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Artifacts | Damn White

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Courtesy of Sperone Westwater Charles LeDray's "Charles," from the collection of Barbara and Leonard Kaban.

We're so used to the white-cube environment of museums and galleries today that we hardly notice it. That's the idea. Blank white walls are supposed to make it easier for viewers to focus on the artworks that hang on them. Sometimes that works, mostly for modern and contemporary art, which is often distracting enough. The general thinking seems to be that it won't abide any competition from the institution showing it.

I don't care. Gray would be better. I hate looking at art on a bright white background. It's not just dull. It's dulling. Icy white walls, like those at the Museum of Modern Art, blind the eye and whitewash the mind. They have none of the warmth of a salon, where muted walls enhance the art experience, personalize it, draw you into a gallery and bathe you in a flattering glow. "Take me!" they say. "I'm yours." Who wouldn't be seduced by that?

What prompted this fit of temper was "workworkwork," Charles LeDray's current midcareer retrospective at the Whitney Museum, actually one of the best in town right now. The title piece is a linear scatter of nearly 600 teeny-tiny, minutely detailed magazines, books, household items and clothes that LeDray made by hand. He's an amazing sculptor. Some of the more delicate works in the show are a rocking chair, an approximation of the cosmos on a period table, a cricket cage he carved from human bone. To make "Milk and Honey" (1994-96), he threw 2,000 miniature ceramic pots from what kind of wheel I don't know every single one different from the next.



Tom Powel, courtesy of Sperone Westwater "Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines," from a private collection.

The bone and ceramic pieces are white. Each is self-contained in a glass case or situated on a (white) pedestal. None of these objects need a wall, white or otherwise. But neither does the installation of “workworkwork.” LeDray made it in 1991 for a sidewalk at Astor Place, where it appeared alongside the used (or stolen) wares hawked by street sellers of the time. [A slide show on the Whitney’s Web site](#) shows the way it looked then, which is the way it’s supposed to look. And the pavement is not the least bit white. It’s city gray and city gritty.

In its recreation at the Whitney, however, “workworkwork” stretches for 45 feet along a spotless white, ankle-deep platform pressed against a blank white wall. All that whiteness actually neutralizes the piece, rather than lets it stand out. Robbed of its context, “workworkwork” is robbed of its visual impact as well as its meaning. What pleasure it provides depends on how amused one is by the irony of giving great value to discarded goods by scaling them down to nonfunctional size. If they had been set on a rougher, and darker, surface, would they not still look like art?

For perspective, and relief, check out the gallery housing the show’s pièce de résistance, “Men’s Suits.” It consists of three knee-high representations of a men’s used-clothing shop that has seen better days. The meticulously tailored, Lilliputian garments look just as worn. Fluorescent tubes in the dusty, dropped ceilings over the circular racks provide the only light in the room. And the surrounding walls are dark, almost black.

Because it isn’t diluted by white walls or incongruous institutional lights, “Men’s Suits” emerges from the darkness like a vivid dream. When I saw the work in London two years ago, where it made its debut in a building that had been a firehouse, bright daylight poured through the windows. It diminished the emotional tenor of the piece, which was also a bit lost in the space.

“Men’s Suits” looks much better at the Whitney, where the installation allows it to enter the imagination. LeDray’s garments may be suited only to a Tom Thumb, but if they dress anything it’s the body of the mind. The theatrical appearance of this tableau only makes the presentation of “workworkwork” more disturbing. It bothered me, anyway. So I called Michael Batista, the exhibition design manager at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where wall color tends to be tamped down. I wanted to know why our institutions treat modern and contemporary art so dispassionately, while they give shows of older art color that engages it and beckons us.



Tom Powel, courtesy of Sperone Westwater "Overcoat" (2004), from the collection of Tom and Alice Tisch.

"It's just the norm," Batista said. "Modern goes with white. In exhibitions of older art, where palettes are more muted, you want a color that comes from the art. In modern, the palettes can be so wild or different that there isn't a unifying color. It's hard to get something that works with everything, even with an off white." In the permanent collection galleries at the Met, the white on the walls varies. It might have blue, gray, yellow or pink in it. It depends on the palette or the curator, or the ambience of the room. For temporary exhibitions of recent art, Batista said, "We go with Navajo or dove white. They have more softness. A plain, not a bright or pure, white works for a Warhol. But the white for the John Baldessari show," he conceded, "is actually pretty bright." It's still boring, even though the show, which closes Sunday, is not.

In 2011, I'd like to see our museums rethink white. Eventually, contemporary art is going to acquire the same patina of age that the older kind has. And stark raving white will not become it then anymore than it does now.

Charles LeDray's "workworkwork" continues through Feb. 15 at the Whitney Museum of American Art, Madison Avenue at 75th Street.