

Levin

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# Sewing and Cooking

By Kim Levin

**Charles LeDray**  
Tom Cugliani Gallery  
40 Wooster Street  
Through February 27

When it comes to the male psyche, at least, Freud seems to have got things pretty much right: coming to terms with the father is a central drama. In the work of a number of male artists now on view, this plays itself out as a narrative of patriarchal authoritarianism, lineage, or rebellion against authority. Maybe it always did, and it's just that, sensitized to issues of sexual identity, we're beginning to interpret things differently. And we're becoming attuned to the gender-bending role reversals inherent within the broad spectrum of masculinity.

Charles LeDray invests miniaturized garments with a vulnerability that bespeaks paternal trauma, while totemizing women's work. His main medium is labor-intensive hand stitching. His forms are those of traditional crafts. Last year he laid out a miniaturized things-for-sale-on-blankets street piece, *workworkworkworkwork*, on a city sidewalk (and on the floor at BlumHelman Warehouse). Now, in an impressive solo show, he hangs a forlorn, scaled-down men's suit, a waiter's tux, and a bathrobe on the gallery walls on handmade hangers. Even-tinier miniaturized pants, jackets, and dresses form the taut web of an open-work quilt, hanging limb from limb. In another piece, the minuscule garments are attached end to end to form a literal clothesline (a means of escape?) that stops in a necktie. The styles are generic '60s and '70s, the styles of the artist's childhood. Forget Barbie. Forget Gulliver.



Charles LeDray: *Untitled/Web* (detail, actual size a few inches, 1992)

In LeDray's hands, reductivism is less a formal issue than a matter of human diminution. The radical scale, obsessive detail (the pockets in those tiny trousers are remarkable), and emotional intensity in this work speak eloquently of psychic individuation, social displacement, shrunken self-image, personal and collective generational trauma. The suit is titled

*Mr. Man.*

A floor piece, *The Men in the Family*—with its extreme scale differentials between oversized boxer shorts, enormous belt, child-sized jockey shorts, and weeny shirt and jeans—seemed to me to be the key work. Another viewer was sure that the whittled walking stick, embodying the old rhyme about Hitler's one ball and

Himmler's two ("But they were very small... and Goebels had no balls at all"), was the clue to LeDray's content. But it could just as well be the sad, dismembered windup toy, or the stifling quilt of men's suiting fabrics that covers a human-sized hump on the floor.

The 32-year-old artist, who has been sewing since the age of four and worked as a puppeteer on a TV program in Seattle before coming to New York, says only that his work is "experiential," and that for him the hanger with neckties is the key piece. His remarkably open-ended metaphors encompass homelessness, the Holocaust, gender reversal, the art-and-craft debate, individual and collective memory, and the losses from AIDS.

FRED W. McDARRAH