

# the village VOICE

By Peter Schjeldahl

23 April 1996

## No Kidding

**C**harles LeDray makes things that are wonderful to look at and painful to think about. This makes him very 1990s. Our era will be marked forever by art that publicly licks wounds of childhood and adolescent traumas. I am impatient with that baleful, interminable fashion, but not with LeDray. I would like to appreciate his wonderfulness without bowing to psychoanalytic and quasi-political, sociobabble shibboleths. Is this even possible?

A notion that art's current task is to amplify spirits of grievance has a lot going for it, admittedly. What should art do when its traditional functions as a mirror of the time are hogged by popular forms, on the one hand, and critical so-called discourse, on the other? Present culture digests life as entertainment and seminar fodder. Edge-seeking artists are left with what's otherwise indigestible: insanity, more or less. Personal hurt. Soul damage. Speaking unspeakable privacy. Stuff too dark and slithery for the menus of the media and academe.

LeDray is 36, a New Yorker from Seattle whose history as an abuse survivor is often cited. He has won modest but solid fame by sewing tiny, incredibly detailed clothes that broadcast personality at once hysterically abused and heartbreakingly game. His world isn't Lilliput. *Is it our dysfunctional society viewed through the wrong end of a phallic telescope, patriarchal malignity diminishing its victims?* So might go an account phrased in current cant, a litany of abstract whimper and reproach. How does one avoid sounding like that? With difficulty.

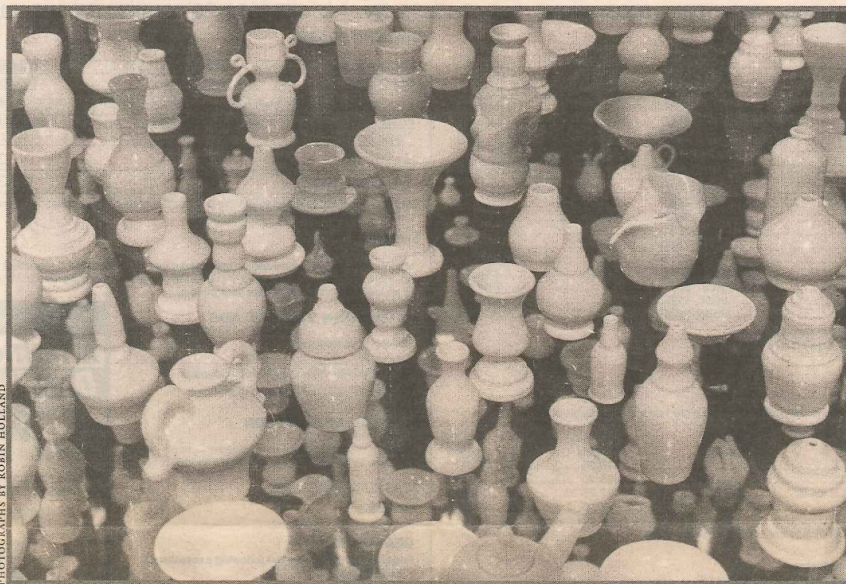
"I think Charles is a kind of Outsider," LeDray's excellent dealer, Jay Gorney, said when I asked for his views. There's a difficulty right there. Nothing is more in now in art than outsidership spun with a certain savvy. (Think only of Karen Kilimnik.) Gorney dropped two other inevitable buzzwords: *fetish* and *obsession*. The words make me gloomy. (Aren't you glad you agreed to talk to me, Jay?) They have been so overused in art talk—in opposing ways, alternately to praise and to disdain—that their elasticity is shot. They should be retired for a few years or however long it takes them to recover some snap.

The word *obsession* names a psychic affliction that has somehow become a bankable value. Are you as stunned as I am by those TV spots for Obsession-brand toiletries? With febrile ardor, the ads promise sex so miserable that no one not terminally jaded could bear to contemplate it. I guess that's what wealth, which everybody wants, connotes today: terminal jadedness. Meanwhile, *fetishism* wanders between positive flavors of primitively authentic

Charles LeDray  
Jay Gorney Modern Art  
100 Greene Street  
Through May 11  
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from scratch. The work activates staggering qualities of cunning and beauty in selfless devotion to a radiant child who happens not to exist.

tial air of maniacal repetition as lemon juice counteracts sugar. Do not view this piece too quickly. Stay with it. Completing the show is the upbeat



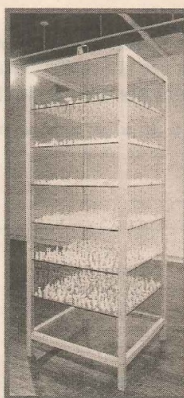
A natural paradise of the mind's aesthetic capacities: LeDray's *Milk and Honey* (1994-96, detail above, entire piece below)

creativity and pejorative smacks of Freudian (*regression*) or Marxist (*commodity fetish*) moralism. To hell with all such corrupted ideas. Thus do I approach LeDray's new show in a fairly tense frame of mind.

The show includes just one clothing piece, but it's a beaut. *Charles* presents on a little hanger a little, dark blue, cold-weather male service uniform: synthetic-fur-collared jacket with embroidered name patch, quilted vest, shirt, and pants. Its every hand-made zipper and carved pearlescent button is a perfect marvel of considered translation. Still smaller, exquisite outfits in many styles, male and female, dangle from the lugubriously masculine, Joe Lunchbucket uniform like shipwreck victims clinging to a raft. Or do they suckle on it like baby animals or attack it like piranhas?

*My Baby*, four years in the making, is a very fancy, lace-veiled wicker bassinet cradling an infant's knitted baptismal garb and, on a shelf beneath, a jumble of what seem all the materials and tools used in its creation. Of course, every last item—spool, pin, metal scissors, and so on, as well as wicker and lace—was fabricated

Under a bell jar, *Bone Rocker* is a delicate chair carved from what looks like ivory but is human bone. (LeDray bought the bone, so this appropriation of somebody is just generically lurid.) Though lovely, the piece seems to me indeed fetishy in a weak, reductive way. Nor am I moved by the giant, devilishly process and labor-intensive reproductions of manly souvenirs (real and imagined) of the 1962 Seattle World's Fair: box of cigars, cigar-cutter, ashtray, spittoon, and Space Needle lighter. I deduce a harrowed boy's-eye view of Dad gear, but the work impresses mainly as an Oldenburgian stunt.



ramic styles, from classically severe to elegantly ornate. Many of the items exude sprightly sensuality à la Beatrice Wood. Some do homage to the virtuosic crimping of George Ohr. Erudite formal exploration cuts against an inj-

bonus of a pocket-size, lustrous relief, carved in the nacre of an oyster shell, depicting a couple of guys cheerfully fucking.

Members of 12-step programs favor a nice definition of insanity: doing the same thing and expecting a different result. By this measure, obsession might seem levelheaded, because it involves doing the same thing in quest of precisely the same result. But the distinction is merely logical. Real-life craziness is typically obsession masked by self-deceit. What I'm getting to is that LeDray's porcelain array, like his *Charles* and *My Baby*, is neither nuts nor ultimately obsessive, even. The artist does different things and gets different results, albeit within a pinched set of behaviors and with an improbable energy that may be as neurotic as you please.

Critics who reduce artistic expression to psychic impulses or social discontents are accurate only about bad, failed art. Good, successful art climbs the ladder of its motivation, then kicks the ladder away. At the point when LeDray's driven spirit fixes on the absolute difference between one type of diminutive teapot lid and another, anything else ceases to count, and an attentive viewer enters a natural paradise of the mind's aesthetic capacities. The utter intelligence of LeDray's decisions, when he's cooking, fills me with joy. It affirms that something fundamental and possibly sufficient to life can remain, even in the teeth of evil, profoundly okay.