

# The Telegraph

## Charles LeDray's 'Mens Suits'

American artist Charles LeDray's tableaux of tiny charity shop clothing, on display in the Artangel show 'Men's Suits', are a wonder.



'LeDray brought the dust from America, assuming British dust is different to that in the Bowery'

By Richard Dorment

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The enormous prestige accorded to American artist Charles LeDray over the years is closely correlated to the strangeness of his working methods and the rarity of his work. LeDray did not train as a fine artist. A former museum security guard, he's a self-taught craftsman whose work looks like no one else's I can think of. Mens Suits, sponsored by Artangel and shown in a disused Edwardian fire station in the depths of Marylebone, west London, is his first show in this country. When you see it, you will instantly understand why it took him three years of full-time work to make it.

The installation consists of three separate but thematically related tableaux, each a sort of sculptural still-life made of arrangements of hundreds of men's garments in tiny sizes.

Each of the miniature articles of clothing was designed by the artist, individually tailored in different sizes, and sewn with his own hands, right down to details so minute they are almost invisible to the naked eye.

The first “scene” is set in the basement of a charity shop such as Oxfam or Shelter, the place where newly donated clothes come in to be sorted out, ironed and folded for presentation in the showroom upstairs. In the other two scenes, articles of clothing have been tidied up, hung on racks and laid out on tables for display, sale or distribution to the needy.

The sorting room is an utter mess. Canvas laundry baskets on wheels overflow with grubby used clothes, stinking of stale sweat. Piled up on the floor, nylon and cotton laundry bags tied with drawstrings bulge with dirty clothes we can't see. Someone has brought a jumble of old sweatpants, T-shirts, polo shirts and trousers loosely tied up in a worn tablecloth.

From two coat racks made of metal piping, rows of sports jackets – in denim, wool, and cotton – hang on plastic coat hangers alongside trench coats, fluorescent safety vests, woollen scarves and chequered trousers. A dozen or so tiny leather gloves are fixed to a hanger with clothes pins.

Each item of clothing tells a story. Many of the suits and jackets, for example, have loud patterns and strong colours that suggest their owners would not have been wealthy or sophisticated men. You can also see how cheaply made many of the garments are, probably in Third World sweatshops before being sold to poor but not indigent people. Now they are being recycled for men trapped on an even lower rung of American society.

The settings, too, were made by LeDray, including the dirty, scuffed and patched linoleum floor and the low ceiling with its harsh fluorescent lights.

Because we look down on each scene we can see something those who might work in the room can't – that above the ceiling, the surface is covered in a thick coating of dust –

which I'm told the artist brought specially from America on the assumption that British dust is different to the kind you find in the Bowery.

There is nothing beautiful or comforting about any of this, yet as soon as we crouch down to examine the work closely we find ourselves lost in wonder both at the power of the artist's imagination and his obsessive attention to detail – the minute zippers that work, the tiny hand-made button lying on the old ironing board, the way the fabric, texture and cut of each coat or pair of trousers is entirely different to the one next to it. When LeDray makes a Lilliputian-sized man's tie (and there must be a hundred of them in this show) he doesn't just take scissors to cut down a real tie, because the scale of the original pattern would look ridiculous on something so small. He must begin, like a real designer, from scratch.

The way LeDray uses scale is one of the subtlest things about the work. Had the clothes been any smaller the piece might easily have looked precious, a contemporary artist's answer to Queen Mary's dollhouse. But working on the scale he does allows him to give us a lot of information about the absent or dead owners.

A pall of sadness hangs over Mens Suits. Unwanted clothing stands in for lost lives and failed dreams. Pay attention, too, to LeDray's unerring sense of design. Step back and you'll see how he uses the shape, colour and texture of the ladder, ironing board, wooden palettes and cloth laundry trolleys as formal elements in his compositions, balancing vertical lines with horizontals, and rhyming diagonals in one corner with those in another. Accents of colour punctuate each immensely satisfying composition.

LeDray's work has been compared to that of contemporaries such as Robert Gober and Mike Kelley, but although I can see many areas in which these artists share an interest in common themes, like social and economic class, for me the most helpful context in which to view him is as the heir to American realist artists of the Depression era. Though he never represents the human figure, the world he shows us is the city life that Reginald Marsh would have recognised. He looks with infinite compassion on the belongings of the dispossessed and the down and out, the downside of the American dream.