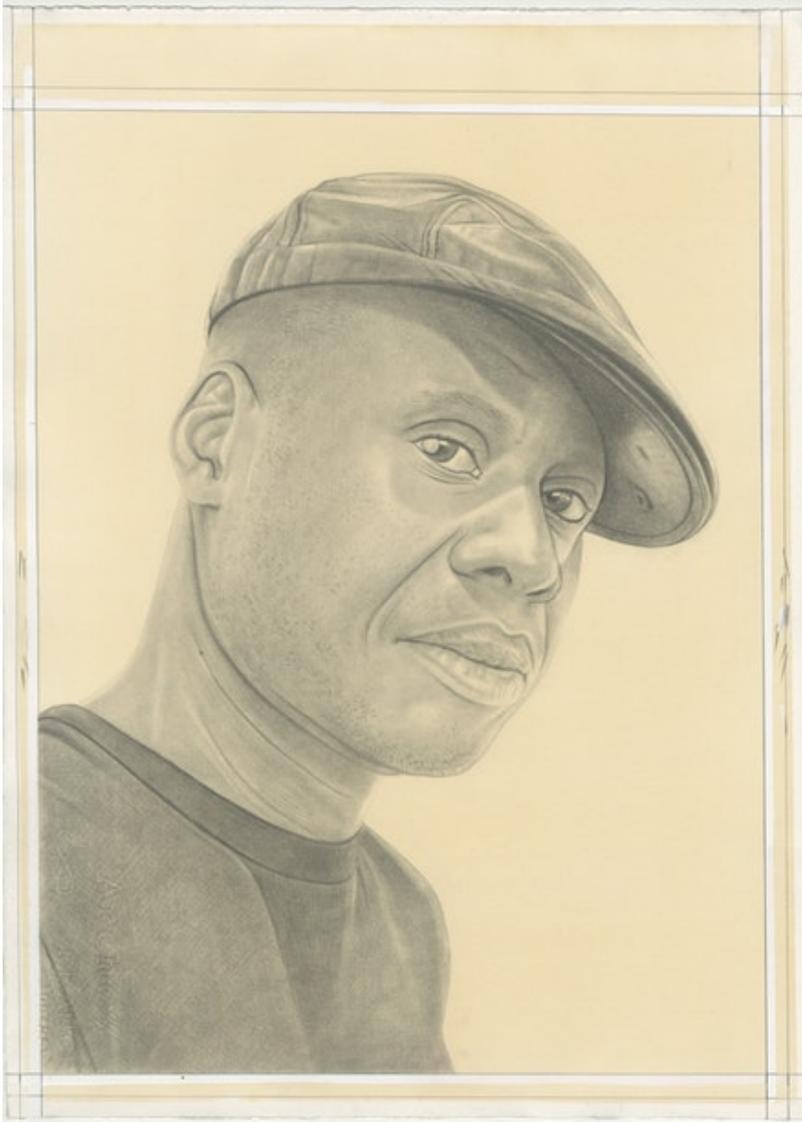


Art INCONVERSATION

LEONARDO DREW with Charles Schultz

“We are the nature of nature”

JUL-AUG 2019



Portrait of Leonardo Drew. Pencil on Paper by Phong Bui.

New York

Galerie Lelong & Co.
May 16 – August 2, 2019

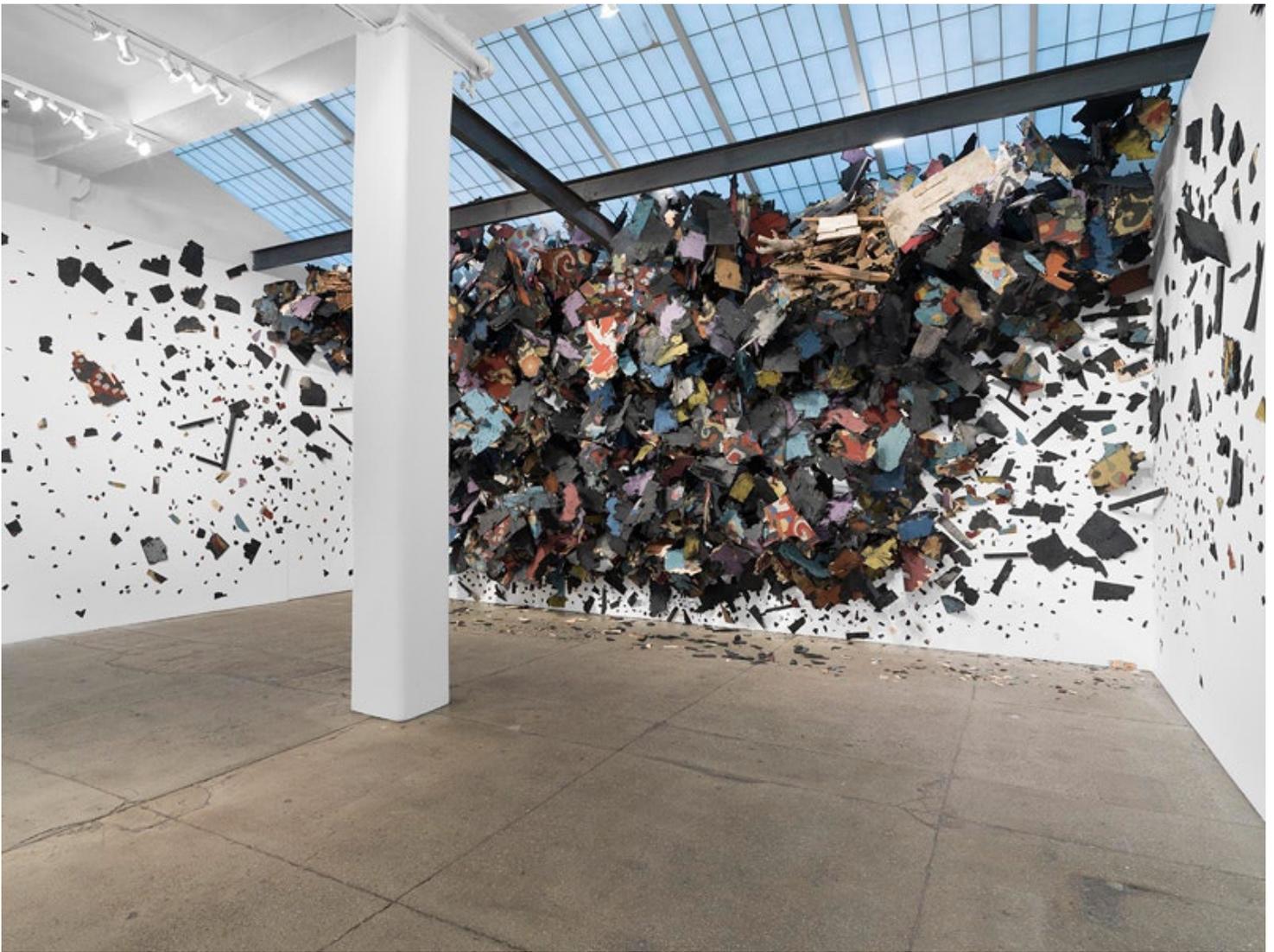
New York

Madison Square Park
June 3 – December 15, 2019

Leonardo Drew (b. 1961) considers himself an elder statesman of the art world. In his first exhibition, at age 13, he showed a larger than life painting of Captain America. His natural talent

for draftsmanship earned him early opportunities to work at prestigious comic book publishers like Marvel and DC Comics, but Drew was after something more elusive. In the conversation that follows Drew talks about the choices he made that enabled him to begin earnestly creating art, the experiences and collaborators who were formative in his development as an artist, and the influence of travel on his life and his practice.

This summer Drew is exhibiting his first outdoor sculpture, **City in the Grass**, in Madison Square Park while a solo show of Drew's new work is on view at Galerie Lelong in Chelsea. We met on a sunny morning in early June and spoke for an hour beside Drew's room-size sculpture, **Number 215**.



Leonardo Drew, **Number 215**, 2019, Wood, paint, and sand. Dimensions Variable. Installation view: **Leonardo Drew**, Galerie Lelong & Co., New York, 2019. © Leonardo Drew. Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co.

Charles Schultz (Rail): I counted **Number 211** to **218** in this exhibition. What happened to numbers **213** and **216**?

Leonardo Drew: [Laughs] I'm well known for cannibalizing my own work. If you were to count the early works, **Number 8** is key, the mother piece to all the works. I start with **Number 8**, so you ask what became of **Number 1** through **7**, well they're part of **Number 8** (1988) actually. That has become a continuum of how I approach things, how I realize things. Nothing is sacred in this studio. I'm always taking bits of this to make that, and realizing that each piece has something to say. When it comes to layering and becoming a solidified situation or a life, you need to have experiences, and each work actually has a level of self and experience that can assist the others, and the more you bring these elements together they become wiser, they become larger, they take on this largesse that you can't deny. Even the things that you would consider failures—things that I've gotten back from exhibitions and stuff—I take them apart and they just inevitably become better, because they're just layered with life.

Rail: That's a strange thing to be aware of, as a viewer. Looking at, say, **Number 212** (2018), and wondering if it will remain **Number 212** or if it will be subsumed by a later work. How do you make those kinds of choices?

Drew: Well it's the responsibility of having an exhibition, work has to leave. Collectors make choices, and the works get pulled away. So that is actually, a lot of time, what saves a lot of these pieces.

Rail: That reminds me of something I read elsewhere, about your philosophy of the viewer: how the viewer completes the work when the work becomes a mirror for the viewer. How the work operates on more energies than just your own—



Leonardo Drew, **Number 212**, 2018, Wood and paint, 125 x 132 x 56 inches. © Leonardo Drew. Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co.

Drew: Yes, the viewer is absolutely complicit in realizing the work. I've always taken that on as a philosophy, that it's not just my journey but a collective one. As I move forward and create, I'm also learning. I mean it's not this kind of vacuum where I'm all-knowing, that would be ridiculous, and I think that as you allow for these other experiences—other people's experiences—to become yours, the work becomes richer, wiser.

I number the works for that very same reason, because if I gave you a hint of what I'm thinking, you might just take it and run with it, and that would just completely wipe out your experience. You know? And you need to have that—I want you to have that experience, as a viewer. For me, that's the most important thing.

I had this one experience actually, at the Hirshhorn Museum, that is a great example. We had this monstrosity of a piece that took on the whole interior of this room, and the security guard, he had to pretty much have this thing in his face all the while, so it was driving him crazy but he started to sort of see things, and whoever walked in that room, could be a tour or something, he'd take it upon himself to tell them what this work is about. [**Laughter**]

Rail: What sort of things did he say?

Drew: Well I happened to be in the room when it was happening one day, and my friend was like, "You have to stop him! He's just like saying anything!" And I said, "No, we're gonna learn something now." So in the end I stepped up to him and asked, "Where'd you get all that?" and he says, "The artist told me." [**Laughter**]

Rail: That's great.

Drew: Maybe this was true, if he's standing in front of the piece to the point where he absolutely believes that what he is saying is what this piece is about, you know? And it was interesting because people were challenging him too, they'd ask "So what is this?" and "What does this mean then?" and "I don't think that's it." It was a beautiful experience watching that trade-off between people who felt very strongly. If I had told those people what to think they would have stopped right there, and so this is what it's all about for me.

Rail: I've got a question, or maybe more of an observation really, about this work that we're sitting beside [**Number 215**, (2019)]. It seems faster than everything else. I mean, I've always thought of your process as slow, meticulous, and your work as an expression of that kind of labor. This piece feels different. Maybe it's the debris you left on the floor, or the fact that I can see the heads of the nails that are holding some of these smaller bits to the wall, and because of those nail heads I think of that singular, fast action—driving home the nail—and it just feels, well, faster for lack of a better word.

Drew: Absolutely.

Rail: Can you talk about what's different for you, in this piece?

Drew: First, I'm alive, so I'm taking on all these different experiences. I've spent a lot of time during the past four years in China, a place called Jingdezhen. China's absolutely another planet. They have a very, very different approach to how they get things done, how they come together collectively. I had a full on experience working with this foundry where we were making porcelain, and following a tradition that was over 1,000 years old. I mean this is ground zero for porcelain, glazing, I mean it is China! and here I am, dropped into this place, just because of one journey of walking through.

Rail: How? Why?

Drew: You gotta understand that I move around a lot, just to ground myself in these kinds of places. I become a sort of antenna receiving information literally from the soil. Lima in Peru is one of these places I traveled to just to see the Nazca Lines, and just sort of study and touch these cradles of civilization. Just by being there, I'm taking in whatever that place has to offer. If I was a musician, I would be making music about it; if I was a poet I'd be writing about it, but I'm an artist and so I'm visual, and I think that absolutely would be the way I'd give it back. I would abstract it, of course, because you have to digest, it has to go through your body and not have to hand it back to you. So, when I placed myself in China I knew that it would be really a shattering—a shaking—and I would be brought in and turned upside down. And that's exactly what happened, the kind of work that I'm producing now has everything to do with that experience, it was full on. I was set into this foundry after I did my exploration of China, which was like, actually going to the Great Wall, Forbidden City, all of these places you need to sort of see.



Leonardo Drew, **Number 215** (detail), 2019. Wood, paint, and sand. Dimensions Variable. © Leonardo Drew. Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co.

Rail: Jingdezhen is in the South. These are in the north, in different provinces.

Drew: I was moving all around different provinces. I thought that I wanted to work with porcelain, because it is so far removed from the kinds of materials I usually work with, so I said “Okay, what would happen if I committed to this situation?” So, first thing is I need to know what it would entail. I mean how does a kiln work? how does glazing work? that type of thing. So I had to move around different provinces, and in that process I went to different foundries and understood that depending on where you were the earth itself—the actual dirt, which is what the clay is made from in order to make porcelain—it differs depending on what province you’re in. So you’re gonna get a different piece just based on how the color glazes affect or are affected by the earth you’re working with, the clay.

Rail: Can you tell me more about the coloring and the patterning in **Number 215**? Because after seeing this and then going to see your new installation at Madison Square Park, I noticed that the colors and the textures have a certain kinship.



Leonardo Drew, **City in the Grass**, 2019, Installation view in Madison Square Park, New York. Aluminum, sand, wood, cotton and mastic. 102 x 32 feet. Collection the artist, courtesy Talley Dunn Gallery, Galerie Lelong and Anthony Meier Fine Arts. Photo: Hunter Canning. Courtesy Madison Square Park Conservancy.

Drew: Well the piece in the park came first.

Rail: Really?

Drew: Yes, **215** intercepted the piece in the park because it was like “Okay, you need to do an exhibition!” In the end the colors, they are now mine, and my approach, even the cut carpet patterns that are in that piece. Color has absolutely been added to my vocabulary, it’s part of my language now. I’ve been in the studio working these things through, and this is me actually allowing something out of the studio. It has a committed approach to color, and compositionally speaking and also physically, I think it’s just limitless. So you’re catching me at a moment where I’m lifting and reaching again. Yeah, “reaching” I call it.

Rail: How does that feel?

Drew: [**Laughs**] You know, I think the best possible place that an artist can find himself is a place where he doesn’t know, and I continue to do that. This is just another situation where I’m in a place where I don’t know, and it’s the best possible position you can be in.

Rail: I like your use of negative space in the Madison Square Park installation. I like how it lets the grass through but also the metaphorical suggestion of a torn or worn out carpet. That aspect of being torn or ripped is also present in **Number 215**—

Drew: It was attacked. [**Laughter**]

Rail: It looks that way. Maybe that’s what I was registering when I talking about it feeling “faster” than your other work. Even though it’s obviously a built thing, it puts off the energy of something coming apart, or exploding, or shattering, whereas the rest of the work feels more evidently accumulative and “built,” and not so thrashed.

Drew: That was before, and this is after. Remember what we were saying about the viewer being complicit? The piece in the park actually puts that philosophy to the test. That piece allows you to stand on it, walk on it, climb it—you can be the weather. You can be a transformative vehicle for this piece to reach its next form of self, and I trust that as a means of reaching the next spiritual realization of that piece.

Yesterday when it opened I saw kids pulling at the towers and they were able to yank off some of the little squares and they were tossing them, and I thought, “this is beautiful,” because this piece is gonna become this whole other being. The piece needs to find that, this idea of taking something that’s brand new and actually becoming weather. We are not separate from natural forces. We are the nature of nature, so there should be no separation. I’ve always understood this concept, but this piece represents the one time when the actual public—when I say they’re complicit, this is when they’re absolutely a part of the creative process, and in that way I think it’s really a learning experience for me.

Rail: Why did you title that piece?



Leonardo Drew, **City in the Grass**, 2019, Installation view in Madison Square Park, New York. Aluminum, sand, wood, cotton and mastic. 102 x 32 feet. Collection the artist, courtesy Talley Dunn Gallery, Galerie Lelong and Anthony Meier Fine Arts. Photo: Hunter Canning. Courtesy Madison Square Park Conservancy.

Drew: [**Laughs**] Because of my love for Brooke Rapaport, who is the curator, she grabbed a hold of that title. It was a working title in the studio because in the studio there are no numbers. I have to be able to point and say “we need to have the 1-2-3,” or “the black paragraph,” or “city in the grass,” we need to be working on this today. It’s just signifiers. We don’t work with numbers because the numbers are for cataloging, really. And so Brooke caught hold of that working title and even though I don’t title things in this case I allowed it because of her.

So it was like okay, **City in the Grass**, this is gonna be the first iteration of this piece; it’s gonna be this undulating, wooden carpet, that is gonna take on the center of the park. And as I went forward, I was like okay, I am going to China, color is happening, so all of a sudden the work becomes invaded by all these new things that are occurring, so it just makes sense to bring that in to the work. I already had the idea that this was a sort of undulating carpet in my head, but it was like okay, Persian rugs, and then also the kids who play outside of my studio, they always point at my pieces when they’re on the floor, they look like cityscapes. I just kept grabbing at all of these things that were happening; like I said, I’m alive—I’m not making art in a vacuum—so all these things are influencing how I’m perceiving next iterations of self and the next body of work.

Living in the type of neighborhood that I live in, moving around China, being open to suggestion, and knowing that you’re not gonna necessarily park it and say “this is my signature”—I’m open to all these things that are occurring around me, and they will absolutely invade and become part of the work. When I saw the piece in the park for the first time with the public actually interacting with it, it was really beautiful.

Rail: What other times in your practice have you had an experience like this?

Drew: Like this? Never. [**Laughs**]

Rail: Really?

Drew: No. I thought the experience I had at the Hirshhorn with the security guard and knowing that you’re allowing people to find themselves in the work, that’s all a beautiful artspeak, but to actually have someone walk on top of it, climb it—that happens in the studio. The piece that the Met owns—that piece actually has a footprint you can see, and I know why, I know how that footprint happened: I work on the floor.

Rail: I noticed the footprints in this piece too. [**Laughs**]

Drew: Yes, these things are made on the floor and I’m walking across them to get to this part of it or that part of it, and having that kind of approach to making things—realizing that nothing is sacred—all these things are just a part of life, then yeah, indeed, it sets you up for something that’s in the park. That kind of experience was already embedded in how I approach my work, it is absolutely alive. And it’s a welcome into the world that I just drag or pull by the nose, you need to sort of like bring it in, and it has to get dirty.

Rail: That sounds like how a lot of artists get introduced to art, just sort of pulled by the nose, getting dirty. [**Laughter**]. How about you? You went to Cooper [Union] in the ‘80s. What was that like?

Drew: Well, I mean, you’ve got to imagine what New York was like in the ‘80s. The East Side was pretty much a burnt-out shell. You look at any of the movies, which are kind of time capsules of that period, like **Downtown 81** with Jean-Michel Basquiat. I mean, listen, the music scene was

happening, Mudd Club, it was really popping. It was New York with teeth, and for a student, moving around New York, pretty much butt naked from Bridgeport, Connecticut, having this kind of experience in the most exciting but dangerous city, it was dangerous then. If you stray too far into the East Side you get beat up, if you stray too far into the West Side, you'd get molested—and all these things that I'm describing are things that actually happened, so I mean it was, getting on the train was always dicey.

Rail: What was your commute?

Drew: Well I was living in Washington Heights, which is way uptown. You could see the Bronx, and that was another burnt-out shell. All these things and places have been gentrified. New York's been scrubbed clean, but it was an exciting place to be if you were creative. Like I said, the music scene was popping, art was popping—the kind of art that followed after this period where collectors could not really find things that were collectible, like Smithson during the '70s, you can't collect that, you know what I mean?

There was a lot of great art happening at that time and those artists were making these interesting statements, but it had very little to do with collecting. So what inevitably ended up happening was that when the '80s hit, there was this raw hunger for artwork that you could collect. So people like Leo Castelli and Mary Boone came in with an army of artists like Schnabel, David Salle, Keith Haring, Jean-Michel Basquiat. It was an exciting time, and a lot of these collectors ended up getting that art, and many museums actually sort of refused to accept it as art, which is sort of interesting now that things have shifted, but a lot of the art that I saw back then you can't even see in museums, but collectors have it. There was a lot of great stuff happening. It was my introduction to what art looked like—where it was headed.

I knew people like Robert Longo and he was always telling me, "You gotta come out, you gotta come out," and you know I looked at what I was making, and what was actually being created at that time, and I knew that it was not my moment. I was working with carcasses and dead animals, you know, tied into the things, and it was kind of out there.

Rail: But you started at Parsons, right? How did you end up switching to Cooper?

Drew: I did two years at Parsons. My reason for coming to New York was actually to explore fine art, but what Parsons was really good at was illustration, graphic design, and so I just went into that department because I had that facility. Earlier on I was asked by DC and Marvel Comics to work for them, that was in like '77 or something like that, two years before I decided that I would go on to school.

There was a number of teachers that were really wonderful, but in the end, I needed to be somewhere where I was going to really learn, and so I heard about this school, Cooper Union, where if you got in, it's free. So I thought, okay, I have to go over and try to get in. And I remember doing that application, I did it overnight. I didn't spend any time showing off my facility because I had a friend that tried to get in the year before and couldn't get in. He used all his facility! I mean he was extremely talented, but he only showed he could draw really well, paint really well. And he didn't get in. So I said well, you know, I can tell that that's not the direction I should go in, and so what I did was I went all over the place, I did this and this and that and just went all in. [Laughter]

That was how I got into Cooper Union and that was the framing of what, you know, New York was like at that time, was the most exciting place to be, and being at Cooper Union and the kind of teachers that were there—Julio Mitchel, Jack Whitten, Hans Haacke—there were just amazing teachers. I had the pleasure and also the honor of being a part of that school at that time. It was really a beautiful time.

Rail: Jack Whitten is an artist whose relationship I wanted to learn more about.

Drew: Well I mean Jack, he took a personal interest. He introduced me to artists like Romare Bearden, Jacob Lewis, Melvin Edwards, and Joe Overstreet. I was introduced to a world of artists that look like me. They're Black artists, but honestly they were under the couch, they were abstract artists, they were not accepted into the mainstream. Sure they're loved now, but back then—it was a shame—but we kind of almost accepted that this was just our lives, that we create and in the end it has very little to do with an idea of success. I had someone actually call me from **Artforum** doing an article on Jack and asked the very same question like, "Oh wasn't it something that even without success he was making his work?" and I said, "Well that has very little to do with it; he's an artist in an attic, he has to make art," you know, so really in the end as you sort of push forward, art is something, it's a monster, you have to feed it, if you're an artist you have to feed that side of yourself, otherwise it becomes a curse. I think all artists, real artists understand this, I mean Jack absolutely understood it.

Rail: Another collaboration that I am curious to learn more about is your work with Merce Cunningham in '95 on **Ground Level Overlay**. From what I've read that seemed like a really important piece for Merce.

Drew: For me also!



Leonardo Drew, **Number 47**, 1995, Canvas, compressed paper, feathers, paint, plastic, rope, straw, string, wire, and wood, 96 x 120 x 12 inches (243.8 x 304.8 x 30.5 cm). Set design for "Ground Level Overlay", a production of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, New York, New York (c) Leonardo Drew. Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co.

Rail: What was that like? How did you get involved with Merce?

Drew: Merce had a friend who owned a piece of mine and he would meditate in front of this piece. It's the very same piece, actually, that the Met owns now, a gigantic piece from that same '92 exhibition.

Rail: What's the number, do you remember?

Drew: **Number 24** (1992), and it's a rusted cotton piece, going throughout this rusted wall with these sort of cotton bunches. Merce used to meditate in front of this piece. And when it came time for him to select an artist to work with he said, "I'd like to work with Leonardo." So he called me and tells me this story of him meditating in front of this piece and is wondering if I'd be interested in working with him, and I say "Let me call you back," you know. I didn't know who this guy was, it was not my world, so I had to call around and ask "Who's this guy Merce Cunningham?" And people said, "Man, he wants to work with you? You do that, you do that shit," You know, so I called back and said, "Let's do it baby."

His form for working is that he'll ask an artist to do their thing, Merce does the choreography, the phrasing, and then he'll ask a musician to make the music—all separate from one another. All these elements come together opening night for the first time. So you're off doing your thing, everybody's off doing their thing, and it's just chance. I asked him what happens if it's a flop? And he said well you know that does happen, but it's his faith, you know, this idea of creating these different elements separately from one another, then bringing them together. I use that very same formula in my own work. So indeed, I incorporate his philosophical approach into how I approach life, and actually throughout my career process. Being around him meant getting an idea on what it means to sacrifice, and also allow chance to be a part of finding out what's on the other side. In terms of my development he was one of the key figures, besides Jack.

Rail: Well one thing that hasn't changed very much between the '90s and now is the process orientation of your work. At what point in your artistic life did you realize that you were happy in that zone of hour upon hour of slow, almost meditative work?

Drew: Growing up in this household of five brothers...

Rail: Where are you in the spread?

Drew: I'm the second, number two. We all shared a room and they were able to leap over me because it was a small room. So they were jumping around me like fleas on a hot brick, and I'm just sort of like, "I'm making work," and they're just jumping over it, kicking the paintbrush out of my hand, there's all this noise happening around me. Even to this day, I actually have to have televisions on all over.

Rail: Really?

Drew: Oh yeah, two televisions on in the studio, and upstairs it's always on too. We have the guys moving around the studio, there's conversations happening, I need that kind of—I wouldn't call it white noise—it's actually like a catalyst, an energizer. I need to have those kinds of things around me, but within that I am like the Isle of Sanity in a sea of chaos. So that's how that is, and that's what it's always been.

I need to be able to navigate through this, like a calm within a storm. I need to be able to make sense of all that and be able to bring it in to the work. In order to do that I need to be focused,

so that process—this is the first time I've actually talked about it, but I know that it is true—it's just the I live and the way I create.

Rail: What's your relationship like with the communities you engage with through your work?

Drew: My relationship with communities? I embed myself. I'm always in communities that are made up of regular folks. In my neighborhood now they don't know who I am. I'm the guy that makes the skating ramps for the kids, gives out boxing gloves so they can get out and fight each other. I'm also the dangerous guy because they'll ask for things like ropes, and they'll say "We wanna tie our bikes together like a train and pull them along," I'm the guy that says, "Let me get you a rope!" **[Laughs]**

So my assistants will say "That's a bad idea! You're making ramps for the kids!" And the kids are like, "Okay, Leonardo, could you make us a ramp? Because we wanna jump our bikes on this ramp," and so I make them a ramp, and then I go outside and there are a bunch of kids down on the ground, and they're trying to jump over them with the ramp, and I'm the guy that says, "Let me get the camera, I'll be right back!" I'm that guy in the neighborhood.

There's never a moment where I'm not alive enough to understand that people are living this type of life, I'm living this type of life, and there's this trade off—this synergy—between bodies and experiences. I don't need to tell them who I am to have this full on life experience with the people in my neighborhood. There's definitely a beauty in that, and I can just live a kind of life that, for me, is grounded in real stuff, and then I can go in the studio and it's like I borrow from all of that.

Rail: When you say "real stuff," what do you mean by that?

Drew: Well, I think I kind of hover over stuff. I'm a kind of ethereal person who moves around a lot. I've never been married, I don't have children, I'm not conventional, but I'm alive. And I'm bringing all this information, my body gets up and moves around whenever it needs to in order to gather information. It's a life that's committed, very focused, but at the same time I know who I am in this picture. If you were to point I would say that's me, and that's something else, so in understanding that, I can actually have an honest push forward in order to create and take in information, bring it, abstract it, and then hand it back to you, but I have to understand who I am in that picture though.

Rail: Do you feel any compulsion to be a teacher or a mentor?

Drew: I think making work is it. I mean, I've been given a gift and I'm handing it back. Teaching would be something else, but this is probably the best iteration of what I can actually hand over. **[Laughs]**

Rail: Maybe, to be more clear, what I'm wondering is whether someone like yourself who's been actively involved in the art world for like four decades, if you gain a perception of artwork, of young artists—of any artists—and an ability to recognize a kinship with someone who is just starting out, maybe you recognize their energy, or their confusion. Does that ever happen?

Drew: That happens because of how I move around, that's a part of my life that's been a continuum. Not in the classroom, of course, but just in that I'm meeting people, people connect themselves to you. Really at this point I'm an elder statesman, so they will find me. I'm not a mystery. I am findable.



Leonardo Drew, **Untitled**, Bassick High School, Bridgeport, Connecticut. Courtesy the artist.

Actually, I had an interesting experience with my old high school because of social media. The kids are able to find who you are, who went to this school or whatever, and they knew who I was—we're talking 35 years later. So these kids were asking me to come back to the school, to come back to Bridgeport, Connecticut, which is always bankrupt, and the schools are just falling apart. So the kids were like "Okay, can you come and actually talk to us?" So I said, "Yeah, I can do that," and I did. I said, "Actually, I want to make a piece," which was this gigantic tree piece—a wall piece that's in the shape of a tree—and brought that with me. It was carved out on plywood, and very detailed, and I told them, "You can add to this piece. You can write your dreams, your hopes, write them on leaves," which we added to the branches.

Rail: What became of this tree piece?

Drew: It's still there at the school, they own the piece. So the new generation of kids who are coming through, they can do that very same thing. They're just adding their ideas and their dreams to this piece.

Rail: Speaking of ideas and dreams, you may be an elder statesman but you still have a lot of young energy. What are your hopes and dreams?

Drew: Me? Just to keep living. I'll keep adding new things, and keep placing myself in positions where I don't know, where it's gonna be a mystery, where it's gonna be a surprise. I'm not trying to figure out anything with any sort of exactitude. I'm full on alive.

Contributor

Charles Schultz

Charles Schultz is Managing Editor of the **Brooklyn Rail**.