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Art in Review

■ The pain of childhood

Charles LeDray

Tom Cugliani Gallery
40 Wooster Street
SoHo
Through Feb. 27

Childhood is a big subject in contemporary art these days and clothing, used in any number of ways, is not exactly scarce either. Nonetheless, Charles LeDray's miniature handmade garments manage to stand out, both for their understated, yet on-target, emotional impact and for their homey, unfailingly touching sense of handcraft.

Mr. LeDray's art focuses on the pain of childhood. Suggestions of dysfunction and abuse thread their way through his work, and masculinity as a kind of facade is a frequent reference. He doesn't only make clothes. The show includes a beautiful but dismembered teddy-bear made of deep blue velvet. The artist has also carved a suitably Bavarian walking stick that recapitulates a famous World War II jingle about Hitler and his henchmen, and created a crazy-quilt landscape that consists of a big patchwork of suit fabrics draped over a mound that suggests a small hill, but also a huddled figure.

But clothing is clearly Mr. LeDray's main concern, with a speciality being garments so small they continually evoke people who would like to disappear, even as they make you aware of every tender stitch that went into their making. "Untitled (Web)" is a wall piece made tiny dresses, skirts, pants, coats, shorts, evening gowns and so on. They seem to account for every occasion, climate and taste, while also enumerating the different relationships that keep a body together. Especially affecting is a neat little scatter piece titled "The Men in the Family," which piles together shirts, pants and underwear whose different sizes indicate boys and men as well as dolls. The finishing touch, and final authority, is a long thick leather belt that is too big to fit any of the garments beneath it. A lot to live up to.

ROBERTA SMITH