

# ARTFORUM

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## REVIEWS

### Charles LeDray

PETER FREEMAN, INC. by Zoé Lescaze

Charles LeDray works with granite and leather, copper buttons and human bone. For decades now, the artist has played with scale, creating miniature replicas of everyday objects using mortar, embroidery floss, and stainless steel, among sundry other materials sourced from hobby shops and hardware stores. His works—replicating cinder blocks, suspenders, wrenches, barbells, and rabbits' feet—are obsessively detailed, down to the hand-sewn vents and hems on tiny houndstooth jackets and the ribbed handles of finger-length umbrellas.

If this is beginning to sound grossly twee, consider *The Janitor's Closet*, 2016–18, one of twenty-six new works comprising LeDray's first show with Peter Freeman, Inc. It features a small dingy mop hung on a white pegboard wall. Water stains dribble from the gray and rust-brown fibers to the base of the board, whose bottom inch is also discolored from the mop's daily damp return. One chunk of wall is missing entirely, revealing a colony of feral dust bunnies on the bottom strip of the wooden frame. The sculpture's sordid subject matter undercuts any cutesiness. Instead, its evocations of indifference and neglect, juxtaposed with the painstaking craftsmanship and care that went into its creation (the hundreds of carefully drilled holes, the perfectly reproduced outlet with dime-size sockets), were ominous and magnetic in the vein of Robert Gober's handpainted bags of cat litter and bottles of Seagram's gin.



Charles LeDray, *Free Public Library*, 2015–19, paper, cardboard, fabric, thread, acrylic paint, ink, acrylic varnish, acrylic gel medium, brass, patina, bubble gum, glass, metal, wire, wood, cement board, cement, granite, glue, fiberfill, Mylar, 10 7/8 × 97 7/8 × 50 1/4".

In *Free Public Library*, 2015–19, the most captivating work in the show, dozens and dozens of books the size of cassette tapes spilled helter-skelter from cardboard boxes, canvas totes, and paper bags onto a craggy slab of assiduously reproduced sidewalk, complete with grimy cracks and blackened wads of bubble gum. Strewn across the curb with their bruised corners and pages the color of tea, the books served as emblems of obsolescence, abandonment, and loss. Had they been jettisoned by someone skipping town? Were they the casualties of a bad breakup? Or were they the former possessions of someone no longer alive, items unwanted by friends and relatives? Gazing at the volumes gradually began to feel like rubbernecking, as though the very mind and soul of the owner were scattered on the pavement.

The piece harks back to one of LeDray's best-known installations, *workworkworkworkwork*, 1991, an array of nearly six hundred miniature wares the artist first exhibited on forty-five feet of actual sidewalk in Manhattan's East Village. The pavement edges of the new work were ragged, as though the slab had been violently torn from its original home. Revisiting hits from one's own oeuvre is not a painless process, it seems, nor one of nostalgic self-indulgence. Whereas the earlier piece resembled an urban yard sale of used goods, *Free Public Library* suggests a more involuntary state of vulnerability and exposure. LeDray heightened the confessional, self-referential nature of the work by signing the cement when it was still wet with his initials beside a child-size handprint, and by including one open book bearing his own ex libris plate. Its pages were gouged out to create a hiding place, but the compartment was empty, its secrets stolen or forgotten. A series of other plates drawn in ink at an enlarged scale (an unusual move for the artist) hung framed on the opposite wall. While these works were not extraordinary on their own, the intrinsic sense of pride, identity, and ownership they evoked added a poignant harmony line to *Free Public Library*. Other pieces were more heavy-handed. The miniature red carpet with velvet ropes barricading either end, for instance, felt trite, as comments on access and celebrity go.

By downsizing and handcrafting his subjects, LeDray makes us pay closer attention than we might otherwise in an age of click-and-swipe distraction. But instead of sparking the whimsical delight and reassuring sense of godlike control provoked by dolls and, apparently, tiny burritos (the latter being one of several recent internet phenomena that have prompted major news sources to report that miniatures are “having a moment”), LeDray's art is unsettling. Confronted with unusable utilitarian objects, by highly narrative yet not easily decoded tableaux, we feel awkward and impotent—and in our discomfort we find pathos. We all know what it is like to navigate the full-size world feeling just as out of place.

—Zoë Lescaze