

BROOKLYN RAIL

ArtSeen

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Charles LeDray: *American Standard*

Jason Rosenfeld



Charles LeDray, *A Course of Empire Bricks*, 2015–2017. Clay, mortar, wood, metal, 16 3/4 x 16 7/8 x 9 1/2 inches. Courtesy the artist and Peter Freeman, Inc. Photo: Nicholas Knight Studio.

On view

Peter Freeman

February 21 – April 6, 2019

New York

Master of the visual and verbal double entendre, gifted with the ability to convincingly fabricate a reduced size version of nearly anything on the planet while expanding its meaning and reference, Charles LeDray, in his first New York show of entirely new work in a dozen years, continues to address all the themes of his career: miniaturization, materials, craft, tradition, sexuality, art historicism—with a great dollop of guffawish humor (potty humor included—*American Standard* is the name of a venerable American toilet manufacturer). But arch comedy notwithstanding, *American Standard* is the product of a resolutely original mind and represents an expansive view of the nation in the moment—it is exacting in its technique and sharp in its cultural commentary.

A Course of Empire Bricks (2015-2017) is the first sculpture to greet visitors, an appetizer course for the fuller show beyond. It is a vertical stack 16 3/4 inches high of eight red clay bricks stamped "EMPIRE," each a little over four inches wide, with mortar oozing out from between them. They stand on a thick block of salvaged wood from a dismantled apartment floor. The sculpture references Carl Andre's stack of eight unbonded actual Empire bricks imperiously titled *Manifest Destiny* (1986), visible in the first floor windows of the Donald Judd Foundation at the intersection of Spring and Mercer Streets, one thousand feet from the gallery. And "Course of Empire" in the title refers to Thomas Cole's canonical five-picture series from 1833 to 1836 at the uptown New-York Historical Society that formed a warning against national hubris and political and environmental despoliation in the Andrew Jackson era. LeDray also channels a major work, *Empire*, that he made on the veranda of Frederic Edwin Church's stately home at Olana for *River Crossings* in 2015.¹



Charles LeDray, *Eagles Softball*, 2016-2018. Eucaboard, wood, metal, leather, fabric, rabbit fur, cotton fiber, embroidery floss, rhodium and gold plate, wax, lacquer, paint, glow in the dark paint, straw, paint, 39 1/4 x 32 1/4 x 4 5/8 inches. Courtesy the artist and Peter Freeman, Inc. Photo: Nicholas Knight Studio.

Thus LeDray's art is knowingly indebted and profoundly irreverent towards American art history's own standards. It is an art about determined perseverance and arrays of reference. The standout wall piece, *Eagles Softball* (2016-2018), is chock full of such allusions, from the adoption of the Bald Eagle as the national symbol from 1782 and its subsequent ubiquity in home furnishings and applied art, to the works of Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, especially the former's *Canyon* (1959) at MoMA, and the latter's *Painting with Two Balls* (1960) at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. LeDray has replaced Rauschenberg's pendulous bifurcated pillow with a shrunken catcher's mitt,² and Johns's testicular balls have been freed from being wedged between two canvases and now, transformed into minute baseballs, sit atop LeDray's reduced scale construction like finials. The central eagle banner refers to the self-described: "New York's Premier Leather Bar," which operated as a gay bar at 11th Avenue and West 21st Street from 1970 until 2000, and then moved up to 28th Street. Rauschenberg and Johns were lovers early in their careers, *Canyon* was a reworking of the mythological tale of Zeus's abduction of the epebic cupbearer Ganymede, and LeDray plays with all these references. Like Rauschenberg's combines in the 1950s—it is a bold and new kind of historical sculpture. His unparalleled illusionistic artistry is on full display, from the perforated Eucaboard made from salvaged IKEA furniture and painted with the ghostly forms of workshop tools, each with their waiting hooks, to an exquisite orange bandana printed using multiple hand-cut paper stencils, to the entirely convincing two-gang light switch, protruding slightly from the wall, both in the on position. With its eagle peppered with darts (we are, after all, a nation that nearly hunted and poisoned its national symbol to death), and the downward facing bad-luck horseshoe at the top, the work may communicate a depressiveness, a lament for a less fraught, pre-HIV/AIDS New York. But the sheer labor on display, all this the lovingly crafted ephemera, is still so very winning, and celebratory of persistence.

Throughout the 14 sculptural pieces and 11 drawings (mostly blown-up bookplates), the obvious meaning is often the most satisfying one. A diminutive red fabric sign hangs eleven feet high on the end of a dividing wall. In white sans serif on crimson it declares: "DANGER/MEN WORKING/OVERHEAD." One searches for Lilliputians in the rafters. *The Alsen Twins* (2015-2017) consists of two shrunken bags of Alsen Portland cement powder atop a platform of three small cinderblocks—all of course made by LeDray. The bag on the left is cinched with a leather deer hide belt. As with many of his works, it is a paean to present and past industries in the region around Hudson, New York, in this case a defunct cement-making firm. But it also is a tongue-in-cheek reference to Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen of TV's *Full House* fame, and their present fashion empire, here transposed to a cinderblock runway. It also plays on Johns's famed bronze *trompe l'oeil* sculpture of two Ballantine Ale cans (1960, Museum Ludwig, Cologne). In *American Standard/Crazy Quilt* (2017-2018), a diminutive patchwork blanket drapes elegantly around a two and a half foot tall flagpole topped with a brass bald eagle. There are hundreds of swatches of patterns that comprise the quilted surface, gleaned from neckties and random garment, some bearing recognizable imagery: hotdogs and hamburgers, leaves, whales, mushrooms, paisleys, a panda bear, tennis racquets and balls, and, of course and centrally, an inverted stars and stripes. The allusion to America, the melting pot, is direct and effective, especially on this scale, and also the contention over the meaning of the Stars and Stripes in today's national discourse.



Charles LeDray, *American Standard / Crazy Quilt*, 2017–2018. Fabric, thread, fiber fill, brass, bronze, patina, gold plate, stainless steel, embroidery floss, viscose thread, wax, 34 1/4 x 5 inches diameter. Courtesy the artist and Peter Freeman, Inc. Photo: Nicholas Knight Studio.

Crazy Quilt is the most overtly political work in the exhibition, and *Free Public Library* (2015-2019) is its most grandiose. It is an over eight foot long one third scale floor sculpture of a two by five grid of cement city sidewalk squares and curb, battered at the edges, and strewn with an array of books, some on the pavement, some in cardboard boxes. There are meticulously reproduced brass oil and gas plates, pigeon claw marks, and a handprint with the artist's initials. It is impossibly enchanting, and a reprise of a work that LeDray staged on 45 feet of actual sidewalk on Cooper Square in the summer of 1991, when he spread out 588 hand-crafted diminutive books and materials on small-scale blankets in emulation of street sellers' wares.³ The books in *Free Public Library* are all real and all appear freighted with meaning—but rarely of a serious nature. Curtis F. Brown's *Star-Spangled Kitsch* (1975) shares a box with Gerald Gardner's *Witchcraft Today* (1954) and Arthur Zaidenberg's *Anyone Can Sculpt* (1952). The spines and jackets are precisely fabricated, and a couple are open to reveal the artist's own bookplate with his initials—just another way he signs the work. Every time I spotted a book whose title seemed too ridiculous to be true, a quick check online revealed them to exist.



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 the artist and Peter Freeman, Inc. Photo: Nicholas Knight Studio.

LeDray's emphasis on a most extreme and solitary handicraft is a riposte to the directed and impersonal fabrication of works by artists from De Maria to Koons, or the insistence on arranged but unmodified extant materials in Andre. One book in *Free Public Library* is titled *Fun With Felt*. A gentle dig, perhaps, at Robert Morris and humorless Minimalism, it illuminates the terms of LeDray's practice: celebratory of the world, mirthful, perhaps even hopeful, and that any material on earth is fair game for his mind-blowing acts of manipulation.

Notes

1. Stephen Hannock and I co-curated *River Crossings: Contemporary Art Comes Home* at Olana and the Thomas Cole National Historic Site (May3 – November 1, 2015), with a catalogue published by The Artist Book Foundation, 2015.

2. The mitt also relates to LeDray's own work, sartorially completing his earlier *Catcher's Vest* of 2005-2006, featuring a catcher's mask and protective vest on a hanger. See Jill Medvedow, ed., Charles LeDray, *workworkworkworkwork* (Skira Rizzoli/ICA Boston, 2010), pl. 48.

3. See Charles LeDray, *workworkworkworkwork*, pp. 15-16, plates 5-7.

CONTRIBUTOR

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JASON ROSENFELD, Ph.D., is Distinguished Chair and Professor of Art History at Marymount Manhattan College. He was co-curator of the exhibitions *John Everett Millais* (Tate Britain, Van Gogh Museum), *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde* (Tate Britain and the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.), and *River Crossings* (Olana and Cedar Grove, Hudson and Catskill, New York). He is a Senior Writer and Editor-at-Large for the *Brooklyn Rail*.