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By Ken Johnson

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LeDray's Dream Objects

In talismanic objects handcrafted at sometimes Lilliputian scale, Charles LeDray defies masculine conventions to evoke a yearning for the maternal embrace and the security it once bestowed.

BY KEN JOHNSON

At the heart of the cabinet of wonders that is Charles LeDray's oeuvre—currently the subject of a finely tuned traveling retrospective organized by Claudia Gould, director of the University of Pennsylvania's Institute of Contemporary Art—are the Tom Thumb-size men's suits and uniforms that he began to produce in the early 1990s [see *A.i.A.*, Sept. '96]. Displayed on handmade hangers on the wall or on armatures within vitrines, they are extraordinary feats of miniaturizing skill—the larger pieces usually about one-third scale and the smaller ones about one-eighth. Zippers, buttons, labels and other details are made by hand, and the parts assembled with a professional tailor's expertise.

To hear them described, you might think of doll's and very young children's clothing, but the combination of magical craftsmanship and surrealistic scale has the effect of transporting the assemblages out of the domain of ordinary reality. Though vividly present physically, they have the aura of dream objects, fraught with meaning and feeling.

Born in 1960 in Seattle, LeDray is largely self-taught as an artist, though he did learn to sew from his counter-culturally inclined mother when he was four. His most sustained art-educational experience came from working for two and a half years as a guard at the Seattle Art Museum in the mid-'80s. At one time he thought about becoming a toy maker. He moved to New York in 1989. Like Robert Gober, Kiki Smith, Tom Friedman and many others who came of age during the pluralist era, LeDray shrugged off the universalist



Left, Charles LeDray: *Come Together*, 1995-96, fabric, thread, embroidery floss, metal, 34 by 27 by 6½ inches. Collection San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Photos this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

Right, Chuck, 1997, fabric, metal, plastic, thread, 29 by 11½ by 6½ inches. The Frank Cohen Collection, England. Photo Oren Stor.



imperatives of high modernism in favor of more personal, idiosyncratic practices; his diminutive suits catalogue ways of being masculine in a world where masculinity as a monolithic ideal has splintered into a million possibilities. Often his work alludes more or less obliquely to gay experience, but it strongly rejects categorization.

With its heavy-duty blue jacket, embroidered name patch, zippered vest, blue shirt and blue pants, *Charles* (1995) might be the winter wear of a gas-station attendant or home-heating fuel delivery man. But dangling from the lower edges of the jacket and trousers is a collection of Barbie-scale clothes, including men's and women's shirts and jackets, as well as a peppermint-striped bathrobe, a pair of jockey shorts and a bra. These tiny togs turn *Charles* into a kind of Madonna figure, reflecting, perhaps, the widening range of socially acceptable care-giving roles for men or, more deeply, the psychological multiplicity most often suppressed in traditional notions of manhood. By employing skills traditionally associated with women's work, LeDray implicitly rejects such social strictures. His decision to work at the scale of a toy maker adds another wrinkle to the piece, as does the suggestion of self-portraiture in the name patch.

One of the most beautiful and emotionally complex of the clothing works is *Come Together* (1995-96), an homage to the artist's mother in the form of a blue denim workshirt gloriously embroidered with hearts, flowers, rainbows, birds and other emblems of hippie transcendentalism. From the cuffs of the outstretched arms runs an arc of little men's, women's and children's clothes strung like beads on a bowed metal rod—a maternal embrace of inclusive generosity.

The apparent optimism of *Come Together*, however, is shadowed by loss, for the world of peace, love and harmony the work alludes to belongs to an irretrievable, mythic past—the 1967 Summer of Love, the Beatles, the protective maternal home. What resonates most strongly throughout LeDray's art is a yearning for lost security. The exposed child, the lost mother: these are the psychic poles of LeDray's enterprise, and they come together in objects whose vulnerability is treated with maternal



In LeDray's telephone-book-sized representation of a mattress, the ticking shows signs of abuse—stains from all the blood, sweat, tears and other fluids shed over a thousand dark nights of the soul.

solicitude. *Chuck* (1997), for example (another self-portrait), is a sport fisherman's outfit made with heart-touching care as if for the artist's own inner child; yet it is torn and shredded in a way that suggests its wearer had been attacked by a vicious dog.

LeDray's feeling for the castoff, the neglected and the abandoned informs many of his early efforts. *Workworkworkworkwork* (1991) is a collection of nearly 600 doll-scale objects—books, magazines, clothes, radios—arranged in small groups like the sales displays that homeless people often set up in the streets of New York. (He first exhibited this piece outdoors on a sidewalk.) There are also a number of wounded, broken teddy bears from the early '90s that refer, in part, to the gay

"bear" persona, the burly, bearded, lumberjack type with which LeDray himself, a man of large stature, has been identified.

Whatever the autobiographical background might be, however, LeDray's works are not obscurely personal; they function as emotional touchstones for experiences shared by all sorts of people in a society frequently too busy to care for its own. There are also more specific social references, as in an ongoing series of diminutive hats, begun in 1997, collectively titled "Village People." Numbering more than 30 items so far, each measuring 4 or 5 inches across, the series includes baseball caps, party hats, a fez, a motorcycle helmet and a hat with the Act Up logo on it. They hang in a row 9 feet above the floor, frustrating one's desire to examine them up close. Like the gay disco group from which it takes its name, the hat series reads as a critique of essentialist notions of masculinity: to inhabit a particular male role is to put on a hat, to be in a kind of drag, and the wide variety of hats displayed here suggests a liberating freedom of choice about identity. But all that empty headgear rising heavenward, out of reach, also summons thoughts of all the men who have been lost to AIDS. In the hands of a garden-variety appropriationist (who would purchase these objects rather than painstakingly make them), the hats would represent a satiric comment on the commodification of individualism. In LeDray's case, making each by hand becomes an expression of all-encompassing Whitmanesque affection.

Though technically very different, *Milk and Honey* (1994-96) works in a comparable fashion. It is a large, wood-framed, glass cabinet containing glass shelves, on which are crowded an astonishing multitude of little hand-thrown clay pots, 2,000 in all, glazed off-white. The display of so many similar yet unique objects calls to mind Allan McCollum's accumulations, but LeDray's purpose is more straightforwardly humanistic. Each empty vessel is like a funerary urn, a memorial to a departed soul.

Asomewhat problematic component of the LeDray retrospective is the series of faux-antique miniatures carved (as the wall labels inform us) from human bone. They include a tiny door lying flat, a rustic Chippendale-style washstand and, most remarkably, a "tellurian," an astronomical device that models the relationship between the earth, the moon and the sun. With all its gears and levers realized to near perfection, the device looks as though it might actually go through its exacting revolutions if you turned the tiny crank.

It's not the benign or rather esoteric iconography that is hard to fathom. (While LeDray prefers not to divulge where he gets his supply



Untitled/Mattress, 1993, fabric, thread, cotton, stains, burn, 2 by 11 by 15½ inches. Private collection, London. Photo Aaron Igler.

of bone, it has long been available on the Internet, among other places.) Using human bone as an art-making material seems manipulative, a shock tactic. That said, a sympathetic eye may see the transformation of bone into art as a kind of resurrection. The point is best made in a full-size ear of grain (*Wheat*, 2000) that looks as if it belongs in a botanical museum: the raw detritus of death is transmuted by the artist into a symbol of life.

LeDray evokes death with richer ambiguity in *Jewelry Window* (2002), a miniaturized store-display window built into the wall. Peering through the plate glass into a dark, backlit interior, you discover pedestals, truncated necks and other devices for the presentation of watches, necklaces and rings, covered in dark gray velvet. But the jewelry itself is gone, as though the store's proprietor had gathered it up for nocturnal safekeeping, leaving a haunted, cemeterylike landscape.

Loss is most powerfully concentrated in *Untitled/Mattress* (1995), a telephone-book-sized representation of a mattress, displayed near the floor on a low platform. The stuffed and tufted ticking shows signs of years of abuse—stains from all the blood, sweat, tears and other bodily fluids shed over a thousand dark nights of the soul. It is the kind of object you find stripped naked and thrown out on the street to be carted away by sanitation workers. Fashioned by the artist with immense tenderness, it becomes a visceral icon of mortality and redemption. □

"Charles LeDray: Sculpture 1989-2002" was seen at the University of Pennsylvania's Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia [May 11-July 14]. The show will travel to the Arts Club of Chicago [Sept. 20-Dec. 21]; Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco [Jan. 25-Apr. 6, 2003]; and the Seattle Art Museum [Apr. 26-July 27, 2003]. The exhibition is accompanied by a 116-page catalogue with an essay by Russell Ferguson and a conversation between the artist and Claudia Gould. In February 2003, LeDray will have a solo show at Sperone Westwater in New York.

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Tellurian, 2000, human bone, 3¼ by 3¼ by 1¼ inches.

Untitled (Bear with one leg), 1992, velvet, cotton, thread, wire, 11 by 5 by 4 inches. Private collection. Photo Aaron Igler.





Workworkworkworkwork, 1991, installation comprising 588 mixed-medium objects, approx. 45 feet long; at the ICA, Philadelphia. Collection Robert J. Shiffler Foundation, Greenville, Ohio. Photo Aaron Igler.

Jewelry Window, 2002, fabric, thread, wood, metal, glass, plastic, paint, electric light, approx. 54 by 75 by 42 inches; at the ICA, Philadelphia. Photo courtesy Sperone Westwater, New York. Photo Aaron Igler.

