

ARTS MAGAZINE

April 1992

NOTES ON A SCULPTURE

Jerry Saltz

It Don't Come Easy

Charles LeDray's *workworkworkworkwork*, 1991

Charles LeDray is the process-artist par excellence. His miniaturized articles of clothing and stuffed animals suggest machine-made or store-bought products, but each and every one of his pieces is meticulously made by hand. LeDray's scaled-down, sewn-by-hand objects have an intimate domestic quality and conjure a host of tiny vulnerable beings, and indeed the subject of his art is the joy—but mostly the pain—of this domesticity. Somehow in LeDray's inviolable sculpture the innocence of childhood permutates into something deeply tragic and hidden. He makes these soft, squishy teddy bears that usually come in—or *live* in—shoebox-like structures. Each one is loaded with love, labored over, cared for, but slowly you get the feeling that LeDray has lavished so much attention on these weird dolls in order to protect them from some awful environment, some concealed fate; that these pygmy sculptures are surrogates for a self which has felt the storm of anger and the hand of violence.

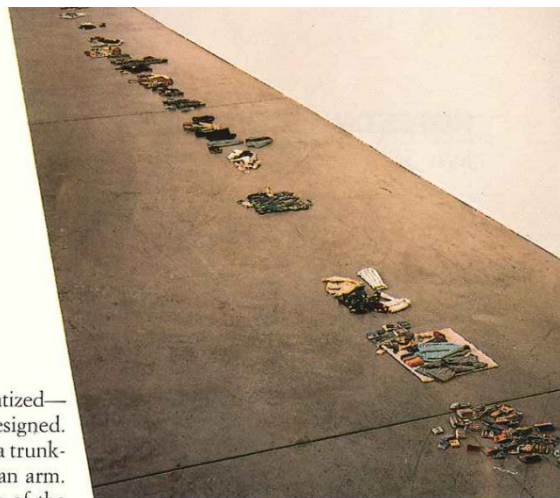
His dolls usually live in compartments, or coffin-like chambers, because they're too hurt or battered to venture any further. One has no legs and so rides on an old skate. Another (who appears to have been looking for a cube of sugar) is engulfed in a plate of sticky black tar. LeDray gets the hurt of childhood to live in these voodoo-doll sculptures. It's as if this sadness and suffering, misery and malaise were displaced onto these poor deformed creatures so that the maker—or the viewer—might not have to know such trials, not have to bear the full brunt of such piercing ordeals. They have a sacrificial quality to them. They're so lovingly hand-made you want to cuddle them, care for them, take them out to play. They're so small and fragile that you know you've got to treat them gently. They're like infants in this way—they inspire that kind of love and protectiveness.

LeDray is to sculpture what the Elephant Man is to the movies. Both conjure a world where malformation and bathos go hand in hand, with an odd sort of *dignity*. Neither ask for much—but you're willing to grant them a lot. They provoke so much pathos, so much sorrow, that you want to cry out. Sometimes LeDray's little teddy bears are severely deformed or otherwise distorted. His

creatures seem traumatized but acclimatized—and that's the tragedy, that they are resigned. One has no head and no feet and has a trunk-like growth coming out from under an arm. You feel its loss of identity. The title of the piece is *Secret Shame*, so you start to see why the doll has no face, no distinguishing characteristics—save that of deformity—as if it had a deep dark secret that it's trying to hide. Additionally, this lack of identity unites it with all those other identityless creatures who have suffered the same internal damage. But it still feels as if a secret life were being preserved somewhere deep inside its injured heart. In this way his dolls are survivors.

Because he makes his figures so small and toy-like you assume whatever secret shame he's referring to is connected with childhood and growing up. He's never specific and leaves everything open. But just the same there's a tragic gravity that draws you in—something unspeakable and poisoned. One teddy bear sports a little bow tie and has a fedora and an old beat-up suitcase. So an itinerant homelessness is suggested, a placelessness; a desire to move on away from here is also covered up by its open-armed happy stance. Somehow you feel that all of his characters (and that's what they are, like something out of a nightmare Kabuki play) would like to disappear or slink away. It feels as if this pee-wee teddy bear is hiding something—like anyone who'd live in a cardboard box lives there for a complex set of reasons. Therefore his little smile is all the more disconcerting. It's just pathetic. Another teddy lies dead asleep in a glass-covered wooden coffin. Dead before its time, unable even to give voice to the trials and tribulations it might have undergone.

LeDray may be the Art Spiegelman of sculpture. He (like Spiegelman, who created the extraordinary *Maus* books in order to approach the unapproachable horror of the holocaust) finds a way to evoke the unnameable damage of child abuse without ever being didactic or heavy-handed. Both create a world you enter unsuspectingly, and both leave no way out once you are in. Where Spiegelman has a way of telling a big story, for looking for what happened, LeDray seems to need to look away and into work and chores



Charles LeDray, *workworkworkworkwork*, 1991, Mixed media. Courtesy BlumHelman Warehouse.

and busyness in order to stave off the whole story. In short, Spiegelman confronts what LeDray only infers. One is straight on, the other endlessly elusive.

On a formal level LeDray's work isn't particularly arresting. He makes the kind of work that could easily be overlooked or relegated to the potter's field of cult and eccentricity—to the land of Twee. The work makes very little claim for itself—it's muted this way—a little shy, even cowering. He leaves no evidence of all the effort that's gone into his pieces. LeDray may be one of those secret artists who goes his own way, occasionally crisscrossing the mainstream. His work feels small, but actually it's big, and this may protect him from being counted out prematurely (he's never had a one-person show). He comes in under your radar and can strike quite a blow. But he's not out there on his own, not disconnected from his peers. He's tied to other contemporary artists in a peculiar way. His work is one of the most unlikely combinations of other contemporary artists I've seen in some time.

First, the way he makes his work—the obsessive, careful attention to craft, his focused way with materials, and all his infinitesimal detail—recalls Robert Gober, whose taciturn sculpture is also well-made by hand (although it's never about minutiae). And, like Gober, LeDray is prone to simplicity, though LeDray's art is never about form first. But a lot of artists seem to be coming out of Gober, so LeDray should be in trouble, right? In with a lot of body-oriented art. But then he adds the unlikely ingredient packed so densely into the recent work of David Wojnarowicz—of anger and incredulity a skewed sense of space and collaged sense of form, but most of all a sense of being left to fend for oneself in a cruel world. LeDray, like Wojnarowicz, wants his viewer to tap into something troubling and bleak, something surreptitious and veiled. Both seem to probe the coded world of sex and

NOTES ON A SCULPTURE

Jerry Saltz

abuse. LeDray's imperfect vehicles are repositories for the unconscious acts of others. And whereas in Wojnarowicz we may be getting our one glimpse of an indignation and rage—our Rimbaud—LeDray is closer to The Blues. There's something slower and less direct in LeDray. Everything's more censored. Wojnarowicz is to letting go what LeDray is to holding back. The important element they both share is that they make political art that is deeply personal—an art that has the power to change lives. The glue that holds LeDray together is probably the endlessly perverse recent work of Mike Kelley. But where Kelley seems sly and menacing with his stuffed dolls, LeDray feels hurt and a little needy. LeDray's things lack any clear sense of *will*. They're limp-rag-like. They have no psychological backbone. LeDray's energy is sapped, tapped out, barely getting by—almost comatose. But by using all three (perhaps unconsciously) LeDray avoids the “outsider” or “regionalist” label and passes as a formalist—if only on the lowest, softest end of the scale (he's never cool). He connects up as well to artist like Michael Jenkins and Laurie Simmons, who both probe childhood as subject matter, without getting autobiographical. Indeed, this last connection to Simmons provides a useful tendrill to his largest piece to date.

In *workworkworkworkwork* (1991), LeDray's most ambitious piece to date, the artist spreads 588 meticulously hand-made objects across the floor. Each is absolutely tiny and detailed, down to the very stitching of the hem of each dress, the cuffs of every shirt, and the stains on every blanket. The level of mania is amazing (I haven't seen anything like it in a work of art since Carrie Stettheimer's doll house). You glide above what seems like a city block of dresses, ties, books, magazines, jackets, blankets, cups, saucers, suitcases, paintings, shoes, slippers, necklaces, hats, and gloves. But really you haven't seen anything. The degree to which every object is perfected is mind-boggling. (The closest thing to LeDray are those electric-train buffs who construct whole universes). Not only is this a laundry bag, say—it's a laundry bag made of worn blue nylon, with a stitched-in white drawstring that works; or a rock—it's a rock of “volcanic origin.” A coat or dress is made of black crushed velvet and may have sewn translucent sleeves; while a lock of hair is braided, made of monkey fur, and is tied with a pretty white ribbon. LeDray's checklist reads like poetry (I recommend it). Every cape (“with printed

flower designs and red lining”), sportcoat, vest, tennis shoe, scarf, and dinner plate is present and accounted for down to the last detail. It's *maniacal*—and everything's in scale. It's stupefying. Usually people work a lifetime on such a project, so this lets you know that the artist is, if nothing else, *intent*.

The order or system he employs is *not* classification by object, or by size, or regular grids, or anything else vaguely recognizable. It's a streetwise disarray, a confusion of stuff and it's not scattered (even though this looks like the kind of ephemera we've been seeing for the last few years, it's only remotely related). Really it's quite realistic. Looking at *workworkworkworkwork* is like walking past all those rows of homeless people on the street selling castaway, dilapidated, disposable objects—things that have been begged, borrowed or stolen—things we think of (by and large) as junk. Each grouping is ordered in its own special way, as if different senses of order were involved, individual orders—different levels of marketing and presentability. The title also suggests a hive-like activity—busy and frenetic—and a superfluous industry or a barter economy. This is an order that exists in a world parallel to our own. A lost world of disappointments and dashed hopes. This order is feeble insofar as it's so personal.

There are roughly twenty-three separate groupings. Many are laid out over tiny gaudy blankets or mangy crocheted rugs. Some are on little pieces of corrugated cardboard, others are right on the floor. Some are disheveled, as if spread out and left; others are well-organized in rows of old porno magazines or forgotten books, lines of men's shirts, or an orderly line of ladies' high-heeled shoes. While others seem suspiciously like they came from one household—suggesting a break-in or lucky timing at a garbage can. There is an empty aimlessness to the piece, a sense that no one's minding the store, a mad, half-desperate merchandising. This is an encyclopedia—or an archeology—of the last nomadic American tribe: the Homeless. You ignore them on the streets, but here LeDray gets you to pore over these incredibly intricate objects, thereby suggesting that those who gathered them are similarly singular and special. The shifts in scale are alluring and the smallness of it all warms your heart. He makes you care for these shipwrecked people the way you do the objects. If you bend to pick up a little thimble-sized magazine, say, you're subtly struck not with how small *it* is—but how big and awkward *you* are. You feel that you're being destructive or a threat to this tenuous world, like you're an interloper. You feel a vague sense of embarrassment around the piece. Everything's so Barbie-doll-like, from some little girl's fantasy world (and his work feels strangely

genderless), but then collapses into a kind of brutal reality. This is where LeDray relates to the double-edged childhood and gender roles explored by Simmons.

It may be problematic, but if you don't know the process (the marvelously crafted handmadeness of his work) it can seem contrived, or that it's about appropriation or conceptual art and the piece turns sour and boring. There's no way you can bear another clever grouping of objects, is there? But LeDray appears not to care one way or the other. He doesn't leave any sign or “explanatory text” telling you how these things were made. It's up to you. In his own elliptical way LeDray gets you to confront what you avoid. The piece exudes a down-on-its-luck, haggard hopelessness. It's not friendly, in spite of all the attention these tiny invisible homeless people put into their arrangements—it's got no sense of tomorrow. It exudes some of that heavy-lidded blankness you sometimes see in the eyes of the homeless or abused. There's a lack of purpose or density to the piece—as if it's lucky even to be here, as if it might be swept away at any moment.

Each little book and magazine (there are 72 assorted hardcover books, 29 softcover books, and 207 assorted magazines) has individual pages that turn, with words or images on them. The suitcases have intentionally missing parts, the shoes their laces. It's almost unbelievable, the fixation this must have involved, and it lets you know its maker has some mighty urge to stay *busy*. It's a way to keep the demons at bay, a process whereby the artist can repress or supplant pain or knowledge. But it's also obviously a portal to the same. This much *busyness* implies some kind of avoidance, some kind of isolation or loneliness. The artist who made *workworkworkworkwork* seems cloistered and reclusive, retiring and forsaken. And this makes you want to reach out to him; you love his objects in his profound absence.

You drift with the piece and it moves away from you (it doesn't feel like art), but the furthest grouping at the end of the dead-end street is one pathetic last-gasp arrangement: an American flag vest, sandals, an empty blue sack, three cups, and a foam-rubber bedroll. And the full weight of this tragedy comes crashing down on you—the devastated lives you walk past everyday come into haunted focus. That bedroll is someone's *home* (and even it is for sale). Your heart goes out to LeDray's dolls and teddy bears and 588 objects—but most of all it goes out to the artist and those *his* heart calls out to. □

Jerry Saltz has edited several books on contemporary art. His column, which concentrates on a single work, appears monthly in Arts.