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'Allow yourself to be open to the new': UMass Amherst exhibit showcases the imaginative art of Leonardo Drew

By [STEVE PFARRER](#)
Staff Writer

Published: 10/10/2019 9:42:07 AM

As an artist, the sculptor Leonardo Drew has drawn on a number of ideas and themes for

inspiration. But one of his most important sources dates from his childhood — when he grew up next to the city dump in Bridgeport, Conn. and scavenged for discarded materials that could be reused in some way.

Some 50 years later, Drew still uses a wide range of materials — wood, paper, metal, animal hides — to create large-scale and rough-hewn installations and sculptures that reflect his interest in the weathering effects of time, or what he calls “the echoes of evolution ... life, death, regeneration.”

A new exhibit at the University of Massachusetts Amherst showcases a range of work by Drew, who’s now based in Brooklyn, N.Y. “Leonardo Drew: Cycles,” at the University Museum of Contemporary Art (UMCA), features enormous as well as more intimate pieces of intricate design: grid-like sculptures constructed of hundreds (if not thousands) of individually shaped pieces of wood, as well as smaller works made of handmade paper that the artist has molded and painted to resemble other materials such as marble.

He deliberately subjects many of his materials to weathering, burning, oxidation and decay to give them the appearance of found objects, but they are in fact fresh sources that he manipulates in his sprawling Brooklyn studio.

In “Number 142L,” for instance (Drew uses simple number and letter combinations for the titles of much of his work), the artist has constructed two vertical, wall-mounted columns of thousands of slender, unpainted wooden shapes arranged in horizontal grids, which are set off against smaller lines of white-painted wood.

The top of the piece, though, is covered with a sort of nest of what appears to be large branches and chunks of partly decayed wood, like what might be found on a forest floor.

“His ability to transform his materials is extraordinary,” said Loretta Yarlow, the UMCA director. She also notes that the UMCA show, which runs through Dec. 8, features a number of Drew’s prints — the first time his sculptures and prints have been shown together, she says.

The New York Times has described Drew’s installations as “pocked, splintered, seemingly burned here, bristling there, unexpectedly delicate elsewhere. An endless catastrophe seen from above. The energies intimated in these works are beyond human control, bigger than all of us.”

But what also comes across is a sense of exuberance and an abiding interest in experimentation. As exhibit notes outline, Drew has painted egg white across some of the plates used in his prints to add a “crusted” element to his designs, while his sculptures and installations also explore themes of “memory, spirituality, energy and nature.”



Art with passion

Two weeks ago, Drew came to UMCA to celebrate the opening of his exhibit. He was joined by Jordan D. Schnitzer, who oversees a family foundation/private art collection of some 14,000 pieces in Portland, Ore. from which he lends work to museums across the country.

The UMCA exhibit of Drew's work is drawn from Schnitzer's collection, and in a panel discussion held at the nearby Rand Theater, Schnitzer said he was thrilled to visit the show, as he hadn't seen these particular works by Drew for some time, or exhibited together.

"I was like a kid in a candy store," he said with a laugh.

He also praised Drew for what he called "the passion you bring to all of your work. That's what is at the center of all great art."

Drew, who's 58, talked about some of his background, such as growing up in a tough housing project in Bridgeport, just outside the city dump, and turning to art — drawing in particular — as a boy. He loved drawing comic book heroes at first, and doing it wherever he could: In an interview with the New York Times in May, he said he pushed his mother "to the limit by drawing all over the walls and television screen. I was crazy."

A slide show that was part of the panel discussion at UMass showed him at about age 13, in an old coat missing a button, standing alongside a large-scale canvas of one of his comic book figures, Captain America, at his first public exhibit — at a bank in Bridgeport.

Some comic book companies showed interest in having him work with them, Drew said with a laugh, "But I didn't take the bait."

Instead, he became increasingly drawn to abstractionism after seeing works by artists such as Jackson Pollock and Piet Mondrian. He went on to explore that topic at the Parsons School of Design in New York and at Cooper Union, where he earned a BFA in 1985.

Today his work has been shown in and become part of the permanent collections of numerous museums across the country (and some overseas as well), including The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and The Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. In addition, he currently has a large outdoor installation, "City in the Grass," made of aluminum, colored sand and wood relief on display in Madison Square Park in New York.

Drew said a central tenet of his work has always been to try new things and not be afraid to experiment — and maybe mess up a little in that process.

"You need to apply yourself to the unknown," he said. "Allow yourself to be open to the new."

With his prints, for example, with which he's worked with Pace Editions of Brooklyn to try and transcribe his three-dimensional ideas to a flat surface, he's explored some unconventional and complex methods of printmaking with Ruth Lingen, a New York-based master printer and book artist.

“We didn’t follow tradition,” he said. “We kind of forged our own way.”

Steve Pfarrer can be reached at spfarrer@gazettenet.com.

“Leonardo Drew: Cycles” is on view at the University Museum of Contemporary Art at UMass Amherst through Dec. 8. A number of special events will take place in conjunction with the show, including a jazz performance, “Play to the Art,” at the gallery by three Five College faculty members on Oct. 16 at 5:30 p.m. More details are available at fac.umass.edu/umca.

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loretta yarlow

artist leonardo drew

jordan jordan schnitzer

