

The New York Times

By Hilarie Sheets

2 June 2002

Big Hands Working With Tiny Wares

By HILARIE M. SHEETS

WORKING as a museum guard in the same galleries for hours and days and years could easily be a mind-numbing experience. But for Charles LeDray, it was pivotal to his becoming an artist. For two and a half years at the Seattle Art Museum in the mid-1980's, Mr. LeDray watched over treasures from around the world.

"It's a jewel-box collection of lots of different things from different cultures and time periods," said Mr. LeDray, 41, rattling off a list that includes 19th-century porcelains, ivory miniatures, African art, textiles, early Christian paintings, jewelry and coins from antiquity. "You start venerating these things you're protecting."

Since then, Mr. LeDray has sculptured his own jewel-box collection of objects that are striking for their beauty, force, attention to detail and, often, smallness. With remarkable manual dexterity, he moves fluidly between materials and processes: sewing reduced-size suits of clothing, complete with shoulder pads, linings and hand-fabricated zippers; throwing 2,000 tiny white porcelain pots, no two alike, shown together in a vitrine; carving a perfect stalk of wheat out of human bone.

Now his eclectic output has been pulled together in Philadelphia for his first museum survey, at the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania.

Mr. LeDray's skills are essentially self-taught. Other than two uncompleted courses, in life drawing and gouache, at the Cornish School of Art in Seattle, where he grew up, he has had no formal art education. His mother showed him how to sew when he was 4 so that he could make puppets and toys, and he later trained himself to crochet, fashion buttons, carve wood and copy shapes using wire and metal — basically to replicate anything he looked at. When he moved to New York in 1989, Mr. LeDray was making worn and weathered teddy bears that he didn't really think of as art but did see as a kind of self-portrait.

"I always had a big love of ceramics," he said. "I took a class here and was getting proficient at wheel-throwing, but I had all these pots at full scale and they just didn't mean anything to me. So I started trying to throw small pots."

It is hard to imagine how Mr. LeDray, who is burly and has enormous hands, can achieve such delicacy and nuance in objects sometimes only an inch tall. "I could make



"Torn Suit," 1997-98, is a 30-by-13-inch garment handmade down to the horn buttons by Charles LeDray, who is having his first museum survey in Philadelphia.

one after the next after the next," he said of the tiny pots. "Soon I had 200 and then 2,000. I liked the collective energy of all those pots together."

Indeed, the landscape of reflective glazed vessels placed shoulder to shoulder on glass shelves in the piece "Milk and Honey" (1994-96), which holds a prime spot at the Philadelphia show, has the concentrated power of a city or an army.

"LeDray's distinction as a sculptor lies in his ability to reduce or distill his forms into small-scale objects, while retaining the strength and emotional weight normally associated with works on a massive scale," said David Leiber, director of the Sperone Westwater Gallery in New York, which began representing Mr. LeDray last year. "The beauty of the I.C.A. installation is that, although the works are mainly small in size, this fact seems almost incidental."

The first time Mr. LeDray used Lilliputian dimensions was in "workworkworkworkwork," a piece comprising 588 miniature books, magazines, clothes, shoes and



Photographs courtesy of Sperone Westwater, New York, and John Groo (above)

Hand-thrown pots of all colors and shapes in Mr. LeDray's studio. A future show will include an array of 4,000 small pots.

Charles LeDray

The Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia. Through July 14.

housewares — all handmade — that he originally installed outdoors in 1991 in the East Village, mirroring the way homeless people sold castoff objects from blankets on the sidewalk.

"It was the hottest day in the summer," Mr. LeDray recalled. "Nobody came, except the people passing by, but they seemed to enjoy it."

Later that year he had his first gallery show when his "Mourning Piece," a small brown jacket splayed like a pressed flower, was a last-minute addition to a group show titled "Forbidden Games" at the Jack Tilton Gallery, where he worked part-time as an art handler. The piece sold at the opening and was mentioned in a review in *Newsday*, jump-starting his career.

Mr. LeDray resists addressing the question of scale head-on. "Everything is a device," he said. "How do you get someone to look at something? How do you make it

interesting? Those choices are all devices to either attract or repel." His diminutive forms do seem magnetic, drawing viewers in close and demanding sustained attention.

MORE recently Mr. LeDray has worked at full size, as in "Jewelry Window" (2002), a group of black-velvet pedestals minus the jewelry. The necklace busts, bracelet cuffs and ring and earring stands are all translated by Mr. LeDray from a real display window. Silhouetted from behind by a soft light (as though someone forgot to switch it off when closing the store), these forms seem about to come to life. This quality of aliveness underscores the fact that the human figure is never actually present in Mr. LeDray's work, but always implied or imagined. "They're all figures," he said. "They all have personality and something that activates them."

The tension between the metaphorical presence and absence of human figures becomes particularly compelling in his miniature planetary models or his diverse collection of buttons, all exquisitely carved from human

bones. "You're not looking at bones but at carvings," said Mr. LeDray, who first used the material in 1995 when he recreated a tiny rocking chair from a bone purchased at a specimen shop. "It's just calcium, but it's of human origin, so it's charged in a lot of different ways," he said. Far from producing mementos mori, Mr. LeDray said he was "trying to make something that's about life, something that's adding rather than taking away."

Mr. LeDray is now focused on completing new work for a solo show at Sperone Westwater next winter. It will include an even more encyclopedic array of pots — 4,000, painted in every design, color and style imaginable. "The challenge is how to glaze 4,000 pots differently," he said, adding that he gets ideas from painting, sculpture, the grocery store, everywhere.

Meanwhile, his museum show will travel to the Arts Club of Chicago, the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco and, fittingly, the Seattle Art Museum. "It's sort of an art guard's revenge," said Mr. LeDray, smiling. "I get to return as an artist."