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Machismo in the doll's house

VISUAL ARTS

Charles LeDray

Whitney Museum, New York

Some of the richest, most touching and witty art I have seen in a long while is now on view in "workworkworkworkwork", a retrospective of Charles LeDray's still brilliantly unfolding career. His ambitions are not wide, but deep. In room after room of sad, funny sculptures, all beautifully installed at the Whitney, he excavates his repository of inspiration with rigorous, even religious stamina. He sews Lilliputian clothes, throws thousands of tiny vases on a potter's wheel and carves delicate objects out of human bone. He embroiders, he cuts, he tears. In an age of digital, conceptual and video art where creators often hand their ideas to assistants for fabrication, LeDray actually makes things with his hands.

"Village People", one of his more spectacular efforts, consists of a procession of wee hats hung so high that viewers must crane to see them. There's a pointy blue wizard's number with silver moon and stars, a yodeller's feathered cap, a construction worker's helmet, a jester's beanie and a pirate's tricorne. This assortment — like everything LeDray does — is adorable and enigmatic. It suggests, obliquely, that changing our identities is as easy as doffing one hat and pulling on another. Who we are isn't fixed, but as myriad as the complex taxonomy of headgear that he so lovingly crafts.

The work's title derives from the name of a 1970s disco group featuring an assemblage of stereotypical male characters — a police officer, a Native American, a cowboy, a biker, a construction worker. The band played on masculine clichés and gay fantasy. It recruited most of its members with an ad that read: "Macho Types Wanted: Must Dance And Have A Moustache".



Threads of existence: LeDray gathers masculine signifiers in order to undermine them

LeDray, too, gathers a constellation of masculine signifiers for the purpose of undermining them. One ensemble unites a baseball cap emblazoned with "World's Greatest Dad", camouflage fatigues, and a patch-encrusted bomber jacket. The decorations advertise robust American virility: Harley Davidson, Marlboro, POW-MIA. A postal service eagle logo perches over the words "US Mail", a wry play on the American male. The macho costume is pint-sized, though, and the ornamentation even more diminutive. While a typical bomber jacket is made of weathered cowhide, this particular model is



fashioned entirely from fragile, feminine materials such as satin, silk and embroidery thread. LeDray's imaginary mini-guys can bluster but they wear their softer instincts on their sleeve.

It feels like revisiting a childhood place that seems to have shrunk in the intervening years

LeDray tailors all these little clothes from scratch, and then goes to great lengths to break them. He rends and fades the fabric, adding stains and fraying cuffs. A threadbare denim shirt or a tatty bathrobe become stand-ins for people worn down by time and affection. For a series "My hand, My Father's Hands" LeDray created a white button-down Oxford shirt and then ripped it into fragments, framing a flattened, tattered pocket or a shorn-off sleeve against a black background. Each splinter of the garment is like a severed limb, an emblem of mortality — a relic.

LeDray is as fascinated by the way people metamorphose into objects as he is by the way clothes represent their wearers. He transforms human bones into frail miniatures. In

"Cricket Cage," toothpick-like slivers form both an enclosure and an open gate through which an insect has presumably just escaped.

The mind-boggling "Orrery" is a fist-sized model of an antique astronomical instrument, displayed, like a Victorian anatomical specimen, inside a bell jar. LeDray transmutes the human skeleton into a machine for exploring the cosmos, while at the same time reducing the universe to ladybird scale. A text panel quotes these lines, from the closing monologue of the film "The Incredible Shrinking Man": "So Close, the infinitesimal and the infinite. But suddenly I know they were really the two ends of the same concept. The unbelievably small and the unbelievably vast eventually meet like the closing of a gigantic circle."

In his most ambitious, room-sized installation, LeDray simulates three sections of a thrift store, overflowing with ties, shirts and suits. He cunningly mimics the shabby linoleum, mismatched hangars, and fluorescent lights in various shades of sickly grey, topping everything with layers of dust. The suits are "vintage", which is to say battered, cheap and loud. Each cast-off item embodies some small failure, perhaps a loss or a regret. It's all so real — you can almost smell the sourness — except for the doll's house scale. We viewers, made suddenly, awkwardly godlike, tower over grim displays of dreary stuff and have to bend to see beneath the lights. It feels like revisiting a childhood place that seems to have shrunk in the intervening years. Time rushes through LeDray's mournful dioramas, and in their gloom we can see the present receding tragically into the distance. Already it has grown quite small.

Ariella Budick

'Charles LeDray: workworkworkworkwork' continues until February 13, www.whitney.org