

artcritical

the online magazine of art and ideas

Tuesday, March 12th, 2019

The Janitor's Closet: Charles LeDray at Peter Freeman

by Robert Taplin

Charles LeDray: *American Standard* at Peter Freeman, Inc.

21 February to 6 April, 2019

140 Grand Street, between Crosby and Lafayette streets

New York City, peterfreemaninc.com



Charles LeDray, *The Alsen Twins*, 2015-2017. Fabric, thread, paint, leather, brass, concrete,

11-1/4 x 22 x 9-3/8 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Peter Freeman, Inc.

I'm peering down at *Jack Straws* (2015-16), one of the many new works in Charles LeDray's first gallery show in New York in nearly ten years. The piece consists of perhaps fifty or sixty delicate carvings, each about three or four inches long, artfully scattered on a two-foot square cement board. The material, we are told, is human bone. It looks like forbidden ivory. I am sure it is not lost on the artist that elephant tusk is an illegal material, whereas human bone is not. Each carving is a carefully detailed version of an implement, something made to handle; scissors, a broom, a hammer, a T-square, a ski pole, a feather, a croquet mallet, a skeleton key etc. They are all reduced to roughly the same size so the scale diverges wildly. A ladder and a crochet needle lie near each other. One is tiny, the other maybe half its usual size. Each item has an associated body language depending on how it is grasped and used and a corresponding set of mental attitudes related to its use. We pick up the crowbar in a completely different way and with totally different intent than we pick up the crutch. It amounts to a small catalog of prehension, the way the world we have made is "at hand".

And yet, as in the game of Jack Straws (or pick up sticks) the entire collection of tiny carvings could be gathered up in two hands, scattered, and then carefully picked up one at a time with a delicate pincer grip. The association with the intense focus and concentration of a childhood game pervades all of LeDray's work. In the background is the ominous threat of the digital, robotic world on track to wipe out millennia of handmade culture. The supporting backdrop of another piece, *Eagles Softball* (2016-18), is a miniature pegboard with the silhouettes of a full set of hand tools indicating the appropriate hook for each one. The tools are all gone.



Charles LeDray, *Life Vest* / *Hotel Manhattan*, 2018. Fabric, thread, twill tape, Kapok, paint, varnish, brass, steel, patina, firescale, wood, wax, embroidery floss, 13-7/8 x 8-1/4 x 6-1/4 inches.

Courtesy of the artist and Peter Freeman, Inc.

Concrete is another running theme in the exhibition. A dirty, plebeian material that most people want nothing to do with, it is nevertheless constantly underfoot, is formed into foundations or building blocks, and fixes innumerable things in place. It is also highly transformative, going from soft and dry to heavy and wet and, finally, to hard and smooth. The qualities of concrete are perfectly congenial to LeDray's project, both practically and metaphorically. In *The Alsen Twins* (2015-17), two miniaturized bags of Portland cement, complete with their manufacturer's label, stand next to each other on a row of appropriately scaled cinder blocks. Both bags are full, but one has a leather belt cinched tightly around its "waist". This hilarious couple recalls Jasper Johns' pair of Ballantine Ale cans cast in bronze, with some of the same underlying jokes about same sex relationships, but LeDray's piece is much funnier.

Another piece, *Free Public Library* (2015-19), has well over a hundred miniaturized books scattered on a section of concrete sidewalk with a stone curb. Full of delightfully bizarre conjunctions, the stacks and groupings of titles form mini-narratives or dissertations. One stack goes: "Les Fleurs du Mal," "The Atlas of Meat Inspection Pathology," "The Black Camel," "Pottery of the Europeans," "Black Figure Vases," "Free and Female," "The Strange Life of Objects," "The Ultimate Cat Book." It is a world of culture and obsession thrown out on the curb.

The value of the abandoned, discarded and ignored is another ongoing theme for LeDray, picked up in several pieces like *The Janitor's Closet* (2016-18), a roughly half-scale section of pegboard with a beautifully made mop hanging on a hook. The stains from the wet mop run down the wall to the moldy, dirty section of pegboard at the bottom, part of which has broken away to reveal piles of lint on the framing behind. This piece is near *Do Not Enter (Red Carpet)* (2018), again a more or less half-scale red carpet with stanchions at either end. Notions of class, hierarchy, privilege and access bounce back and forth between these two pieces. The conflict is somewhat relieved by a set of meticulously copied, antiquated "Ex Libris" bookplates on the wall nearby invoking the public commons of the library and the solitary or communal pleasures of reading or being read to. LeDray is remarkable in the way he handles all of these themes with such a light hand, but with laser like focus and precision. And it is all undergirded with a quiet awareness of vulnerability and mortality as set forth in *Life Vest, Hotel Manhattan* (2018), an outdated kapok life vest with its nearly hidden inscription, "Inspected and Passed 9 Oct 1904".



Charles LeDray, *Free Public Library*, 2015-2019. Paper, cardboard, fabric, thread, acrylic paint, ink, acrylic varnish, acrylic gel medium, brass, patina, bubble gum, glass, metal, wire, wood, cement board, cement, granite, glue, fiberfill, Mylar, 10-1/8 x 97-1/8 x 50-1/4 inches.

Courtesy of the artist and Peter Freeman, Inc.