

Artist's poignant small-scale pieces work wonders in a show at the ICA

Life's wear and tear

BY SEBASTIAN SMEE | GLOBE STAFF

My clothes — probably like yours — live in a closet. The T-shirts, sweaters, and pajamas are folded in precarious piles on a ledge at head height. The shirts, jackets, and ties are aligned on coat hangers beneath.

What a forlorn collection. The shirts, most of them unironed, just hang there. Limp. Pitifully uninhabited. Some have the sleeves rolled up: They've been worn once or twice, they could do with a wash.

Tragically, what's more, there are no really viable *ensembles*: Ties don't match shirts, shirts don't match pants. There's no order, no strategy at work — just mute evidence of a weakly held conviction that these are the sorts of clothes a man my age should probably own.

Why am I thinking all this? Because I've just come back from the Charles LeDray exhibition titled “workworkworkworkwork,” at the Institute of Contemporary Art. It's not that it's a depressing show. Quite the opposite. LeDray is one of contemporary art's brightest stars, and this show, organized by the ICA's Randi Hopkins, is the most beautiful, poignant, and witty show the ICA has mounted since moving to its new waterfront home in 2006.

LeDray treats clothes as surrogates for human identity, particularly male identity, and for the many types of work that go into constructing it. As such — and unlike the fashion industry, which is founded on an unblinking faith in the potential of clothes to communicate power, beauty, and self-worth — his work is intensely alive to the pathos clothes can communicate, and to the many senses in which they just don't . . . quite. . . *fit*.

LeDray, who was born in Seattle in 1960 and lives and works in New York, gives this “not quite fitting” a literal twist. The majority of the clothes he makes and transforms into sculptures are small. Too small to wear, but not so small that they seem precious or cute.

And yes, LeDray makes them. All of them. By hand. Himself.

You can't help but marvel: *My God, the work!* It's a response

that speaks, obviously, to the show's title. And it relates not just to the sculptures LeDray makes from his small-scale clothes, but to the thousands of tiny ceramic vessels he throws, and to the eccentric little sculptures he carves from ivory and human bone. (Yes, *human* bone.)

Today, when the actual making of art objects is frequently displaced from the hands of the nominal creator to various anonymous assistants, there's an atavistic appeal in LeDray's displays of virtuosic skill and dedication. But it's not just a sentimental appeal.

The time LeDray dedicates to the making of his pieces — in some cases as long as three or four years — is as much a conceptual tool as the medium itself. Painstakingly cut, carved, stitched, sewn, and thrown, his sculptures crystallize, through ironic devotion, a sense of pathos. They sharpen our awareness of the expendability of things.

One stupendous early work (it is the piece that gives the show its title) consists of 588 handmade objects, all of them small-scale representations of cast-off shirts, shoes, ties, and coats, along with similarly Lilliputian books, magazines, and works of art.

Originally, back in 1991, LeDray displayed the objects in discreet, lovingly arranged con-



Charles LeDray's handmade “Flip Flops” evokes a sense of absence.

WENDY MAEDA/GLOBE STAFF



figurations on the sidewalk at New York's Cooper Square, in imitation of the improvised sales commonly established in that locale by street people seeking cash.

At the ICA, the work is set out at floor level and stretched across more than 40 feet. Some of the item groupings reveal more wear and tear than others. Among them are sofa cushions and sets of clothing with unwholesome stains, and magazines with lubricious covers and titles ("Frat Guys," "Shame," "Sleaziest").

The deliberate pacing and fastidious placement of the objects suggest some kind of classification system. Looking closer, however, we're forced to register the random character of the objects.

It's a quiet but utterly engrossing work, alive to socioeconomic realities and freighted with heartbreak and desperation, but framed, hauntingly, by a semblance, a promise, of order.

The sense of absence it arouses — of dreams abandoned, lives curtailed, people vanished — recurs throughout the show. You feel it in LeDray's early works, such as the series of flattened fragments of crumpled white shirt on black backgrounds called "My Hands, My Father's Hands." It's there in the reduced-scale dressing-gown that hangs poignantly from a hook ("Becoming/Fight"). And it's there in the bundle of end-of-summer flip-flops hanging from a thread, all but begging to be taken out to the trash ("Flip Flops").

But LeDray does much more than evoke absence. His wit, his



feel for novelty, and his ever-shifting strategies of presentation give universal feelings a specific twist or spin.

Some of the works are like epics, others are haikus. His ivory carving of the bones of a human finger threaded through a gold ring, for instance, is as concise a statement as any of the vanity and absurdity of human contracts.

"To what base uses we may return," says Hamlet, holding the skull of Yorick. LeDray seems animated by the idea, but he wants to transform baseness into something finer, into art. If it's true, as Hamlet contests, that even the "noble dust" of Alexander the Great may end up being used to stop a beer barrel, why not carve a cricket's cage or a bunch of buttons from human bone, as LeDray has done?

These carvings are impressive — none more so than the stack of chairs and tables carved in 1999-2000 ("Untitled"). The displays of thousands of tiny vessels, each



WENDY MAEDA/GLOBE STAFF (TOP); TOM POWEL

Three LeDray works at the ICA: "MENS SUITS" (top), "Throwing Shadows" (left), and "Party Bed."

ART REVIEW

CHARLES LEDRAY: workworkworkworkwork

At: Institute of Contemporary Art. Through Oct. 17. 617-478-3100. www.icaboston.org

one unique, are similarly mind-boggling.

And yet installations like these are not altogether unusual in contemporary art, where a preoccupation with systems of classification and a tendency to want to overwhelm viewers with endless repetition register as clichés.

My own inclination was to keep on returning to LeDray's obsession with clothing. Thinking of the artist working away, with scissors, pins, needle, and thread, I thought of W.S. Merwin's great poem, "Separation": "Your absence has gone through me/ Like thread through a needle./ Everything I do is stitched

with its color."

We have, as my own closet reminds me, unreal expectations of clothes. In a certain light, there's something preposterous, even humiliating about them. Intended to conceal shame (the shame of mortality, and the lesser aesthetic shame of unwanted hair, excess weight, unclean orifices), they too often end up compounding it. They get dirty, they don't sit right, sweat stains develop, buttons go missing. Eventually, we discard them, or they end up in thrift shops.

Two works that subtly acknowledge all this struck me as LeDray's masterpieces. One was "Party Bed," which re-creates the scene in many a Friday night home, when one of the host's beds is loaded with guests' coats. The life and energy of the party in the adjacent rooms is palpably at hand. But the focus of our attention, this bed piled high with patterned fabrics, could hardly be more mute, more desolate, more out-of-mind.

The second was "MENS SUITS." This epic installation, commissioned in 2006 by the UK's "Artangel," re-creates on a reduced scale three rooms of a men's thrift store. It is installed in a darkened room. If you're of average height, the first things you see are the tops of the room's ceilings, which are covered in thick accretions of coal-colored dust. You have to squat down to see the ceiling's fluorescent lighting and the store's drab parquet floor.

One room contains circular racks for coats and shirts and a table with neat piles of folded clothes. Another contains a clothed mannequin and a circular table with a pinwheel display of colorful ties.

The final room is the store-room: It contains stacked hangers, cloth bags stuffed with unsorted clothes, and portable open containers for more clothes. Here, everything appears jumbled: There's a step ladder, an ironing board, an empty rack, and two wooden pallets. But slowly you begin to register how carefully and sensitively LeDray has placed everything, orchestrating the tableau's horizontals, verticals, and diagonals so that everything is just so.

One could emerge from this extraordinary installation with a sense of nothing but pathos. But LeDray has a poet's ability to concentrate and lift the imagination. His work registers loneliness and futility, yes, but also togetherness, renewal, and all the endless idiosyncrasies of life.

Sebastian Smee can be reached at ssmee@globe.com.