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All the Little People

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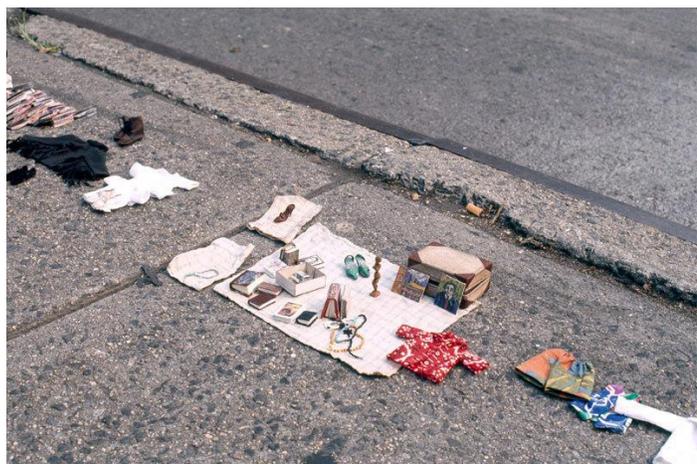
Charles LeDray, *Family*, 1985-1988, private collection, courtesy Sperone Westwater, New York

An army of Lilliputians must be running around naked in the cold, because their tailor Charles LeDray (who is also a master potter and bone carver) has taken back their clothes and put them on display at the Whitney Museum. The imposing, cigar smoking, bearded LeDray is not your typical seamstress, but his mother taught him to sew when he was four. At ten, he was already an expert at knitting and macramé. Every element in his work is created practically from scratch by hand -- artificially aged fabrics, tiny metal and plastic hangers, doll-sized ladders, and miniature porcelain pots. If there's anything LeDray wants to create, he finds a way to make it himself, no matter how long it takes.

Although he did start a few painting classes at Cornish College, LeDray's real art education began with a job as a guard in the mid-1980s at the Seattle Art Museum. "Neolithic Chinese jades, rhinoceros-horn libation cups, 12th-century Japanese flung-ink paintings, Indian Mughal ivory power horns, African masks, Southeast Asian jewelry and textiles, and on and on," he once told Claudia Gould, the curator of a previous survey seen in 2002 at Philadelphia's Institute of Contemporary Art. "Many nights I would leave the museum with a burning desire to make something -- anything -- inspired by spending the day with great works of art."

LeDray's impeccable craftsmanship, seen here most spectacularly in a delicate sheaf of wheat carved out of human bone, certainly lives up to his models.

After moving to New York in 1989, LeDray found work as an art handler, first at the Museum of Modern Art and then at Jack Tilton Gallery. Soon, Tilton director Janine Cirincione included a small jacket he'd made for a teddy bear in a gallery group show. In fact, a desire for antique stuffed animals he couldn't afford to buy is what led LeDray to move from painting to crafts. *Family* (1985-88), the earliest piece in the Whitney show, is a pair of indeterminate little brown creatures -- bears, or mice -- seated one behind the other on a small horse, dressed in artificially worn clothing.



Charles LeDray, *workworkworkworkwork*, 1991, installation view on Astor Place, New York City

Nearby is *workworkworkworkwork* (1991), LeDray's first major installation (also the

title of the Whitney retrospective). These 588 tiny handmade objects were originally displayed in 23 groupings on a pre-gentrification Astor Place sidewalk, right beside the normal-sized collections of motley goods peddled on blankets and cardboard by the homeless and destitute. The miniaturization of LeDray's imitation porno magazines, battered suitcases and other assorted debris is a reflection of the small social status of marginalized people reduced to selling what others have discarded. Ledray's miniature cast-off garments evoke a sense of mourning, and the lives and deaths implied by heterogeneous absent bodies.



Charles LeDray, *Village People*, 2003–06, Collection of John and Amy Phelan

Setting up a play between variety and similarity, Ledray seems to suggest that diversity can also produce sameness. The more bizarre the outfit, the more it becomes a disguise, and any costume, no matter how outlandish, becomes a uniform when worn by more than one person. Hence *Village People* (2003-2010), the first piece on display at the Whitney -- a lineup of undersized headgear hung in a row about eight feet up on a wall. From fire helmets to dunce caps, from a sumo wrestler's headband to a majorette's plumed top hat, all function as ciphers for individuality that both erase and celebrate the people that might wear them.

The fetishism of uniforms hiding a multiplicity of schizophrenic fashion is similarly outlined in *Charles* (1995), a plain little black jacket with Ledray's first name embroidered on the front, hanging on a tiny hook over a pair of black pants and a work shirt. At least 20 really tiny garments -- outfits for doll's dolls -- dangle below, like a virus of inner turmoil, including a silk lamé bra, a pink fool's cap and a pink gingham bathrobe. More toxic diversity is found in three enormous groups of tiny porcelain vases displayed in glass cases, respectively glazed white, multicolored and black -- probably totaling at least 10,000, none alike. The sheer variety of forms cancels their singular



Charles LeDray, *Charles*, 1995, Collection of Barbara and Leonard Kaban

individuality, as we look down at these miniature objects like God, unable to differentiate among the hordes of mortals swarming over the earth.

MENS SUITS (2006-2009), the show's most elaborate installation, is a three part, knee-high reproduction of a thrift shop for men set up in a dark room painted black. Fluorescent lights attached to artfully dust-covered, shoulder-high drop ceilings illuminate each section. Contents include a table of T-shirts, two round displays of jackets and suits, and a table of ties arranged in a sunburst pattern. Part three is a storeroom with clothing filling sacks and piled on moving bins, an ironing board, and a ladder. As viewers tower over this haunting untenanted store, it becomes apparent that all the garments are redolent with death, like leftover belongings discarded by surviving families.



Charles LeDray, *MENS SUITS* (detail), 2006-2009, Artangel London, courtesy the artist and Sperone Westwater

Jewelry Window (2002), the only un-shrunken piece in the show, is also the exhibition's most chilling work. A life-sized replica of a jewelry store shop window at night has been fitted into the wall of a darkened room. All that can be seen is a pack of black velvet display forms resembling an army of ghosts shaped like hats and headless trunks. Tier upon tier of absent diamonds make it clear that in spite of his genius with tangible materials, LeDray's real subject is absence.

"Charles LeDray: workworkworkworkwork," Nov. 18, 2010-Feb. 13, 2011, at the Whitney Museum, 945 Madison Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10028