

ARTFORUM

By Alpesh Kantilal Patel

October 2012

MIAMI BEACH

Charles LeDray

BASS MUSEUM OF ART

Human labor revealed itself as the core of this tightly curated show. Featuring only four of Charles LeDray's meticulously crafted pieces, the exhibition was a concentrated extract of the New York-based sculptor's fifty-some-piece retrospective "workworkworkworkwork," organized by the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston in 2010.

Mens Suits, 2006–2009, occupied the bulk of this presentation, as it comprised three tableaux, generously spaced across the expanse of one full, dimly lit floor. The sets—replete with such convincing details as well-worn linoleum flooring, fluorescent lighting, and cheaply paneled dropped ceilings—had been modeled to resemble scenes from a secondhand-clothing store. In one, two dust-covered racks of blazers were separated by a table haphazardly loaded with shirts; in another, a circular table displaying a spectrum of ties was attended by a men's dress form modeling rumpled attire. In the last setup, perhaps the most visually disjunctive of the three, a selection of carefully sewn and stitched clothes hung alongside such back-closet items as laundry bags and bins, an ironing board, and wooden pallets for a forklift. But more uncanny than these scenes' verisimilitude was their disconcerting scale, which was one-quarter life-size. After all, these were "mens suits," or so the title claimed. By creating a discrepancy between what this sartorial designation normally calls to mind—a uniform for heteronormative executives, sold by department stores—and the style of garments, aesthetics of display, and dimensions articulated by the tableaux, LeDray queered the term. In his hands, "mens suits" were not aspirational; they were worn-out, the unwanted garments of subjectivities that white-collar labor, historically, has marginalized.

LeDray likewise subverted expectations with *Jewelry Window*, 2002. Set back into the gallery wall (and so dimly lit that it could have

easily been missed altogether), this to-scale replica contained a surfeit of black velvet forms—the kind of headless busts and pedestals that typically populate jewelry stores. But here the forms were naked, recalling a store window stripped of its goods. The physical disconnect between what we see and what is there and how simply this served as a metaphor for our knowledge of the slave labor that largely underpins the production of luxury gems shifted the experience of this work into an affective register of anxiety and dread.

But perhaps it was the two smallest works on view—*Wheat*, 2000, and *Cricket Cage*, 2002—that seemed the most chilling. Exquisitely carved from human bone, these delicate pieces had been installed near the entrance to the exhibition, both carefully lit against dark grounds. Though many Miami locals may have found little connecting these two subjects, it is well known in China that the cricket's first springtime chirps traditionally signal the start of the wheat harvest. It is important to note, however, that LeDray's cage contained no such creature. Rather, the door was set slightly ajar, the skeletal container empty. As did *Jewelry Window*, *Wheat* and *Cricket Cage* focused attention on that which is absent but nonetheless felt—in this case, the human cost of labor involved in the farming of this staple grain.

As viewed in this show, all of the pieces "worked" to recalibrate our relationships to labor; they forced us to stoop, to squint, to puzzle over absence, as if conjuring the kinds of subjectivities and physical experiences forced upon laboring bodies, only to remind us of the gulf that exists between our subject position and theirs.

—Alpesh Kantilal Patel

Charles LeDray, *Mens Suits*, 2006–, mixed media. Installation view.

