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ARTSEEN | DEC/JAN 2023–24

Charles LeDray: *Shiner*

By Louis Bury



Charles LeDray, *Backward Suit*, 2010–2023. Fabric, thread, coated board, wood, leather, gold-plated brass, steel, epoxy resin, enamel paint, crayon, paper, 39 7/8 x 32 1/4 x 5 1/4 inches. Courtesy the artist and Peter Freeman, Inc, New York. Photo: Justin Craun.

Charles LeDray's Peter Freeman, Inc. exhibition, *Shiner*, contains no literal or figurative black eyes, no depictions of bruises or marks of shame. It does contain a scaled-down sculpture of a wooden shoeshine kit, *Shiner* (2015–23), with the title word painted on its side in wobbly yellow letters. Miniaturized versions of polishes, creams, and other shoe care implements surround the kit, as well as a smattering of seemingly unrelated miniaturized sculptures such as a harmonica, a toy truck, and a box of Whoppers spilled on the floor. These laboriously fabricated dollhouse-scale artworks have been LeDray's stock-in-trade for several decades; few artists have so consistently had the adjective "Lilliputian" used to describe their work. Both the sculptures' tininess and their aggregation attract, like an idiomatic shiner, curiosity regarding how and why their appearances differ from the norm.

ON VIEW

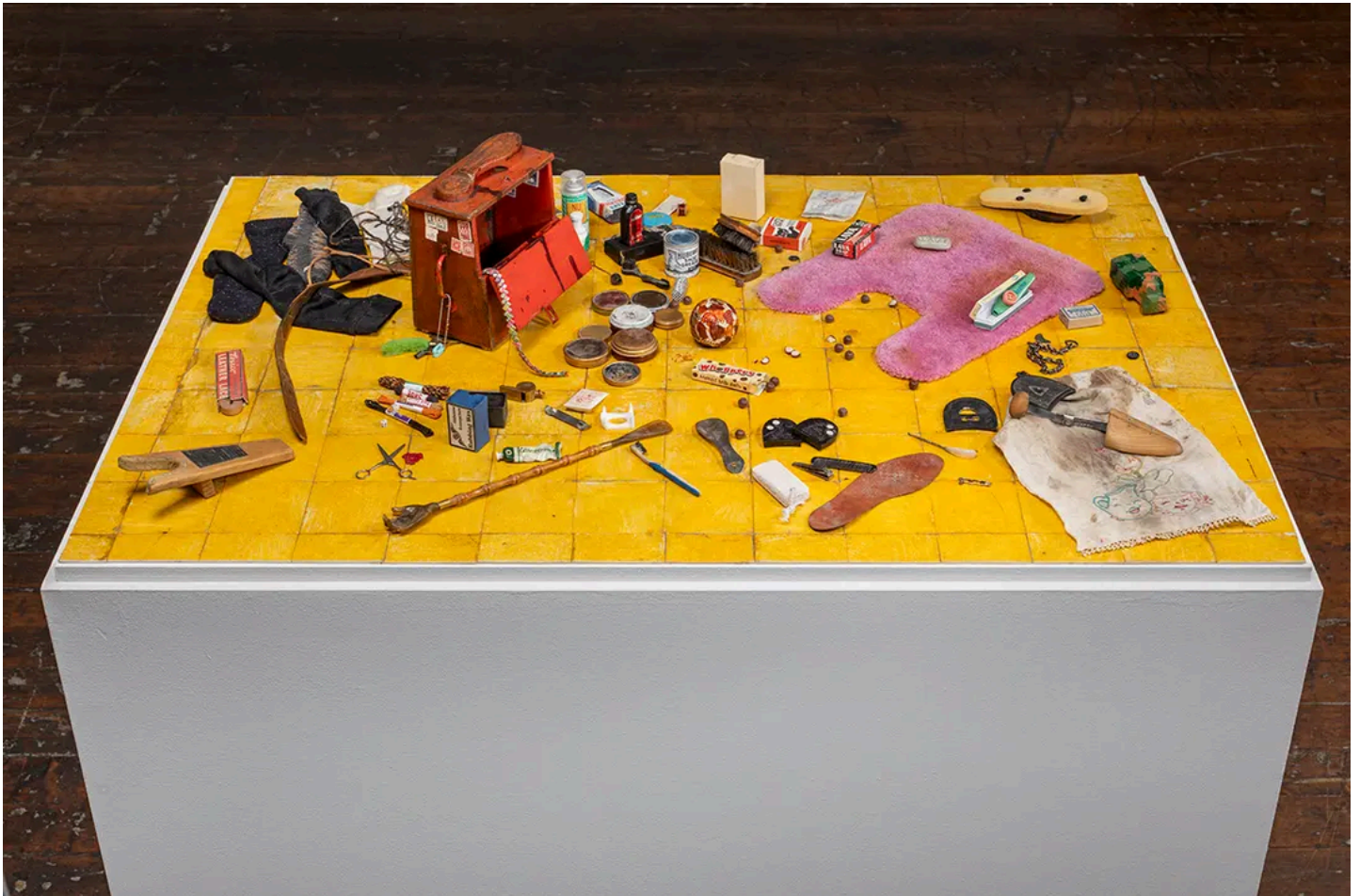
**Peter Freeman
Gallery**

Shiner

November 2,
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Consider LeDray's series of twenty-seven "BRIEFS" (2020–2023), another overdetermined title word. Each sculpture imitates, at reduced scale, the design of a Peter Schuyler-brand vintage cigar box. However, rather than cigar sculptures, the boxes contain miniaturized replicas of newspaper clippings and other historical ephemera, as though the artworks were time capsules. Only one box is displayed with its lid open; its extensive, varied contents—a container of rubbing wax, a museum ticket, vintage stamps—have been removed from the box and arrayed on the vitrine shelf like bodily organs on a dissection table. The other boxes remain closed, tight lipped, as if entombing caches of secrets.



Charles LeDray, *Shiner*, 2015–2023. Wood, mat board, acrylic paint, enamel paint, watercolor, polyurethane, fabric, leather, embroidery floss, acrylic yarn, silicone rubber, Lava soap, mother of pearl, Fimo, pretzel bits, rabbit fur, bubble gum, wax, cinnamon oil, shoe dye, metal, copper wire, electrical tape, acrylic, foil, pumice, plastic, eraser, letterpress print, printed paper, 5 3/4 x 34 x 23 7/8 inches. Courtesy the artist and Peter Freeman, Inc, New York. Photo: Nicholas Knight.

This interplay between concealment and disclosure finds telling expression in *Hope Chest* (2022–2023), a scaled down sculpture of a colorful storage trunk displayed with its lid open. The trunk teems with sculptural recreations of items that belonged to the artist's late mother: a rainbow clown's wig, a plush hamburger and fries, plasticy bracelets and bangles galore. On the underside of the chest's lid are the same kind of documentary ephemera found in "BRIEFS": a poster advertising a Muhammad Ali boxing match, a Woman's Suffrage Day greeting card, a Weight Watchers bookmark announcing, "I lost 5 pounds!" The recreated belongings operate at the intersection of personal and cultural history, a kind of seam between the private and public meanings humans invest in objects.

LeDray stitches such seams, literally, in his signature recreations of menswear shrunken down to children's proportions, as though the droll garments were left in the dryer too long. *S.A.M.* (2022–2023) beautifully recreates the artist's own Seattle Art Museum guard uniform from when he worked there in the 1980s, down to the sport coat's textured navy fabric and schoolboy-ish "Security" patch. *Backward Suit* (2010–2023) is more impersonal: a tan camel-hair sport coat, whose back faces the viewer and the original provenance of which is not provided, hangs above a pair of ruddy, plaid pants. On a pegboard behind the rustic garments, the artist has affixed a crayon rubbing of miniaturized bricks with the words "men," "man," "woman," or "women" variously imprinted on them.

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The brick sculptures used to create the rubbing *MEN MAN WOMAN WOMEN* (2012/2020–2023) lie stacked on two pallets in the gallery and serve as a master key to *Shiner*. On an obvious level, the bricks' words signal LeDray's interest in how cultural artifacts encode historical conceptions of gender. More subtly, the bricks' binaristic labels suggest that such cultural relics may be less revealing of their owners' individuality, more generic, than we like to imagine. The quirks of personal taste, from cigar to clothing preferences, can always be assimilated into larger cultural categories, particularly in hindsight.



Charles LeDray, *Spool'n: How My Mother's Embroidered Apron Unfolds in My Life*, 2015–2023. Acrylic paint, gesso, acrylic varnish, plastic, nails, thread, wooden spools, glass, brass. 77 x 28 x 28 inches. Courtesy the artist and Peter Freeman, Inc, New York. Photo: Justin Craun.

LeDray's other signature aesthetic, in which he fabricates a sprawling series of unique miniatures, thematizes the tensions between individual and group identities. His 1994–1996 *Milk and Honey*—two thousand tiny, hand thrown, white porcelain vessels, displayed across six shelves of a glass cabinet like figurines in a hobby shop—constitutes the artist's touchstone work in this vein. *Shiner* reprises that gesture with *Revolution* (2015–2023), an earth-toned series of miniature stoneware vessels, and varies it with *Spool'n: How My Mother's Embroidered Apron Unfolds in My Life* (2015–2023), a series of small brightly painted wooden spools. In such works, each individual sculpture possesses, like

a snowflake, unique characteristics, yet the accumulation of sculptures subsumes, like a snowdrift, those characteristics into that of the group.

A similar dynamic is at play when an artist is known for a particular style. Repeated across a career, gestures that once felt singular can start to feel familiar. In *Shiner*, LeDray switches things up in places, as in the decision to display *Revolution* and *Spool'n* side-by-side and allow sculptures from both series to intermingle in the middle. He also experiments with scales beyond miniaturization, enlarging some of the text-based ephemera from “BRIEFS,” for example, and displaying them as stand-alone artworks. These variations freshen up LeDray’s charming hallmark methods, but at the same time his work’s indefatigable repetitions have always been a big part of the point.

Louis Bury is an art writer, author of *The Way Things Go* (punctum books, 2023) and *Exercises in Criticism* (Dalkey Archive Press, 2015), and Associate Professor of English at Hostos Community College, CUNY.

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