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Getting Small: A Man's World, in Miniature

If Charles LeDray does not have little, nimble-fingered elves working in platoons around the clock under his direction, then I don't know how he does it. His

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ART REVIEW

magical retrospective "workworkworkworkwork" — consisting mainly of thousands of miniature pieces of clothing, tiny ceramic vessels and dollhouse-scale furniture at the Whitney Museum of American Art — is dumbfounding. That one man could have singlehandedly created all these things defies credibility. (The exhibition was organized by Randi Hopkins, an associate curator at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, where it first appeared this year.)

More than feats of miniaturism, Mr. LeDray's works are loaded with psychological resonance. One of his earliest forays into the public realm was the piece that gives the exhibition its title, a display of scores of handmade miniature items — used clothing, magazines, paperback books and housewares — placed on a Manhattan sidewalk like the wares of an indigent vendor in 1991. Now installed indoors at the base of a high-end museum's snowy white walls, it loses some of its original sociological import but still conveys the concern for things outcast, marginal and forgotten that would continue to animate his art for two decades.

Mr. LeDray's most recent effort, a haunting, three-part extravaganza called "Mens Suits" (2006-09), occupies a large, darkened gallery all by itself. (Carter Foster, a Whitney curator, helpfully oversaw the installation here.) It represents different sections of a grungy used-clothing store. One is a messy, behind-the-scenes area where clothes are sorted. A wheeled canvas bin is loaded with old garments and stuffed laundry bags, and more clothes are piled on wooden palettes and draped on a stepladder.

The second part juxtaposes a suit on a headless tailor's dummy and a table offering a radial array of outmoded neckties; the third part has shirts and jackets hang-



TOM POWEL/SPERONE WESTWATER

Charles LeDray: workworkworkworkwork "Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines" (1993), a set of midget-size military uniforms, is part of this exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

ing from circular metal racks and a table bearing piles of folded T-shirts.

Each section is under a grid-like ceiling with white pasteboard panels and frosted panes through which cold fluorescent light shines. You have to bend down to see everything under the low-hanging ceilings, and because of the near-perfect miniaturization, you get the impression of looking in on a Lilliputian parallel universe.

Much of what makes "Mens Suits" so riveting is in the attention to detail and labor-intensive determination to get everything just right. But the atmosphere of neglect and abandonment it conjures is equally compelling. The tenderness that Mr. LeDray exercises in the making of his work becomes an expression of redemptive compassion for things uncared for.

You might also speculate that Mr. LeDray's project is partly to redeem homosexual love. The first thing you find on exiting the Whitney's elevator to the exhibition is a row of little hats — baseball caps, beanies, hard hats and many other types — collectively called "Village People" (2003-06), after the popular singers who perform hits like "Macho Man" and "Y.M.C.A." while wearing stereotypically masculine costumes.

But though often witty, Mr. LeDray's work is not campy. "Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines" (1993), a set of four midget-size uniforms, is more sincere than satiric. It could be a Whitmanesque eulogy for young men who die in conflicts overseas.

In a world dominated by men, it might seem counterintuitive to imagine masculinity in need of redemption. But then, do we not almost every day hear of political leaders, athletes, movie stars, members of the clergy and other exemplars of upright manliness exposed as liars, sex fiends, wife beaters, cheaters, deadbeats and drug addicts? Posturing peacocks are everywhere, but a good man is hard to find.

Reflecting manhood's beleaguered status, Mr. LeDray's suits and uniforms sometimes are damaged. "Hole," an ensemble of jacket, shirt and tie on a handmade coat hanger has a cannonball-size aperture cut through it. Others outfits are tattered and torn.

Mr. LeDray might be looking for the truly virtuous father — the brave, honest, humble, kind, patient, caring protector who seems, in our world of cutthroat narcissists, to be on his way to social extinction. "Charly/Chas" (1999-2002), a complete blue mechanic's uniform including a leather toolbelt stocked with little screwdrivers, might represent a

paragon of hardworking, fatherly integrity seldom encountered outside the movies. The old-fashioned catcher's mask and chest protector he made in 2005-06 evoke a presteroidal era when poorly paid men played for the love of the game.

The exhibition includes several tall cabinets whose glass shelves display astonishing multitudes of tiny, hand-thrown ceramic vases, bowls and pitchers, each no taller than an inch. "Milk and Honey" (1994-96) contains 2,000 all-white unique vessels. These works exude nostalgia for the touch of the human hand, but as high-concept spins on process art, they lack the warmth and metaphorical depth of his clothing sculptures.

The objects carved from human bone, a material that you can purchase online, are more puzzling. They include a cricket cage, a cobbler's bench and a model of the solar system. One is a life-size human finger bone encircled by a real gold wedding ring. Are the dots between the AIDS-related deaths of tens of thousands of young men and these curious objects too far apart to connect? Maybe it is enough to see them as alchemical transformations of the dead into living works of art.

Still, the main attraction of Mr. LeDray's sculpture is his heartfelt, poetic way with American male apparel.

"Charles LeDray: workworkworkworkwork" is on view through Feb. 13 at the Whitney Museum of American Art, 945 Madison Avenue, at 75th Street; (212) 570-3600, whitney.org.