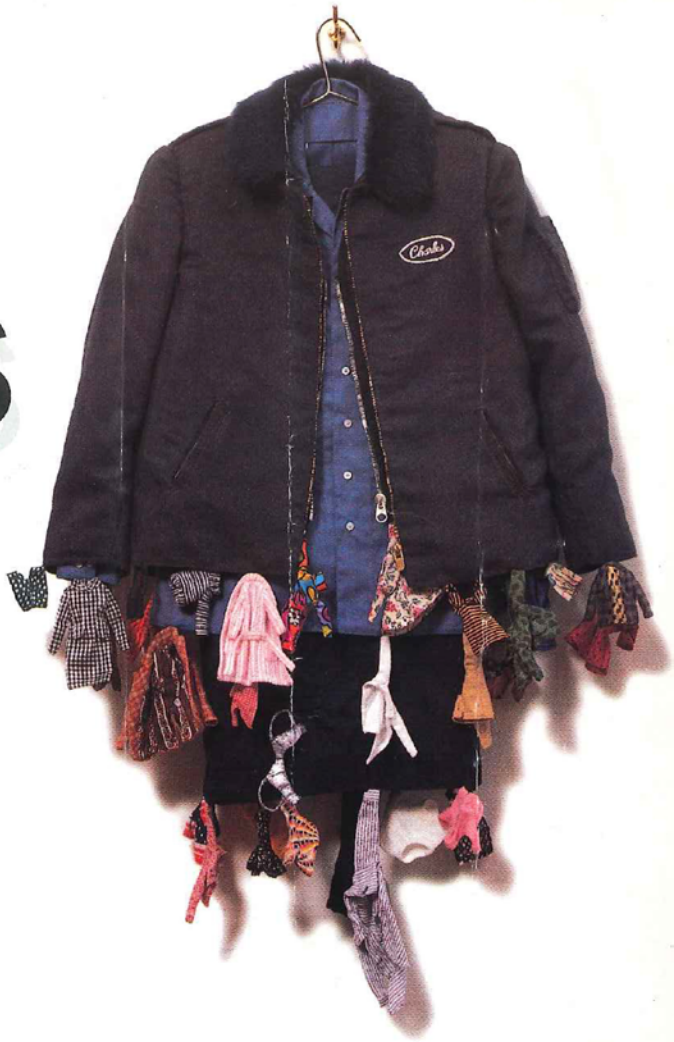
ARTFORUM

By Jeff Weinstein Summer 1996

TENDER BUTTONS



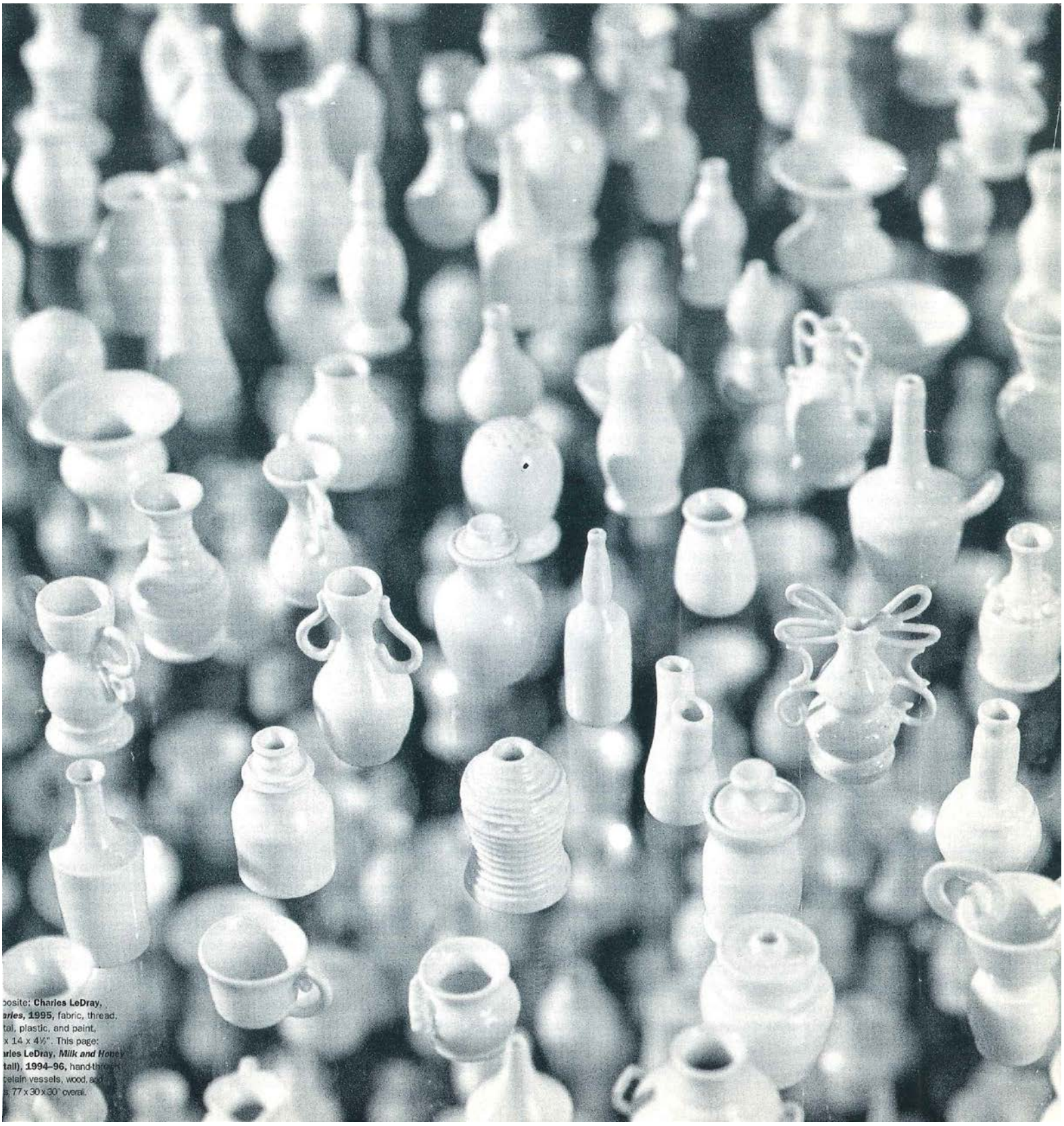
THE ART OF CHARLES LEDRAY

JEFF WEINSTEIN

The noise of all the fashioned objects existing in the world is incessant, a racket of fabrication, location, use, reuse, repair, value, and, in the least insistent of whispers, meaning.This ambient noise explains why the silence of an art gallery is not merely conventional, but pertains to its objects themselves. How many extraneous sounds must an artwork filter so its own particular tones may be heard? Is this why contemporary art that refers to use—the most strident of material declarations—must find contemporary tactics that dampen the din of usefulness?

Charles LeDray's first solo New York show, in 1993 at the Tom Cugliani Gallery, consisted mostly of objects made of objects that resembled clothes. Clothing, even clothing with quotes around it, is risky to employ as an art ingredient because it is among the "noisiest" of object categories: immediately and universally recognizable yet culturally and personally specific, reverberant with centuries of connotation and cliché. Of course, when sculpture in the form of clothing is compared to, say, a present-day painting of a horse, a similar artistic problem does rear its head, in this case a sentimental neigh that echoes back to the hollows of Lascaux. All representational art is noisy, it's true. But unlike the ostensible original live horse so many generations removed, the generic 20th-century shirt or skirt had already been conceived and fashioned—represented—before it was refashioned and re-represented by the artist, by LeDray. Mimetic refashioning is this artist's method and challenge, and LeDray's strategies of "silencing" the common noise of what he represents are a good measure of his art.

I recall that it was stock-still when I walked into that gallery. I didn't understand why until later: the "clothes" on the wall had thoroughly absorbed the clothing noise they initially evoked, quieting the street fashion and SoHo windows, the "this looks like this" or "that looks like that" viewers were

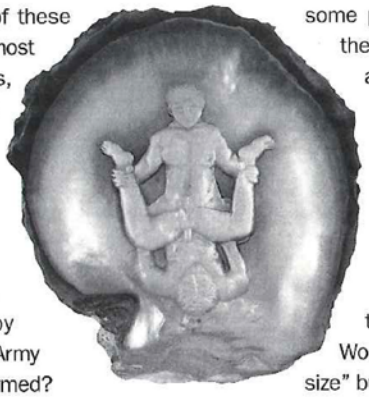


posite: **Charles LeDray,**
***arles*, 1995,** fabric, thread,
tal, plastic, and paint,
x 14 x 4½". This page:
arles LeDray, *Milk and Honey*
tall), 1994–96, hand-thrown
celain vessels, wood, and
; 77 x 30 x 30" overall.

REFASHIONING IS LEDRAY'S METHOD AND CHALLENGE, AND HIS STRATEGIES OF SILENCING THE COMMON NOISE OF WHAT HE REPRESENTS ARE A GOOD MEASURE OF HIS ART.

tempted to claim—even the Japanese shirt off my own back. After a while, listening closely, I could hear something like muffled cries, whimpers, dolly conversations: a little boy alone, a little girl? Also, I picked up the random click of a needle on a thimble, the snap of a pulled thread. Recognition was sucked out of the air and replaced with evocation: of women's work, of sissy play, of thwarted and constrained identity. The easy part of clothing disappeared.

Two facts of LeDray's art led to this. The first is Modernist and formal: tampering with scale. His painstaking poly housedresses, gestural seersucker robes, and gay-inflected bomber jackets and leather harnesses are "shrunk" to various, sometimes disparate (within one work) sizes. They don't seem to be made in any practical Ken or Barbie dimension, so their very existence is disconcerting, surprising. (These fabric constructions emblematize use; they cannot be worn or torn.) They feel like something at the wrong end of the memory telescope, where physical contraction corresponds to past helplessness and worthlessness—but also to secret, delicate, closet observation. It helps to remember that children do not naturally see themselves as small: some, however, are made to.



Perhaps the most ambitious, beautiful, yet disturbing of these whole-cloth pieces was not a single outfit left hanging but an almost seven-by-five-foot net of embryonic jackets, pants, dresses, robes, some in dark gray or black and others in patterns and lighter colors, sewn together sleeve-to-leg and collar-to-skirt into a stretched web of male and female lives. At a distance this untitled piece of 1993 appeared to be an abstract fabric work, the darker areas positioned to focus the plane and move the eye through it. But up close, patterns sharpened suddenly into suburban connective tissue, each unambiguous, sitcom costume warped into El Greco–like distress by the weight of every other. A safety net of victims? A Salvation Army bin—and all its attendant misery and failure—finally transformed?

The other quieting tactic was not so easy to pin down. It was the fact, felt in my case before it was known, that almost everything in that show, down to the ominous wire hangers, like almost all of LeDray's artworks before and after, was made from scratch (or almost scratch) by the artist's hand. The artist's mother taught him to sew at age four; later, he trained himself to work wire and metal, cut and polish buttons, carve walking sticks, throw and fire porcelain, crochet—to manipulate any material into a simulacrum of the product of some other labor, craft or industrial.

LeDray, born in Seattle in 1960 and now living in New York City, is an artist who will not have anyone do his work for him: he comprises all of his assistants. In the age of mechanical art production, the intensity of such a personal working method might be thought to imply madness, or, at the very least, cultural naïveté. (It was for this reason that a wry, tattered checked jacket, vest, shirt, bow tie, and pants—all of 13 inches across was included in the New Museum of Contemporary Art's recent art/craft/outsider group show "A Labor of Love.") In an interview, the artist acknowledged another possible reading, the therapeutic power of handwork, and he did not deny that his difficult, abused childhood might call for what is commonly termed "healing." His core understanding of his work, however, corresponds to that of a precious few other workers, hurt or not, artist or not: work is LeDray's life, his seeding of the world, what he does best. I mention this blunt belief in the humanity of work, a textbook affirmation of the survival of unalienated labor, because I rarely see it exhibited in so concentrated a form, infusing LeDray's deftly fingered products with spirit and power far beyond the novelty of miniature representation.

Noisy clothing is not the artist's only vehicle: he has constructed and dissected midget Teddy bears (*broken bear* group, 1993), made a fecal-looking men's bathroom sign from wool and cotton, redacted a stained, tufted mattress (*Untitled [Mattress]*, 1993). The best of these works find immediate entrance into the place where the child faces his own adult self. In the summer of 1991, on the sidewalk of Astor Place in Manhattan (not far from where David Hammons similarly hawked his graduated snowballs back in 1983), LeDray set up a 24-by-10-foot display, *workworkworkworkwork*, consisting of dozens of handmade and pint-size "used" books, Woolworth classic paintings, clothing, bad African carving—anything one would expect to see sifted out of city trash and arranged for sale on the street. Every end-of-the-road object has a production history behind it and some personal life within it. The artist, it appears, has searched these shards for something of his past, his history, his constant adolescent need to read the world, because here he is offering himself on a blanket, lovingly redone.

LeDray's latest show, at Jay Gorney Modern Art, displayed only one clothing piece, a mature and resolved self-portrait in the form of a gas-station uniform with name tag (*Charles*, 1995). Fringed at the bottom with even smaller cardigans, blouses, and bras, it admits the artist's background, outfits yet decorates his basic gender, and names him through his labor. The rest of the works were spurious Seattle World's Fair souvenirs in materials including metal, almost "life-size" but slightly (and not effectively) adjusted; a rocking chair, carved from a purchased human bone, under a bell jar; an oyster shell showing a sweet relief of two men having sex; a lacy, hysterically elaborate white reed bassinet (*My Baby*, 1993–96) filled with the handmade accouterments of ostensibly female sewing life, tools of its own supposed making; and a standing statement of achievement, of placement in the world of creative history: *Milk and Honey* (1994–96), a glass-and-wood vitrine whose six shelves hold 2,000 inch-high, white (with one blue-green exception) thrown-porcelain vessels, no two exactly alike, Korean teapot to Carolina dirt dish to George Ohr to Betty Woodman, an anniversary gift celebrating the long and happy marriage of utility to art.

Once the art object is quieted down, what is its own voice? LeDray has figured out, by peering at objects in museums, palpating and sniffing them at flea markets, collecting them (he has amassed an enormous trove of Seattle World's Fair memorabilia), and allowing them to breed, that the sound of an object after use changes to a human voice. Like it or not, objects absorb feelings and sense the way clothing absorbs sweat—and both are impossible to clean or purge completely. Can worn, abused objects be recognized, yet be made anew? One can certainly try, which is the way artist LeDray has taken his life into his own hands. □

New York writer and critic Jeff Weinstein is a frequent contributor to *Artforum*.

Opposite: **Charles LeDray, *Mother of Pearl*, 1996,** oyster shell, 5½ x 4½ x 1". This page, clockwise from top left: **Charles LeDray, *Untitled/Web*, 1992,** fabric, thread, and buttons, 82 x 55 x 5½". **Charles LeDray, *Cigars*, 1995–96,** lettering, wood, tobacco, painted wood pedestals with fabric, and Plexiglas. Detail from the installation "Civic Center." **Charles LeDray, *Untitled*, 1991,** velvet, sawdust, shoe buttons, platter, tar, and sugar, 4 x 14½ x 20". **Charles LeDray, *Untitled/Broken Bear*, 1993,** fabric, thread, and buttons, 1½ x 8½ x 1".