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## ART REVIEW

# Creations Small in Scale but Towering in Impact

By HOLLAND COTTER

Art is about control. At a basic level, the control is physical; an artist puts certain materials together in a certain way to create a new form. More or less simultaneously, conceptual control is at play: the new form is intended to communicate ideas or elicit emotions. All of this is part of the public side of art, the side geared to reception, the side art schools teach.

But control is also, to varying degrees, private and internal. Art can give its maker — and by extension, its viewer — psychological mastery over potentially disruptive thoughts and feelings, a reassurance that life is basically O.K., even in the face of evidence to the contrary. Children exercise this control when they play make-believe. Adults exercise it through civic rituals, domestic routines, personal obsessions.

This impulse to control impulse animates, even generates, some of the most interesting art of our time, from Jasper Johns's paintings to Consuelo Amezcu's drawings to Tom Friedman's sculptures. And it runs like an electric current through the spare, intense retrospective of sculpture by the American artist Charles LeDray at the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia.

Mr. LeDray's art is miniaturist in scale but naturalistic in proportions: the combination of smallness and rightness is what make it tick. Pains-takingly crafted, the work includes two-foot-tall tailored suits, books the size of matchboxes and carved furniture that would fit in a dollhouse. None of these objects seem precious or cute. Instead, they feel dense with compressed energy and, perhaps for that reason, seem to command monumental stretches of surrounding space.

Mr. LeDray's art is largely self-taught or home-taught. Born in Seattle in 1960, he went to art school there only briefly. He learned one of his primary formal skills, sewing,



Sperone Westwater, New York

from his mother when he was 4. Others, like carving and ceramic making, he picked up later on his own. By its very nature, his art is a one-person and somewhat hermetic pursuit; it is also indebted to particular developments in recent art history.

One of these is the women's art movement, which in the 1970's broke down cultural hierarchies and gave media like sewing and weaving, long dismissed as "women's work," a fine-art cachet. Related changes in aesthetic attitudes came with the gay liberation movement, which made female-identified art forms fully available to men, often as a means for expanding conventional definitions of gender.

To this inherited context, Mr. LeDray brought his own talent and experiences as a self-educated gay artist. And the exhibition, organized by Claudia Gould, director of the institute, is a selective record of the formally ambitious, personally complex career he has shaped.

Before deciding on art as a profession, he considered being a toy-maker; one of the show's earliest entries — dating from 1989, when he moved to New York — is a home-made teddy bear. But he was already making art on an intimate scale, notably the elaborate "Workworkworkworkwork" completed in the same year.

The piece is modeled after the sidewalk sales of recycled material organized by the homeless in the East Village. In this case, though, all of the nearly 600 objects — magazines, clothes and dishes, along with the blankets to display them — are hand-wrought miniatures. The piece, which the artist first exhibited on a sidewalk in Cooper Square, is astonishing. Not only are its contents fantastically well made — you have to

"Come Together," a small workshirt under an arch of tiny blouses, in "Charles LeDray, Sculpture 1989-2002" at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia.

is a worker's short blue jacket of a kind that became part of the butch gay clone look of the 70's. Here, though, diminutive examples of women's attire, like skirts and a bra, dangle from the hem, as if they had suddenly slipped out to reveal the wearer's true identity.

In the piece titled "Chuck," disaster has struck. The striped shirt and the parka with an insignia that says "Bass Master Classic World Championship 1976" appear in soiled and tattered disarray, as if the wearer had been seriously roughed up. And in "Torn Suit," a tweed jacket and floral tie appear to have been assaulted with a shredder, leaving the bottom half of the outfit chewed to ribbons.

In Mr. LeDray's world of embattled figures, community plays little part except in a work titled "Village People," which he has been working on for several years. It consists of dozens of miniature versions of male headgear, from a Santa hat to a menacing black ski mask, from a cap emblazoned with an Act-Up logo to another advertising the National Rifle Association. Hanging high on the gallery wall, absurd and forlorn, they are memorials to lost ideals and warnings of follies all too real.

Mr. LeDray's recent ceramics and carved sculptures deal more overtly with mourning and mortality. A glass case in the center of the gallery holds 2,000 inch-tall clay vessels, no two alike. Their collective title, "Milk and Honey," promises nourishment and comfort, though the vessels themselves suggest an army of funerary urns. In a vitrine nearby, a single pale, fragile shaft of wheat is on display, an all-flesh-is-grass image that Mr. LeDray carved from human bone.

This sculpture would not look out of place in a church, a Victorian parlor or a Robert Gober installation. One can certainly point to Mr. Gober (and formally at least, to Mike Kelley) as a contemporary influence on Mr. LeDray. The work of both artists emerges from the night side of childhood, where innocence and experience collide. At the same time, Mr. LeDray's art is on its own formal track and occupies its own psychic universe. In it, fear, loss and anger lie close to the bone; humor is dark but pervasive; and art, in the form of self-tutored virtuosity, makes past and present alike manageable, sometimes transcendently so.

"Charles LeDray, Sculpture 1989-2002" remains at the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 118 South 36th Street, Philadelphia, (215) 898-5911, through July 14. The show then travels to the Arts Club of Chicago (Sept. 20 to Dec. 21), Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco (Jan. 25 to April 6, 2003) and the Seattle Art Museum (April 26 to July 27, 2003).