

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

Charles Ray

Press Packet

Farago, Jason. "Now's the Time to Stand Up for Sculpture." *The New York Times*, January 3, 2020, p. C17, p. C19.

Fry, Naomi. "Walking and Talking." *The New Yorker*, December 2, 2019, pp. 17–18.

Loos, Ted. "A Sculpture Gnaws, And Spectators Feel It." *The New York Times*, May 14, 2018, pp. C1–C2.

Saltz, Jerry. "Three Sentence Reviews of Marlene Dumas, Dan Colen, and 11 Other Art-World Big Shots." *New York Magazine*, May 31, 2018.

Saltz, Jerry. "See Charles Ray: three rooms and the repair annex." *New York Magazine*, May 28–June 10, 2018, p. 111.

"Charles Ray." *The New Yorker*, May 21, 2018.

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# The New York Times

THE NEW YORK TIMES, FRIDAY, JANUARY 3, 2020

JASON FARAGO | CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

## Now's the Time to Stand Up for Sculpture

A maligned art form shines in this age of digital images.

IN 1846, back when critics were not yet afraid of rendering judgments, Charles Baudelaire went to the Paris Salon and wrote a review that aimed to put an entire art form out of business.

Under the title “Why Sculpture Is Boring,” Baudelaire argued that bronze and marble statuary was vague and elusive, and “presents too many faces at once” — 100 different angles — to the spectator. He thought sculpture lacked the authority of painting or architecture, which both made clear where they stand. When “a chance illumination, an effect of lamplight, reveals a beauty which was not the one he had thought of,” the sculptor must sadly accept that three-dimensional art is always fated to depend on the circumstances of its display. That makes it, the poet insisted, nothing but “a complementary art.”

Baudelaire's critique was just one of many anti-sculpture broadsides over the last two centuries, mostly delivered by painters — and by those critics in the tank for them. (Ad Reinhardt, maybe apocry-

phally, said in the 1950s that sculpture was “something you bump into when you back up to look at the painting.”) But something interesting has changed in the camera phone age: Suddenly, a sculpture's infinite perspectives and mutable viewing conditions provide new prospects in the gallery and on the web. To Baudelaire, sculpture disappointed by refusing to resolve into a single point of view, but to the camera phone-conditioned eye, that refusal is an opportunity. Every sculpture, to the contemporary viewer, is first a solid thing in the gallery and then a font of subsequent images, co-authored by artist and viewer.

I've spent a lot of the past season thinking about the contemporary relevance of sculpture, and how we experience solidity, weight and dimension in the era of the cloud. It's a question that framed my viewing of Verrocchio's works in bronze and terra cotta, on view through Jan. 12 at the National Gallery of Art in Washington. It exercises contemporary sculptors as different as Richard Serra, Rachel Harrison, Nairy Baghramian and Andra Ursuta, who



CHARLES RAY, VIA MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

all presented major new shows recently in New York. It looms over the rolling controversies over public monuments, which solidify history in metal or stone, then deliquesce into pixels on Google Street View. And it provides the unexpected link between two extraordinary sculptors, working five centuries apart, who each updated the classical sculpture tradition for new audiences looking with new eyes.

The older of these two artists is Bertoldo di Giovanni (circa 1440-1491), whose small but var-

ied output in bronze, wood and terra cotta anchored the fall season at the Frick Collection. Bertoldo enjoyed the patronage of Lorenzo the Magnificent, the biggest hot shot of 15th-century Florence, and yet he produced relatively little; today he is most often spoken about as the student of Donatello and teacher of Michelangelo. This first-ever retrospective, which closes Jan. 12 and contains almost every surviving work, sticks up for Bertoldo as a multimedia resuscitator of the art of classical Rome, whether

Charles Ray's “Mountain Lion Attacking a Dog” from 2018. Some of the artist's work is being shown at Hill Art Foundation.

in Lorenzo-celebrating portrait medals or in an entire terra cotta frieze that topped the entrance of a Medici country house (a striking loan from a Tuscan museum).

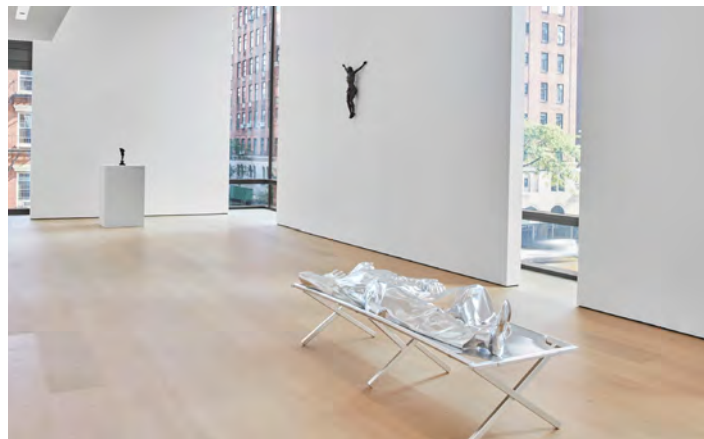
Nude men and gods, twisting and writhing, were Bertoldo's predicament and prize. An arresting, full-scale statue of St. Jerome, made of painted wood and credited here to Donatello and Bertoldo working together, embodies the hermit priest as a lithe but wretched penitent, face pained and abdomen collapsed as he strikes his chest with a rock. Yet to a 21st-century eye, the most challenging and surprising work here is a serpentine bronze statuette of Orpheus, done around



KUNSTHISTORISCHES MUSEUM; MICHAEL BODYCOMB



ABOVE, MICHAEL BODYCOMB MUSEO; BELOW, MUSEO NAZIONALE DEL BARGELLO, MAURO MAGLIANI



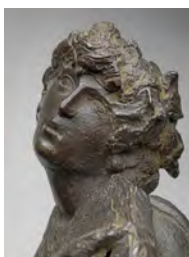
CHARLES RAY, MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY AND HILL ART FOUNDATION; MATTHEW HIERMANN

1471 and on loan from the Bargello in Florence.

Just 17 inches tall, with a tiny waist and un-musled thighs and buttocks, this Orpheus looks more like a boy than a man as he sings, dances and plays a Renaissance string instrument called a lira da braccio. Get up close and you'll see that the bronze is abraded and unfinished, especially on Orpheus's lyre and on the animal pelt draped over his chest — the result of an only partial mastery of the lost-wax process of metal casting, which involves forming a

clay mold around a wax figure, heating it so the wax melts away, and then filling the cavity with liquid metal. It was an ancient technique that Florentine artists had only recently rediscovered. Bertoldo's "Orpheus," for all its antique inspiration, is a work of a new, or newly revived, engineering process, whose glitchy rusticity has both a human and a technological derivation.

Bronze statuette works grew in refinement and finish later in the Renaissance and into the



**Bertoldo di Giovanni:**  
The Renaissance of Sculpture in Medici Florence  
Through Jan. 12 at the Frick Collection, Manhattan; 212-288-0700, frick.org.  
**Charles Ray and the Hill Collection**  
Through Feb. 15 at the Hill Art Foundation, Manhattan; 212-337-4455, hillartfoundation.org.

Top, "Bellerophon Taming Pegasus," designed by Bertoldo di Giovanni, executed by Adriano Fiorentino (1480-82). Above left, the "Bertoldo di Giovanni" show at the Frick, with a statue of St. Jerome, center, credited to Donatello and Bertoldo, "Orpheus" at right, and at left "Suppliant," by Bertoldo. Above right, at the Hill Art Foundation, from left, Alessandro Algardi's "Christ at the Column" (circa 1630s); his "Corpus Christi" (circa 1646) and Charles Ray's "Mime" (2014). Left, a detail of "Orpheus" (circa 1471).

Baroque era. The financier and art collector J. Tomilson Hill, whose collection of bronzes went on view at the Frick in 2014, now exhibits his cache of statuettes in an airy, white-walled space in Chelsea — alongside works of con-

temporary art. Right now at the Hill Art Foundation you can see five Renaissance bronzes alongside the sculpture of Charles Ray, the deep-thinking and slow-working Los Angeles sculptor who has rethought the classical tradition for our age as profoundly as Bertoldo did for his.

For Mr. Ray, sculptural invention takes the form of an excessive perfectionism, in which new scanning and casting technologies permit thrillingly off-key riffs on ancient forebears. In the



low-slung sterling silver sculpture “Mountain Lion Attacking a Dog” (2018), for example, the artist embodies a predator sinking its teeth into the flesh of its upturned prey, updating the Greek and Roman taste for group sculptures of animals to today’s Hollywood Hills. (This work’s most evident art historical precedent is the marble sculpture “Lion Attacking a Horse,” at the Capitoline Museum in Rome — a favorite of Bertoldo’s disciple Michelangelo.)

The lion’s painstakingly chased fur recalls the contrasts of clean and striated bronze in Bertoldo’s “Orpheus,” though now the technology at hand is different. For Bertoldo, the intermediate step between the initial figure and the metal cast was a layer of wax. For Mr. Ray, it is 3-D scanning and CNC machining: highly precise technologies that translate objects into data that can be output to a robotic mill.

For both the metal sculpture stands as an uncanny replica or transformation of bodies we know, given new integrity and new value (literally, in the case of silver and bronze casts). What makes these sculptures compelling — and what Baudelaire hated about them — is the cryptic and unfathomable faces they offer as we circle them in the gallery, beholding them from all sides, scru-

tinizing their chasing and their patinas.

What interests me now is how young audiences may perceive these sculptures, and how the social photo has transformed our appreciation of them. For more and more viewers, the phone screen conditions almost all visual perception — and this is true even at a museum like the Frick, where, nearly alone among New York museums, you cannot take photographs. Whether the smartphone comes out or stays in your pocket, our eyes are already being reformatted to follow the logic of digital images, where life becomes pictures and pictures become information.

Sculpture, much more than maybe any art form, can offer viewers the satisfaction of oscillating between reality and virtuality, between object and image. (Unlike installation art, which too often recedes into a selfie backdrop, a sculpture retains its potency as it’s channeled with light and shadow from gallery into the social media feed.) Baudelaire’s anxiety about sculpture as a “complementary art” has drained away. The new challenge, when we look at Renaissance or modern sculpture, is to somehow still appreciate mass, volume and scale when all that is solid melts into the screen.

THE  
NEW YORKERVISITING DIGNITARY  
WALKING AND TALKING

Bright and early on a recent Saturday, Charles Ray, the Los Angeles sculptor, stepped out of the Four Seasons Hotel, and walked west on Fifty-seventh Street. Ray, who is sixty-six, was in town for the opening of a show at the Hill Art Foundation, in Chelsea. At the luxuriously spare nonprofit space, his enigmatic sculptures—a life-size aluminum mime stretched on a camping bed, a sterling-silver mountain lion about to maul a dog, an apple core wrought in gold—were presented alongside Renaissance and Baroque bronzes, among them three Christs, which were selected by the artist from the collection of the hedge-fund billionaire J. Tomilson Hill and his wife, Janine. The curatorial gambit threw into relief the solemn, even spiritual quality of Ray's pieces, which can take fifteen years to complete.

Turning north onto Madison Avenue, his pace was measured but steady. "I walk a lot," he said. Fourteen years ago, his aorta was replaced during open-heart surgery, after which he started walking ten to twelve miles a day. "I get up at 2:30 A.M., leave at three, and I'm back home around 6:15, and then I have breakfast, swim for an hour, and go to the studio," he said. If there's time later, he'll walk some more. He used to walk in the dense darkness of the Santa Monica Mountains—"I had a flashlight, and it was really beautiful. I would see wild animals, even strange people"—but it made his wife, Silvia Gaspardo-Moro,

nervous. Now he walks from Brentwood, where the couple lives, to the Santa Monica Pier and back. He also has a route in every major city he has shown in. "I have one in Paris, in Madrid, in Tokyo," he said. He never misses a day. "In Chicago, I have a nice route that I do along the lake, even when it's twenty below zero. You have to know how to dress."

Ray is spindly, with a mass of gray curls, rimless glasses, and the slight, kindly stoop of a man who makes an effort to meet his interlocutor halfway. Each of his sculptures involves a lengthy process of thinking and tinkering, over the course of which its materials might change, and its scale might shift. "I spent three years looking at details on a sculpture that I was working on, including a toenail," he recalled. "And I asked Silvia, 'Will anyone ever notice the slight changes I'm making to this one thing, the subtleties?,' and she said, 'No, but the meaning in these details adds up over time, like an ecosystem.'"

He went on, "There are no big revelations as you're walking, but over the yearscape the temporality of this regular action puts things in a more interesting perspective." A siren shrieked in the distance. "Sometimes I wonder, How much longer can this go on? I keep thinking, Well, I'll keep on doing this, and then I'll die, you know?" He laughed. Sculpture is similar. "It makes you see your entire temporal shape." He sketched a few quick strokes in the air, like the chalk outline of a body.

Across the street from the Met Breuer, formerly the Whitney, Ray paused. "This is my alma mater," he said. He has participated in five Whitney Biennials. His eyes scanned the concrete façade. "For my generation, brutalist architecture meant that we had left home," he said, "since that was the style of so many uni-

versity buildings." He began walking again, carefully skirting an overzealous jogger. The city was waking up.

On his New York route, Ray always tries to stop at the Metropolitan Museum, where he spends at least an hour looking at sculpture. It was a little after ten, and the museum was already teeming. "Lately, I've been trying the wings that are emptier," he said, "like the Cyprus section." But this time he headed toward the popular Greek and Roman galleries, where he stopped before a Greek stela memorializing the death of a child, from the fifth century B.C.

"I think this is one of the most profound pieces," he said, taking in the carved marble figure of a girl, draped in robes, her face turned down toward two doves in her hands. "Look at the orchestrated elements of the form, in the brilliant *here-ness* of the sculpting!" His voice fell to an excited whisper. "The one part that isn't a relief, where there's a gap between the figure and the slab, is where the girl's lips touch the bird's beak!" He gestured toward the small space. "She's dead, yes, but there's *breath*, there's *pneuma*, there's *birdsong*!" He took a step back. "Looking at this makes me feel like it's O.K. to die, because when I'm dead that space is still going to be there."

—Naomi Fry

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## The New York Times



"Mountain Lion Attacking a Dog," a sculpture by Charles Ray, whose subjects can often have unpredictable effects on viewers.

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

# A Sculpture Gnaws, And Spectators Feel It

In a new work, Charles Ray  
stirs up a fine line of attack.

By TED LOOS

WALDEN, N.Y. — The Los Angeles sculptor Charles Ray woke up at 5 a.m. and walked for four hours, as he does every day, both for his health and for solitary reflection time.

Only he was in New York City at the time, so he used Central Park. Energized, he got into a car and came up here to the Polich Tallix foundry in Orange County, to see some men about a lion and a dog.

Mr. Ray, who is known for his mysterious figural sculptures that "circle ancient themes and conventions," as Roberta Smith wrote in a review, was finishing his painstaking work last month

on new versions of a 2017 piece, "Mountain Lion Attacking a Dog," for the exhibition at Matthew Marks Gallery in Chelsea, through June 16.

The cast sculpture comprises two main pieces, interlocking where the mouth of the lion meets the neck of the dog — the killing moment frozen in time. And it epitomizes the artist's enigmatic relationship with his subject matter. Even when he is sculpting a nature scene, Mr. Ray unearths something uncanny that can provoke a reaction.

You wouldn't necessarily know it from his process, which is steeped in art historical and aesthetic concerns. Wearing a dark knit cap that hid his unruly hair, Mr. Ray agonized, meditated and philosophized about every aspect of the piece.

Just the seams on "Mountain Lion" have occupied his mind for a year

— he doesn't "encourage" them, he said, but it often can't be helped. "Sculpture and seams are like boxers and broken noses: They go hand in hand."

The five new pieces in the show represent a large portion of the work he has completed since his 2014-2015 retrospective, shown in Chicago, which may help explain why they cost between \$2 million and \$8 million each. For a major artist, Mr. Ray produces very little. "I work very slowly," he said.

Mr. Ray had completed a sterling silver version with a rich gleam that made it hard to look away from. Next to it was a stainless steel version that required more polishing. "The stainless is like video, with all the realism and information, and the silver is like cinema, it's warm and emotional," said Mr. Ray, 64, who is known to all as Charley.

Some 40 people have had a hand at some point in the several-year process



making the work. It began with having a real mountain lion in his studio, gnawing at a steak that was nailed to a piece of wood.

The piece was inspired by the sculptor's long walks in the hills above Los Angeles, where the wild cats prowl, and also by a Greek marble sculpture, "Lion Attacking a Horse," that Mr. Ray saw at the J. Paul Getty Museum.

But ask what it's about, and you'll get a sideways answer. "One could say I've spent a great deal of time making very little of my subject matter," Mr. Ray said with a wry smile.

James Rondeau, the president and director of the Art Institute of Chicago and co-organizer of Mr. Ray's retrospective there, said that the artist creates "vehicles that pick you up somewhere and drop you off somewhere else."

"They're not narrative," he added. "He's making figurative sculpture relevant in the present tense, but connecting it to a long continuum of art history."

Put another way: It's sculpture densely packed with references, which is why the critic Hal Foster called him "catnip for art historians."

The public has at times had a different reaction, as have institutions that feared controversy, particularly with his nudes.

Mr. Ray is perhaps best known for "Boy With Frog" (2009), commissioned by the luxury goods tycoon François Pinault for the piazza in front of the

### An artist who has been referred to as 'catnip for art historians' by a critic.

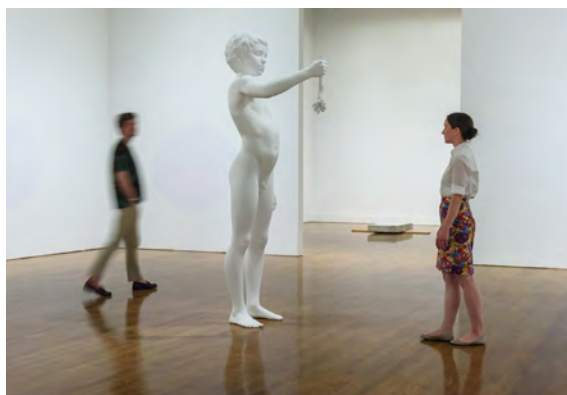
Punta della Dogana, his museum in Venice, but later removed. The nude sculpture was beloved by many, but offensive to others — though it is no naked-er than the subjects of artworks all over the city — and locals wanted the return of a displaced lamppost there. (A version was installed at the Getty Center because of its echoes with the older art inside, and it remains uncontroversially on view on the steps leading to the main entrance.)

Even his fans acknowledge that his subjects can have unpredictable effects on viewers. "People can get stuck with his provocative content," Mr. Rondeau said.

That was the case with "Huck and Jim" (2014), inspired by "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn." The two naked figures — a black man and a white boy, almost-but-not-quite touching — were intended to be displayed in front of the Whitney Museum



PHOTOGRAPHS BY LAUREN LANCASTER FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



Above, Charles Ray, a Los Angeles-based sculptor known for his mysterious figural sculptures. Left, "Boy With Frog" at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 2016. Below, Mr. Ray with two versions of "Mountain Lion Attacking a Dog," then works in progress.





of American Art. But it was considered too contentious and the museum offered to move it inside; instead, Mr. Ray withdrew the piece.

"Disappointed is the wrong word," Mr. Ray said of his feelings on the matter, though he sure seemed it. He said he was working on a public home for the piece.

Though his earliest phase involved pared-down, Minimal art, he first lodged in the public consciousness with works like "Family Romance" (1993), a naked nuclear family in which the son and daughter are the same size as Mom and Dad.

"When I was a younger man I was very aware — and perhaps still am today — of a degree of provocativeness carrying a work into a room and grabbing people's attention," Mr. Ray said.

From the start, the art world has esteemed his work. "He has a complete understanding about the weddedness between conceptual ideas and the world of form, and the way they are integrated," said the artist Laura Owens, who first met Mr. Ray some 20 years ago when he hired her for her first teaching job, at U.C.L.A., where he ran the sculpture program.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art's classical collection — in particular a Greek kouros, of a naked young man — has long been a source of inspiration, particularly for Mr. Ray's "Aluminum Girl" (2003), the first in his series of white-painted metal figures. It is on view at the Met Breuer in the exhibition "Like Life: Sculpture, Color and the Body (1300 — Now)."

Sheena Wagstaff, the chairwoman of the modern and contemporary department at the Met and co-organizer of "Like Life," said: "The first time I ever visited him in L.A., he was reading Pliny. That's not your normal studio visit."

On the day of the foundry visit, Mr. Ray was digging into the details of his sculptures like a Renaissance carver, though his assistants make the actual marks. He pointed to various areas on the finely hatched belly of the dog — in this piece, the canine's supine vulnerability gave the piece his signature strangeness.

"These are marks from a clay tool; some are natural, but others are like a Japanese comic book, or like a Lichtenstein," he said. "They are not randomly sprinkled on there — and that's what took a long time."

At lunch in an Irish pub after his foundry visit, Mr. Ray told one of his signature loopy stories about how he sent a sculpture to a collector "and I sent 12 empty crates along with it. I said the 12 empty crates is the space that goes around it." He added, "He was totally freaked out."

It was a joke, or maybe more of a wish, since he advocates lots of air around his sculpture. For the Matthew Marks show, Mr. Ray spread three works in one building and, in an adjacent space next door, installed just two more.

You could say that Mr. Ray leaves room for the uncanny wherever he goes.

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**Charles Ray: three rooms  
and the repair annex**

Through June 16, at Matthew  
Marks Gallery, Manhattan;  
212-243-0200;  
[matthewmarks.com](http://matthewmarks.com).

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NEW YORK

## Three Sentence Reviews of Marlene Dumas, Dan Colen, and 11 Other Art-World Big Shots

By Jerry Saltz

### Charles Ray

*three rooms and the repair annex*

Matthew Marks Gallery

After being one of the premiere sculptors of the 1980s and 1990s, Los Angeles-based genius Charles Ray turned from strange visual effects and trippiness to far more laborious, time-consuming techniques, hard-to-work materials, and older forms, and starting in the early 2000s made some astounding works that seemed to say, “Since contemporary sculpture appears to be played out, let’s retrieve familiar forms and techniques to make something supposedly old, new again.” Like a naked boy holding a frog, or a pair of naked figures — one black, one white (said to represent Huckleberry Finn and the runaway slave Jim) — each of which was either removed (in the case of the frog-boy, in Venice) or not allowed to be installed at all (the latter work rejected by the Whitney Museum). At Matthew Marks, five works made variously of solid stainless steel, sterling silver, machined aluminum — especially the duo of a car mechanic — called to mind ancient sculptures like *Dying Gaul* and *Boy Removing a Thorn From His Foot*, works that depict semi-bent-over figures lost in their own worlds of contemplation, and made me think about the complex relationship we have with mechanics, these figures from an almost-gone world, the last ones who can take care of machines that we have made too complex for anyone but experts to repair.



Photo: Charles Ray/Courtesy of Matthew Marks

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# NEW YORK

To

The CULTURE PAGES

Do

Twenty-five  
things to see,  
hear, watch,  
and read.

## ART

### 9. See Charles Ray: three rooms and the repair annex

*Regarding greatness.*

Matthew Marks Gallery,  
522 and 526 West 22nd Street, through June 16.

In his dominance of mass, weight, material, and form, the L.A. genius Charles Ray, 64, gives a master class in sculpture. In one of the more existentially resonant small-scaled figurative sculptures I've ever seen, witness a mechanic going about his business who feels as distant from you as the workings of the world and as close as life on Earth.

JERRY SALTZ

MAY 28–JUNE 10, 2018 | NEW YORK 111

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## THE NEW YORKER

ART GALLERIES—CHELSEA

### Charles Ray

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Five new sculptures flabbergast in exquisitely machined solid metal, almost realist but subtly abstracted. They include a stainless-steel, larger than life-size, middle-aged nude, stoically posed like a pinup (her obviously near-sighted gaze makes us less shy about staring); an aluminum copy of the ancient Greek “Great Eleusinian Relief,” which is owned by the Met; a silver mountain lion savaging a silver dog; and two stainless-steel, filmily white-painted garage mechanics at work. Collectively, they effectively condense two and a half millennia of sculptural modes and meanings, if you think about them. But thinking is no cinch when you’re rocked with wonderment.



## FINE ART CONNOISSEUR

# FAVORITE

WRITTEN BY DAVID MASELLO

### MARK ROBBINS

*President & CEO,  
American Academy  
in Rome*

*Photo: Gerardo  
Gaetani*



#### *Shoe Tie*

CHARLES RAY (b. 1953)  
2012, solid stainless steel,  
28 7/8 in. x 29 1/4 in. x 23 1/2 in.  
© Charles Ray, photo courtesy  
Matthew Marks Gallery, New York



When most of us reach down to tie a shoe, we don't worry about a mountain lion attacking us from behind. But when the artist Charles Ray (b. 1953) was conceiving the idea for his stainless-steel sculpture *Shoe Tie*, he was keenly aware of that risk. In a video he made for the Art Institute of Chicago explaining the origin of this sculpture, Ray says that hikers in the Santa Monica Mountains, near his Los Angeles home, know it is unwise to bend down to tie a shoe because it could result in a bite on the neck. While tying his own sneaker on a mountainous trail one morning, Ray got the idea to make the sculpture, with himself as the subject.

A few years after it was completed in 2012, Mark Robbins, president and CEO of the American Academy in Rome, displayed the sculpture in an exhibition he curated, *American Classics*. When he first saw it, Robbins wrote, "Ray has made something wholly new, unsettling, and profoundly resonant."

Although *Shoe Tie* has left the Academy, where it received much attention from both Romans and foreign visitors, it continues to resonate with Robbins. "What amazes me about Ray and this piece is that he is so comfortable working in a minimalist mode while being so effective and affective in making figurative sculptures. *Shoe Tie* appears traditional, since it references the Spinario, the famous Greco-Roman sculpture depicting a boy removing a thorn from his foot, yet it's completely different from the classical Greek and Roman canons from which it's derived."

Robbins spent time examining not just the sculpture, but also the visitors examining it. "*Shoe Tie* is the kind of work that quickly

enters into a dialogue with those looking at it," he says from the Academy's administrative headquarters in New York, though Robbins travels frequently to its large complex atop Rome's Janiculum hill. "From some angles, it's all quite neutral, assuming the pose of the boy pulling out the thorn. But look closely enough, especially from the rear, and you see the actual physiognomy. You realize this is not a youth, but an adult man with signs of aging. He's not a perfect muscular specimen, as you'd expect from something neoclassical or classical." In fact, like many other sculptures by Ray, some arrestingly bawdy, this self-portrait reflects the artist's awareness of his own middle age. And, also, like many of Ray's works, what appears to be an action is not always exactly that. The figure is barefoot, but he mimics the tying of a shoe: a dialogue is established between the real and the suggestive.

Another feature that signals this sculpture's ability to be both classically figurative and technologically in tune with its time is its materiality: "It looks absolutely neoclassical," Robbins notes, "but is made of shockingly high gloss, machine-made metal."

Robbins was curator of architecture at the Wexner Center for the Arts, in Columbus, Ohio, during the 1990s when he first encountered Ray's art. "I saw then how his sculptures, which seem to bridge hard edged neo-minimalism and figuration, described the whole arc of modernism, even the whole of art history. Years later, I could think of no better piece to exhibit in an American institution that is so engaged with the cultural life of Rome."

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## flash art



1 / 4 Charles Ray, "School Play" (2014). Photo: Natalia Tsoukala © Charles Ray. Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery, Marguerite Hoffman Collection and The George Economou Collection Space, Athens.

[Review](#) / February 22, 2018

### Charles Ray *The George Economou Collection* / Athens

Charles Ray has staged a dramatic exhibition with four works, pregnant with philosophical ideas about representation, the human condition, and the confluence of past and future.

Largely indebted to Hellenistic sculpture, Ray is fascinated by the *Great Eleusinian Relief*, circa 440–430 BC, on permanent display at the National Archaeological Museum in Athens. A Roman version of this work is in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum. Unlike the refined marble carving of the original, the Roman replica was reproduced mechanically through a technique known as the pointing process. Thanks to the most advanced technology, Ray has recreated the Eleusinian relief in solid aluminum. His is a copy of a copy.

One could easily refer to the work as an example of appropriation art and put forward an argument about the postmodern condition, yet it is important to consider the myth behind the Eleusinian Mysteries: the abduction of Persephone by Hades, god of the underworld. Persephone was the daughter of Demeter, goddess of earth and fertility, who in one of her violent outbursts caused much suffering to the people. Zeus intervened and Persephone returned to her mother. Her rebirth stands for the rebirth of all life on earth and is often cited as the symbol of eternal life.



2 / 4 Charles Ray, "Untitled" (1973). Photo: Josh White © Charles Ray. Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.



3 / 4 Charles Ray installation view at The George Economou Collection, Athens. Photo: Natalia Tsoukala © Charles Ray, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.





Charles Ray, "A Copy of The Ten Marble Fragments of the Great Eleusinian Relief." Photo: Natalia Tsoukala © Charles Ray. Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery and The George Economou Collection Space, Athens.

The embryonic sculpture *Handheld Bird* (2006), which, as its title suggests, depicts the birth of a bird, is another musing on life. More enigmatic, *School Play* (2014) depicts, in solid stainless steel, an adolescent boy dressed in toga and sandals and holding a sword; he could be the twenty-first-century version of Triptolemos, featured in the Eleusinian relief. Ray captures the awkwardness of adolescence and the struggle between acting and authenticity.

"Past crimes create future jails. This exhibition does not live in the present tense. It is created for the future," writes the artist in the catalogue. His





4 / 4 Charles Ray, "Handheld Bird" (2006). Photo: Natalia Tsoukala © Charles Ray.  
Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery and The George Economou Collection Space,  
Athens.

recreation of a work from the 1970s — a phallic stack of bricks tied to a sawhorse — suggests an impending catastrophe. It evokes the burden of today's world on the individual and denotes the risks, guilty pleasures, and abundant possibilities of making and thinking about art.

by Vassillios Doupas

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# HYPERALLERGIC

MUSEUMS

## All in the Smooth, White, Vacant-Eyed Family of Contemporary Figurative Sculpture

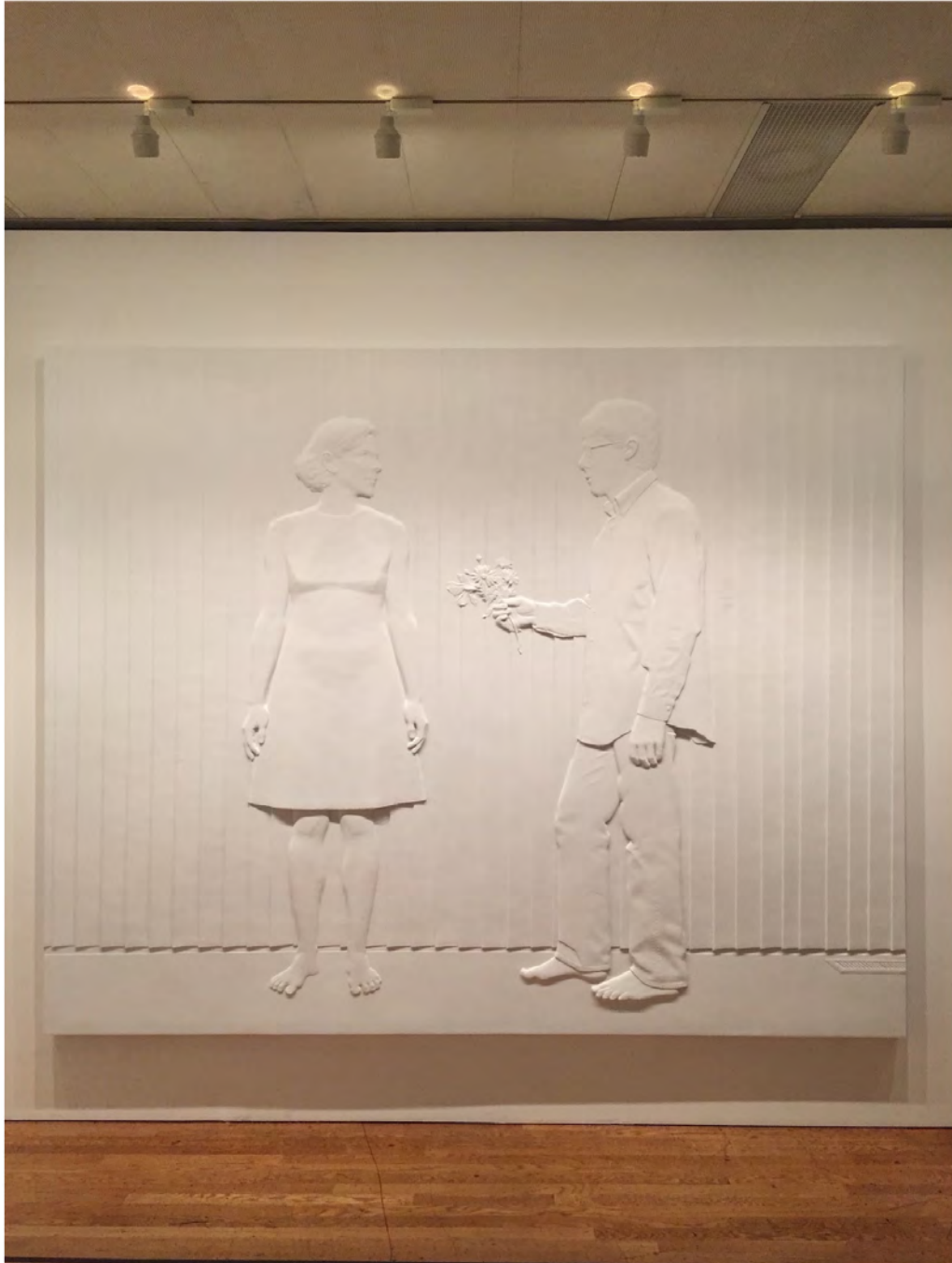
by **Carey Dunne** on July 21, 2016

PHILADELPHIA — Once upon a time, at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, there lived a family of sculptures. They were all smooth, white, and vacant-eyed. Surrounding them were works of clean, monochromatic abstraction and geometric minimalism: The hard-edged color fields of Ellsworth Kelly and Ad Reinhardt, the spackled white squares of Robert Ryman, the asphalt-like paint-sticked canvases of Richard Serra, an anodized aluminum square tube by Donald Judd. The family's artificial sun was "the diagonal of May 25, 1963," a stick of cool white fluorescent light by the minimalist Dan Flavin.

*Embracing the Contemporary*, an exhibit at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, showcases some 100 works from the collection of Keith and Katherine Sachs, all by major artists from the past 50 years. In the bulk of these pieces, there's no trace of the human form: They come from a generation of abstract and minimalist artists who tried to finish off the so-called death of the figure. The few sculptures of human bodies that are featured in the show look like dazed survivors of this attempted erasure. Together, five of these sculptures, all made within the last 15 years, resemble a strange postmodern suburban family, frozen in a sterile gallery space.

The figures in "Light From the Left" (2007), a bas-relief sculpture by Charles Ray, could be the family's mother and father. Made of cast fiberglass, stainless steel, aluminum and acrylic polyurethane, it depicts the artist handing a bouquet of flowers to his wife in the living room of their Los Angeles home. (Though the flowers are rendered in matte white, they're somehow more lively than Jeff Koons' bland "Small Vase of Flowers," nearby, in

colors that all look diluted with beige.) Like Richard Tuttle's "Paper Octagonals," irregular eight-sided shapes of white construction paper cut and pasted directly onto the walls of the next room, the characters in "Light From the Left" are almost invisible. They seem to be trying to camouflage into the white walls of the gallery.



*Charles Ray, "Light From the Left" (2007) (Installation view)*



Charles Ray, "Boy With Frog" (2008) (Installation view)

This couple's son, "Boy With Frog" (2008), also by Charles Ray, towers over the viewer at eight feet tall, made of cast stainless steel and acrylic polyurethane. Inspired by "a classic marble nude," according to the wall text, it depicts a boy holding a squirming frog by the leg. It's playful and uncanny, idealized in form but sinister in its depiction of a child discovering his power over weaker creatures. Unlike most "classic marble nudes," which tended to idealize not just the human body but its soul, too, the boy looks to be growing into a kind of banal evil. The sculpture's dry humor, and surreal play on scale, saves it from total soullessness.



# ARTFORUM

SLANT

## MISSION STATEMENTS

### Elisabeth Sussman on the 1993 Whitney Biennial

IN 1991, when I came to the Whitney, I felt we were under siege. It was impossible to work in an art museum and ignore what was happening around you. The conservative Republican campaign to defund the National Endowment for the Arts, which was really a thinly veiled effort to censor American artists, was in full swing. Under George H. W. Bush appointee John Frohnmayer, the NEA had withdrawn funding (later partially restored) for the group exhibition "Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing," organized by Nan Goldin at Artists Space in New York. Washington, DC's Corcoran Gallery had bowed to congressional pressure, canceling its plans to host the Robert Mapplethorpe show "The Perfect Moment." The Ayatollah Khomeini had proclaimed a fatwa against Salman Rushdie. As a curator, I could not hide from these attacks on free expression any more than I could hide from the homophobia and racism so apparent all around me.

Before I arrived at the Whitney, I'd been a curator at Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art. There, my

colleagues (including David Joselit, Gillian Levine, and Robert Riley) and I developed a curatorial approach that reflected the vital exchange between the art world and what was generally referred to as cultural studies. This was a catchall term that for us encompassed a constellation of texts and theories about postcolonialism and the politics of identity while also designating an experimental impulse, a rethinking of the relationships among artistic, curatorial, and political practice; criticism and theory; literature and polemic. Out of this ferment came a productive way of working. We focused on inclusive programming and outreach to different communities of artists. Many artists we thought were important were working in video and performance, so we paired time-based art with installations of other mediums. Eventually, we produced a group of exhibitions and publications that reflected what I think of as an ICA style. For instance, the 1987 exhibition "British Edge" brought together installation, film, video, and music by a diverse roster of creators from the UK

As a curator, I could not hide from attacks on free expression any more than I could hide from the homophobia and racism so apparent all around me.

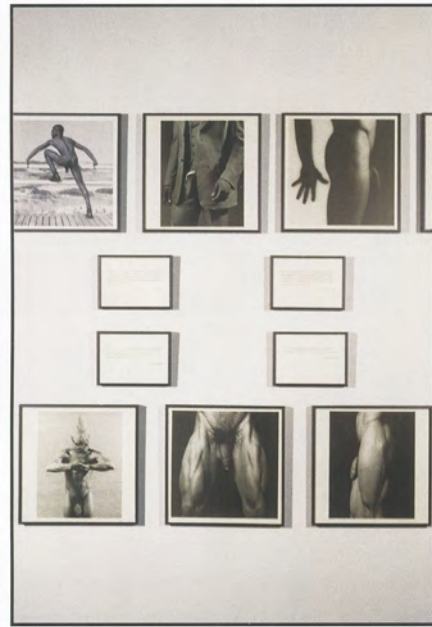


From left: Charles Ray, *Family Romance*, 1992-93, painted fiberglass, synthetic hair, installation view, 1993 Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Photo: Ted Thai/The LIFE Images Collection/Getty Images. View of the 1993 Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. From left: Cindy Sherman, *Untitled*, 1992; Alison Saar, *Hi Yella*, 1991; Cindy Sherman, *Untitled*, 1992. Photo: Geoffrey Clements.

(including Mary Kelly, Derek Jarman, and Isaac Julien). Dick Hebdige's widely anthologized catalogue essay "Digging for Britain: An Excavation in Seven Parts," an experimental archaeology of British history and culture from empire to Thatcherism, is an example of the kind of critical intervention we wanted to support.

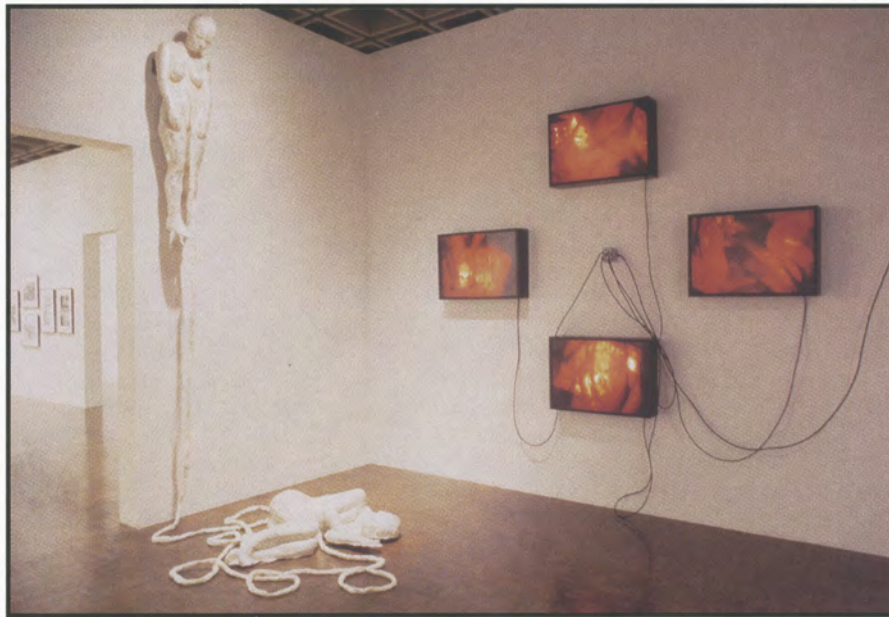
When David A. Ross left the director's post at the ICA to become director of the Whitney, I made the move to New York, too. But if there was no longer any geographic distance between me and the city's network of blue-chip galleries, auction houses, and collectors—the art world that had boomed in the 1980s—I was determined to at least maintain a critical one. The artists I was interested in, and the critical community that had grown up around them, wanted something more from the museum than a rote program of career-building exhibitions.

The 1993 Whitney Biennial was actually the first exhibition I organized as a staff curator at the museum. If ignorance is bliss, that would explain why I plunged into my new assignment so blithely. I was not versed in institutional or New York art-world politics, and I had no real sense of what it would take to install an immense, heterogeneous exhibition in the quirky precincts of the Breuer building. Happily for me, it was a collective effort. I invited my new colleague Thelma Golden (like me, recently hired by Ross) onto the team, as well as Lisa Phillips and John Hanhardt, veterans of previous Biennials. Education director Connie Wolf was a crucial part of the conversation, too. It's fair to say that we had a mission to make a strong statement, to demonstrate the kind of exhibition making we thought was important, to powerfully confront the issues engulfing America and the art world.



I think we all wanted not just to include the usual suspects from the usual galleries but also to look seriously into all mediums and to put together a diverse group of artists. Hanhardt had been organizing an incredible socially responsive video program for years. Golden had curated exhibitions of several generations of African American artists but was particularly involved with a group from her own generation, including Glenn Ligon and Lorna Simpson, who were both in the Biennial. Most important, we wanted to be responsive to what was happening in the world, at the moment of our making this show. Whenever an artist we had chosen proposed a work, we pushed against the constraints of architecture, budget, and programming as usual, an attitude that enabled us to include works like Daniel Joseph Martinez's *I CAN'T IMAGINE EVER WANTING TO BE WHITE* admissions buttons. Constraints were precisely what we intended to overcome.





Left: Glenn Ligon, *Notes on the Margin of the Black Book* (detail), 1991–93, ninety-one offset prints, seventy-eight text pages. Installation view, 1993 Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Photo: Geoffrey Clements. Above: View of the 1993 Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. From left: Kiki Smith, *Untitled*, 1992–93; Kiki Smith and David Wojnarowicz, *Untitled*, 1980–92. Photo: Geoffrey Clements.

I am proud of what we accomplished, proud of our boldness, and proud that the '93 Biennial is a benchmark in the Whitney's institutional DNA. It's an event we can't and don't want to live down and it inflects the way we think about our collections and programs. Retrospective pride, however, doesn't erase memories of the harsh controversies that we lived through.

When the exhibition opened, it did not seem to me that we had launched anything more than an ordinary and ordinarily contentious Biennial. We were not prepared for the gargantuan uproar. I can still summon the amazement I felt when I read *New York Times* critic Michael Kimmelman's review. The line that sticks in my mind is his flat declaration: "I hate the show." Even for Biennial criticism, that was extreme. The objections

Kimmelman raised were representative of those aired by other critics. He cited Ligon's work, which incorporated appropriated Mapplethorpe images, as an example of the "sensationalistic" surfeit of "genitalia." And he took the show to task for privileging "political sloganeering and self-indulgent self-expression." I think perhaps the real issue for Kimmelman and other critics was the vision of "self" that was being expressed. If the Biennial artists had contented themselves with presenting an individualist subjectivity that transcended race, sexuality, gender, and other identity categories, then both the tone and the content of the criticism might have been very different. Instead, the artists were responding to an imperative that Homi K. Bhabha articulated in his catalogue essay: "the need to think beyond narratives of origin and initiatory, initial subjects and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of 'differences.'" That need is just as pressing today. □

ELISABETH SUSSMAN IS CURATOR AND SONDRIL GILMAN CURATOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY AT THE WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART.



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## THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

MASTERPIECE: 'WOMAN WITH LEAVES' (1934) BY PABLO PICASSO

# Making And Looking

BY CHARLES RAY

I RECENTLY VISITED "Picasso Sculpture" at the Museum of Modern Art and was surprised by how taken I was with "Woman With Leaves" (1934). It's a small figurative work, and it easily could be overlooked in the exhibition, as it's placed in a room full of larger and more imposing sculptures. It's a scrappy little piece made of dingy cast-plaster forms assembled and stacked into a figure of a woman. At first glance it is so Picassoesque that you almost need go no further: Assembled forms becoming parts of another whole. The relation of one to the other is charming and easily understood. But if you stop and look, this sculpture's stack of plaster shapes and forms becomes a precariously balanced and dynamic event.

By "precariously balanced" I don't mean that it's about to fall apart before our eyes. Rather, it is possessed of a quality that keeps the viewer intimately engaged by forcing him to juggle dual perceptions simultaneously. "Woman With Leaves" holds together both as a physical object and as an image. At the same time, part of the visual experience of the sculpture is its clearly visible separate sections.

The sculpture reads to me as an essay centered on the human act of making. As you walk around it, decisions Picasso made when casting and imparting forms in plaster become apparent. These seem both technical and intuitive. The process of making small impromptu molds from cardboard, filling them with wet plaster, stacking the resulting forms, and imprinting garden textures and shapes of leaves in the plaster itself gives this sculpture a fluid physicality that creates

a complex narrative of art-making and sculptural becoming.

The viewer perceives the scale of "Woman With Leaves" as that of a figurine. Out of wet plaster, a matchbox-size rectangle with round holes for eyes forms the figure's head. The corrugated cardboard becomes drapery in folds, an abstract garment. Leaves fully imprinted in plaster create the image of the mythic Daphne becoming a tree—or, if one moves around the axis of the sculpture, the imprinted forms become like wings. Around again, and they remind one of an ancient figure holding a docile animal. These shifting associations are not occurring from one stationary view, but appear because you are drawn into and around the small figure.

But soon the viewer is returned to the real world of masking tape, razor knives and the construction of the sculpture. Image recedes and Picasso's hands emerge, so evident in the process. This shifting back and forth between elements and processes of construction, then giving way to rendered images—form and content—vibrates and dances, with neither one dominating.

The creative process here is not simply a means to an end. This little sculpture is not just made of stuff from the world filtered into the art by artist and studio—impressions of cardboard molds, leaf forms, and an armature

of Greek myth, all juxtaposed, stacked and composed until an image appears. It is also "made" as the viewer is brought into and around the work in the act of visual investigation that the elements and evidence of its construction invite.



AS YOU WALK around it, Picasso's creative decisions become apparent.

The magic of the sculpture is how the artist and the viewer join their intuitions. Picasso used his in the construction of the sculpture, and the sculpture is understood only through an intuitive method of looking. This relationship of making and looking is what makes the sculpture.

The most electric and energetic force field of creativity arises in this small yet powerful artwork that cannot be separated from the space and time of its own making. This experience does not come from a reading of the image or the process by itself, but from an engagement with the dynamic of becoming. This little sculpture stood its ground. Picasso's hand was everywhere in it, and as he seemed to be present in the making, I became present in the viewing. This, I think, is how a good sculpture can steal an exhibition even when surrounded by rooms of greater art.

*Mr. Ray, a sculptor who lives and works in Los Angeles, recently had an 18-year retrospective at the Art Institute of Chicago and Kunstmuseum Basel.*

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NEW YORK

## The Whitney Rejected This Masterpiece Sculpture

By Jerry Saltz

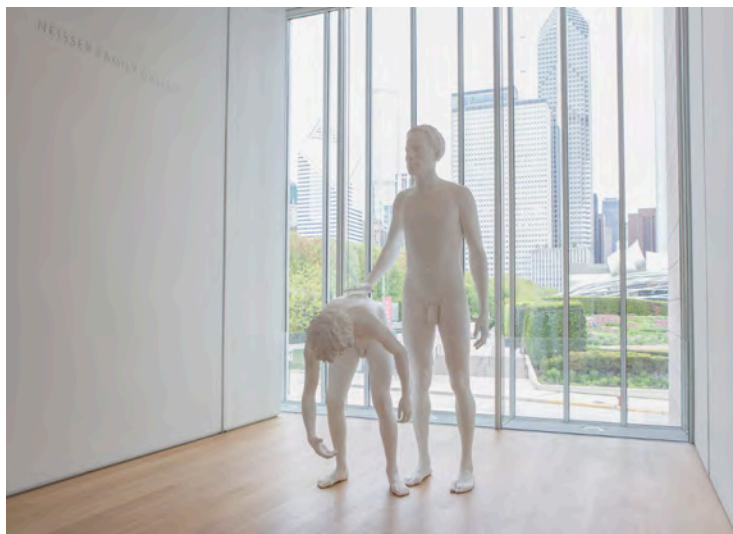


Photo: Art Institute of Chicago/Charles Ray Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

For all its promise, the new Whitney Museum of American Art is and will be marked by an invisible original sin that can't be lifted. That sin? An aesthetic one that perfectly mirrors America's hysteria and mania around race, what D.H. Lawrence called the fear of our "old, hoary, monstrous ... unspeakably terrible ... and snow white ... abstract end."

After boldly commissioning eminent American artist Charles Ray to design a sculpture to be permanently installed on the public plaza outside the new museum, the Whitney blinked and declined Ray's proposal. According to Calvin Tomkins, the museum feared the work would "offend non-museumgoing visitors." And just like that, a gigantic chance was lost. The proposed work, since made and exhibited in Chicago's Art Institute, is not only a 21st-century sculptural masterpiece, it embodies so much of America's past and current struggles that had it been placed in the front of this museum at this time, it might have been a beacon, a lightning rod, a second Statue of Liberty. Adding layers of paradox to this tragedy is the fact that the work is a classically traditional Western figurative sculpture in the vein of the ancient Greek and Roman art widely worshipped as beautiful. Here is Realism, incredible skill, fealty to canonical form and academic history. On top of all that, the subject matter is totally familiar, even banal or boring: two large, naked figures, both male — nothing not already seen in probably 100 other American museums. Yet Ray's public sculpture crackles and fractures with historical counter-force and presents a fact so shattering that the Whitney decided the work could not be exhibited in public. Let's see why.

Saltz, Jerry. "The Whitney Rejected This Masterpiece Sculpture." *New York Magazine*, November 6, 2015.

The figures are big, looming over us at about one-and-a-half times natural size. As realistic as they are, and as much as they command space and attention, they also feel abstracted, once-removed. At no point do the two figures actually touch; in 100 years, some committee or collector could separate them. Yet here they're locked in cosmic orbit with one another, almost inseparable. A standing man towers over us at about nine feet. He's probably about 40 years old, fit, but not a colossus. Still, he's something of an augur, perhaps owing to how he peers into a distance over our heads as if we're not here. Like he's been swallowed up in something we can't see. He extends his right hand over the bending figure of the boy who is looking into his own open hand, or down to the ground. He's lost, absorbed in something. Ray says this figure "reaches down into the river and pulls up a frog." Either way, nothing untoward, freakish, or flashy is happening. The standing man's hand over the boy could be seen as a blessing gesture. For me, the small of the boy's back seems like a vulnerable point, as if injury could be inflicted with very little force, especially given the distracted, rapt way he stoops, oblivious to the world around him. The standing man's consciousness, meanwhile, is split, conflicted, weighed-on, pathos-filled. He is far more aware of the boy than the boy is of him. Still, however academic the realism, neither figure feels Greek or God-like; the body language and type are familiar, the hair is contemporary, expressions are commonplace. There's a sense that the fugues have been fashioned by 3-D printing or something that makes the surfaces feel digital, pixelated. Also, unlike classical sculptures on pedestals these figures stand on the ground in our world. Maybe due to their bigness and the fact that they're cast in stainless steel and painted stark white, however, an enigmatic otherness still exudes. The sculpture is neither sensual and translucent, like marble, nor reflective and cold, like steel. These figures are in limbo.

This is where the hysteria sets in. I can't recall a contemporary artist better electrifying a work of art with its title — activating a metaphysical interstice. The sculpture is called *Huck and Jim*.

Of course. We are looking at a representation of Mark Twain's famous characters in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The man is Jim Watson, escaping Missouri for the free territory of Illinois and Ohio. Huck is the novel's namesake, a small-town Missouri boy running from his drunkard father who wants to kill him for a treasure found in a previous book. In the middle of the night, on Jackson's Island, in the Mississippi River, Huck finds Jim hiding from slave-catchers who will either kill him or chain him to claim the \$800 reward for his return (about \$25,000 in today's money). As told by Twain, Huck is escaping but looking for adventure and fun. He's no angel. All during the book, we read of how he wrestles with his conscience, thinking that the legally and morally right thing to do is to return this piece of property to its rightful owner. By the story's end, Huck deigns to let Jim go because, as he puts it, "I knewed he was white inside." Thus, Huck is the hero of the book, Jim the cause of his heroism and redemption. We know that Huck will eventually have access to the money he found. We don't know what happens to Jim: if he'll be able to return to Missouri for his wife and two children, if he's killed making his way back from Arkansas, where Huck steered him in order to seek adventure.

The hysteria comes from Ray flipping the script. This is not Huck's story any longer. It is Jim's. Or whatever version of Jim's story could be truly authored by a white sculptor. Huck is depicted in the privileged precincts of the imagination, stooping to study something, lost in speculation, surrendering mindfulness to wonder and the luxury of marveling. Ray brilliantly reflects his callowness by obscuring his identity. It's impossible to see his face without lying down on the floor. Or stooping over and peering up at it — which puts you in the exact same position as the figure you're lost looking at, lost in aesthetic wonder. When you do get under Huck, you also notice that he has no pubic hair, another sign of youthfulness or innocence.

Jim is the lodestar of this sculpture, the locus of psychological and physical magnitude. This isn't his *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. It's his "Penal Colony," his *Inferno*; in modern parlance, a state of terrorism. Jim is running for his life, for the fate of his family. Indeed, as a result of Huck's lust for abstract adventure, he brings Jim with him deeper into slave country



rather than just crossing the river into a free state. Even when they reach the point in the river where the Ohio River branches north from the Mississippi, Huck misses the turn in the fog — and continues south. As a result, Jim is captured twice. Both times, he barely escapes. As seen in Ray's sculpture, Jim is a man thinking about something serious; in the words of artist Kara Walker, "his inner plantation ... this grand place where to some extent, we knew our place; a place where one is whole ... and knows what to fight against, or what not to fight against, or who to obey, or how to hold on to oneself in the face of oppression." This is Jim's Gethsemane — an in-between moment of wanting this cup to be taken from him, even as he knows that in America, there's no hope of this happening. In this geography of the damned, Huck is the Pontius Pilate; someone who "washes his hands" of someone else's fate even as this tragic act binds his fate to that of the other. As James Baldwin wrote, "Whoever debases others debases himself." All this felt ambiguity, confusion, innocence, violence, betrayal, and grand defiance radiates from *Huck and Jim*. Here Huck may be well-meaning and innocent, but he is still the racist who needs the black man more than he is needed. And we're back to that white "old, hoary, monstrous, abstract fear" that the old codes will go away. As Baldwin writes, "It is the innocence which constitutes the crime."

And then there is the second kind of in-betweenness at work. The standing man is black; the stooping boy is white; the man's genitals are large and uncircumcised; the boy's penis is small and without pubic hair; Ray is white.

Sexual racial tension is old in America, and deep. In 1851, Herman Melville pictured Ishmael sleeping in the sheltering arms of dark-skinned Queequeg and having torn feelings — later saying, "I must turn idolater." Twain has Jim call Huck "honey," and Huck talks about how "we was always naked, day and night." American shadows become visible. In his famous 1948 essay on the relationship between the boy runaway and the slave runaway, "Come Back to the Raft Ag'in, Huck Honey," Leslie Fiedler writes of the relationship as an archetypal case of American literature's fetish, so to speak, of "chaste male love as the ultimate emotional experience" — a love not quite so chaste of mind as we are typically taught, he writes, even putting aside what he calls the "shackling cliché" of "the white man's sexual envy of the Negro male" and the underlying fear, "white America's nightmare that someday ... he will be rejected." "Unwittingly, we are possessed in childhood by the characters and their undiscriminated meaning, and it is difficult for us to dissociate them without a sense of disbelief. What! These household figures clues to our subtlest passions!" he writes. "In each generation we play out the impossible mythos, and we live to see our children play it, the white boy and the black we can discover wrestling affectionately on any American street, along which they will walk in adulthood, eyes averted from each other, unwilling to touch. The dream recedes; the immaculate passion and the astonished reconciliation become a memory, and less, a regret, at last the unrecognized motifs of a child's book. 'It's too good to be true, Honey,' Jim says to Huck. 'It's too good to be true.'" This is the mine field too far that Ray's *Huck and Jim* occupies.

And yet no outcry erupted when the sculpture was installed at the Art Institute of Chicago, part of a tremendous exhibition of Ray's later work. Perhaps because it was inside a public institution called a *museum*, within the confines of rooms known as *galleries*, where people know to allow ambiguity, nakedness, sexual tension, and unstable subject matter, even around race.

In his sculpture, Ray hits us with visual fact, the belief that form carries meaning, and dispenses with all the familiar distancing tropes that keep stories safe and pathology at bay. Other than the operatic scale, there's no romanticizing of subject, no nostalgia, sentimentalizing, myth, or fantasy. No palliative parable or moral. Just the bare facts. This is a glyph for the complexities of reality. Twain's tale was set in 1853; Ray's story is set in an eternal present and is nonfiction. Here, in Wallace Stevens's words, it's "a constant cry against an old order."

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

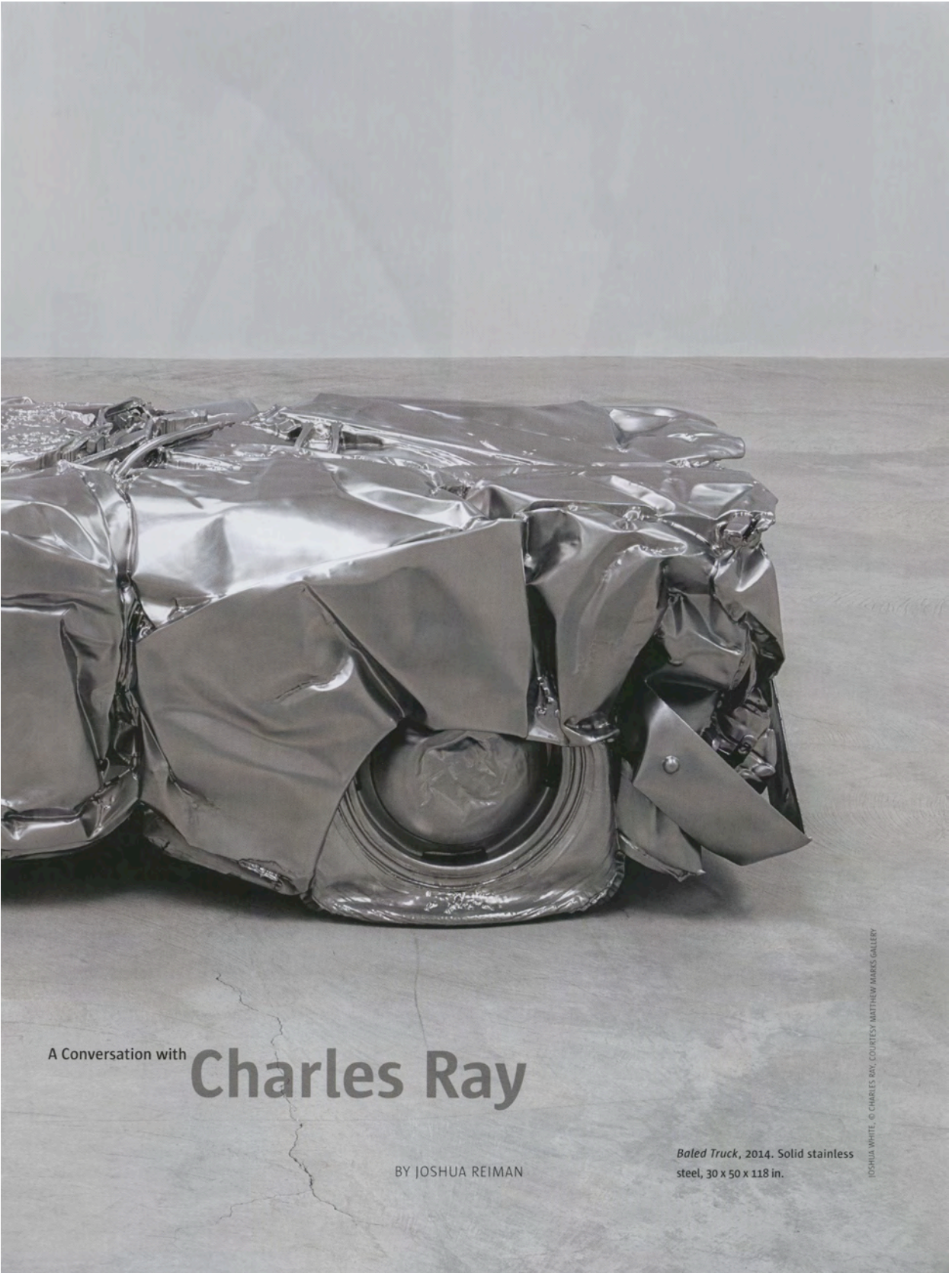
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## The Space In Between

Reiman, Joshua. "The Space In Between." *Sculpture*, July/August 2015, pp. 38–45.









Left: *Plank piece I*, 1973. Right: *Plank piece II*, 1973. Black and white photographs mounted on rag board, 39.5 x 27 in. each.

Over the past 40 years, Charles Ray has produced a majestic array of artistic touchstones within the contemporary sculptural vernacular. His orchestrated relationships between space and objects tempt the senses and baffle perceptual longings. Ray's sculptures are the result of deeply considered compositions often requiring extraordinary amounts of labor, sometimes years in the making.

Ray's sculptural idioms question our basic ontology. He employs the power of awkward bodily relationships, which result in confrontational moments between work and viewer. He deploys a serious wit and, over the years, has engaged in an enormous amount of material inquiry. For many makers and admirers of contemporary art, Ray is a living legend. His recent sculptures remain conceptually challenging, materially lush, and beyond visually compelling. "Charles Ray: Sculpture 1997–2014" will be on view at the Art Institute of Chicago through October 4, 2015.

**Joshua Reiman:** *What are your terms for a successful sculpture?*

**Charles Ray:** I wish they were my terms. We often think that a work we completed is great, or we agree that another artist's work has achieved greatness in the contemporary milieu, but in a very short time, art floats away from our critical control. What's left when we've lost our idea about the meaning of a certain work? Ancient art survives a cultural dementia. We no longer have an understanding of exactly why it's here. After we forget the purpose of an object, its artfulness still remains. Greek figuration is interesting in that we can still see it. The scholar Richard Neer reminds us that a kouros figure was perhaps one of the few smooth objects in a very rough world. Is there an equivalent today? Michelangelo said that a great sculpture must survive being rolled down a hill

without its limbs breaking off. If we take this literally, we're lost. But we can wonder, what's the hill today? As horrendous an experience as it is to watch ISIS destroy people and our heritage, I believe that the slope Michelangelo talks about is much closer to our accepted cultural conventions. I have noticed architects designing escalators in museums that are perhaps too steep.

**JR:** *You use the body a lot, especially your own body. What does your body tell us about us, or what does it tell us about you in sculptural form?*

**CR:** The body is interesting and complex because, first and foremost, it is us. Rather than an image, one can see the body as a vowel—the mental is the physical and the physical is the mental.



When John Searle was asked to comment on the mind-body problem, he said, "Oh, that's identical to the stomach-digestion problem." Throughout my life, I've had different perceptions and uses for the body. Self-portraits are often not about the author, while portraits can serve as an armature for the structure of one's own soul. *Plank piece I* and *Plank piece II* (1973) are early examples of works that used my body as a sculptural element. I was a very young man then—a very young and unformed man. Today, advancing in my years, I marvel at how *Plank I* and *II* remain out in the world, still working for me. These two photographs have no meaning—or rather their meaning is dynamic. As a young man, I denied any empathetic reading of the work. I insisted that *Plank I* and *II* were about a relationship between a wall, a plank, and the junctures and weight of my own body. My friends laughed at me and said, "You idiot, it looks like the aftermath of a car wreck or a Goya print on the horrors of our own physicality." Years later, a collector bought them, and his wife told a curator friend that her husband had come home one day extremely happy and excited. He told his wife that he bought two beautiful black and white photographs of a cat. I could only think of those cat posters from the late '60s that depicted cats hanging from clotheslines or window frames, with a text that said, "Hang in there baby."

I think the answer to your question really has to do with you or your trajectory of viewing. Look at *Oh! Charley, Charley, Charley...*; at first glance, you may feel that I, the artist, have revealed all, naked in a gay orgy, set out in a public location. But identity is repeated. It's like the boy who was fooled by an elf who tied his yellow scarf to the trunk of a tree with a pot of gold buried beneath; the boy makes the elf promise not to remove the scarf while he goes home to get a shovel. The elf keeps his promise, but he ties a yellow scarf to every tree in the forest. With my repeated identity, nothing is revealed. The sexual act remains masturbatory, my fantasies safely locked within my psyche. Perhaps those works that make viewers aware of their own bodies reveal more about the artist than works that depict an image of the artist. I see the body as a place, a structure—the surface of a body being less an image than a manifold for sculptural events to unfold.

**JR:** Your new work is gorgeous. But I have to ask, why solid stainless steel? In pieces like *Young Man* and *Shoe Tie*, is the weight a visual thing for you, or does the solidity achieve a sculptural quality that you believe translates for viewers?

**CR:** Thanks for the compliment, but if you have to ask about the weight, do you really see the work as gorgeous? In all fairness though, you're not the first to ask. People ask all the time why they are solid, and I



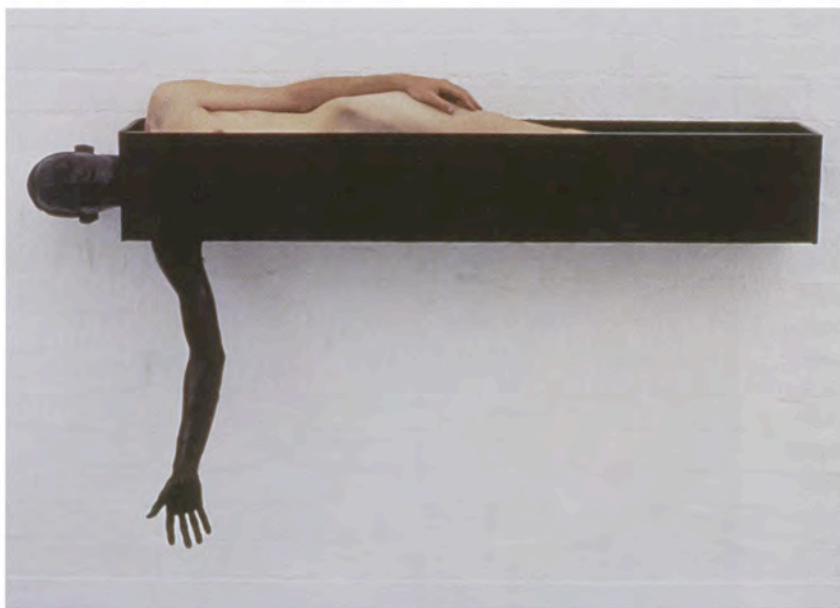
Above: *Oh! Charley, Charley, Charley...*, 1992. Mixed media, 72 x 180 x 180 in. Below: *Shoe Tie*, 2012. Solid stainless steel, 28.875 x 29.25 x 23.5 in.







Above: *Shelf*, 1981. Steel, painted found objects, and human body, 71 x 78 x 10 in. Below: *Painted Box*, 1981–85. Painted steel and human body, 72 x 12 x 42 in.



answer, “Because at least inside I can find some fucking peace and quiet.” Not all of my new sculptures are solid, though many are. I see their solidity as a way to launch them into the stream of time. The solid pieces are machined rather than cast, and I’m also interested in the hand of the machine. If it is not the final hand to caress the surface of my work, evidence from its markings are important to the perception of what I’m doing. All of my sculptures, and in particular the figures, are brought into existence by subtle

orchestration of a relationship of their parts. After many years of looking at a toe in relationship to a foot, to a hand, to an ear, then a lip, to the rendering of a nipple, and back to the testicle, I wondered aloud to my wife if what I was doing was too subtle. No one could ever see, much less spend time looking for and finding and digesting, these quiet connections of being. My wife agreed that there were areas of the work too subtle to be seen, but then she said, “The meaning is in the subtleties.” So, in a roundabout way, the answer to your question is that they’re solid not to be heavy, but they’re heavy because they’re solid. Decroux, the great corporeal mime, said that “all drama is the drama of gravity.”

**JR:** *Can you talk a bit about failure? I often think that this is where the best lessons come from when making sculpture. What was your ultimate failure in making your work?*

**CR:** I suppose one could say that failure comes when the question is answered.

Questions engage us. Answers have a nasty tendency to be disproved. Quality is in the question, not the answer.

**JR:** *I heard that you are a sailor and that you do a lot of solo trips. Sailing is often thought of as a romantic endeavor, yet it is complicated and demands being present and reacting to events to determine your next move. Can you relate the practice of sailing to how you make objects?*

**CR:** I’m a better artist than I am a sailor, but for my entire life, since I was a very young boy, I have been drawn to the beach. I’ve had a boat almost as long as I could draw. The water is really wonderful because it’s so ultimately experiential. Many things have informed my work—what informs your art are the very things that have formed you. I’ve spent a good deal of my life on the water, but not as much today as I have in the past. It’s a pleasure just walking on the beach, thinking about the boundary between land and sea. Art’s a different story. One doesn’t move onto the shore so easily. There is no marina, no safe harbor. Perhaps the only way to land is being shipwrecked on the rocks. As a young boy, my father taught me that if anything ever happens, always remember to stay with the boat, don’t try to swim for



shore. And now as an older man, my own voice reassures me—if anything ever happens, stay in the studio.

**JR:** *The space around your objects is as important as the dialogue between objects and viewers and between objects and other objects. How refined is your strategy of space (considering kinesthetic dimensions of the viewer's body) when preparing what you are going to make? Do you make each of your works for a specific space or site?*

**CR:** Space is the sculptor's primary medium. If you remove a knot from the world—not just the knot, but the very space that the knot occupies—you create a new spatial domain. Every spatial domain is related to a different knot at home in our three-dimensional space. If this sounds complicated, that's because it is. It's not a literal fact, but it is a mathematical fact. A mathematician sees an object with a hole through it as an object that cannot be shrunk to a point. This is a beautiful definition of a hole; it is also the idea of a primitive sculptural armature. Great sculptures have spatial armatures, they can't be shrunk to a point, nor can they be removed from the space they occupy. Space is not emptiness. Sculptures don't sit in space or fill space. They are made from it.

You also asked if I work in a site-specific manner. I have occasionally, but where a work is born may not be where it lives—for instance, a kouros figure that once bedazzled the ancients in the great outdoors is now indoors at the Met, where a guard watches me look at it.

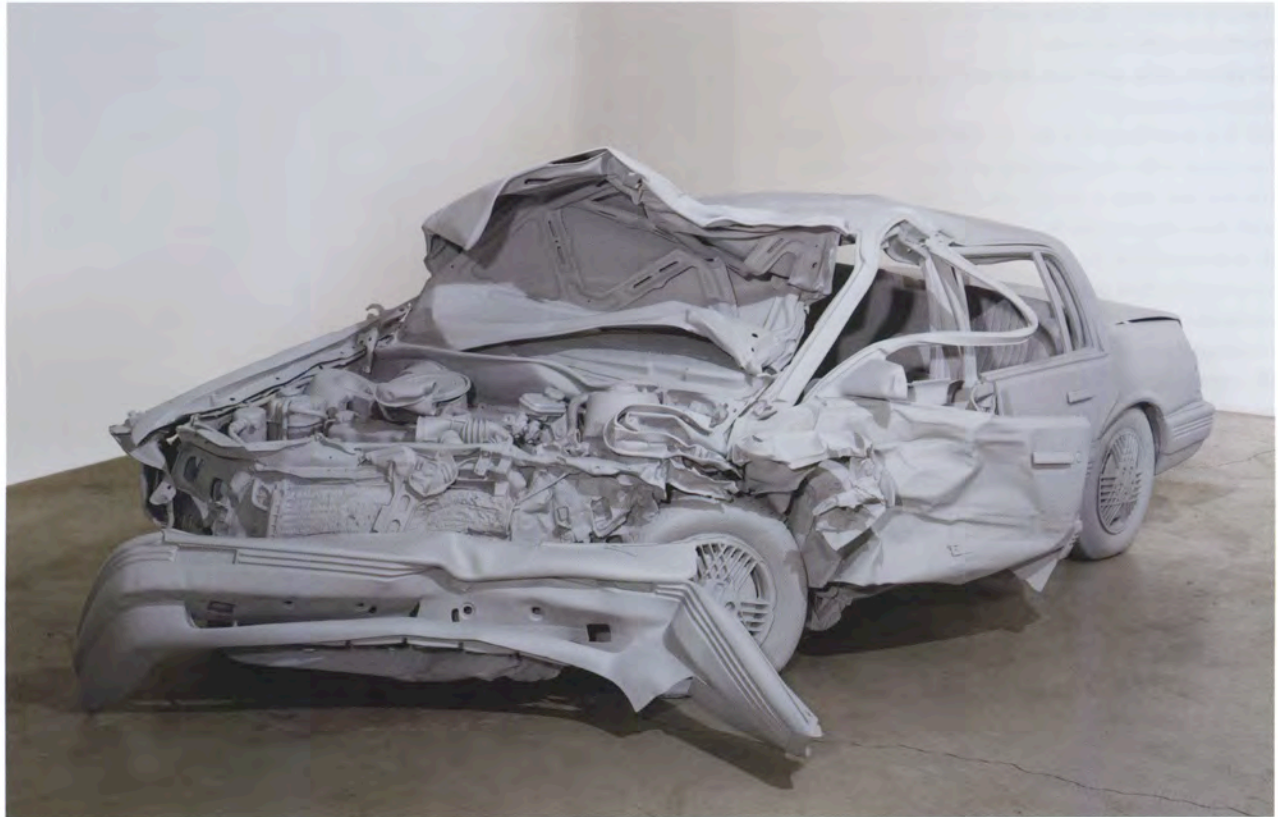
**JR:** *When you look back over the trajectory of your work, have you discovered certain patterns or networks that you didn't notice before?*

**CR:** Yes, and this is not just with my work, but with all work. Without sounding superficial, I would add that art has good days and bad days. Sometimes I go back to a museum and wonder, "What the hell did I see in this?" But then, rooms that I had hurried through slow me down and stop me in my tracks. Art is dynamic, and it asks for our continual interaction. Ancient art feels so contemporary, simply because we can see it.

**JR:** *In Shelf (1981), your head is painted gray and your body is naked below the shelf, with various objects on top also painted gray—a gas can, a toolbox, and a pot. What do these objects mean to you? Unlike your other works from that time, which nod to Minimalism and your mash-up performance-figurative actions, this one involves recognizable objects. And, in a work like Shelf, is the photograph the final work for you or just documentation?*

**CR:** The objects on the shelf, including my head, have no specific meaning. Perhaps I should say no predetermined meaning. I wanted that work to create a tension between two axes, vertically and horizontally across the shelf, as the viewer struggled to disassociate my head from my body and form a narrative with the objects. The gray paint was an artistic device best left in my youth, but it allowed the head to be read as a discrete object. The

*Unpainted Sculpture*, 1997. Fiberglass and paint, 60 x 78 x 171 in.



narrative associated with head, toolbox, gas can, and vase was continually being broken by the verticality of the flesh below—figure or live figurative body being inseparable from head.

The meaning of the work became intertwined with the structure of viewing. Verticality and horizontality cannot coexist. The figure continually changes from vulnerable to all-powerful and back to vulnerable. This, of course, is in the viewer's mind, because I was often thinking mundane thoughts about the completion of my day. I mention this because perhaps the structure of this artifice became apparent more quickly than I would have liked. All artifacts have an artifice, and for me, it's often a question of how steep or interesting the trip to the artifice becomes.

**JR:** *Gray appears again in Unpainted Sculpture. What sculptural presence does this color achieve for you, and how did you come to that conclusion with this work?*

**CR:** *Unpainted Sculpture* is many years later, and its concerns with color and space are very different. The gray in *Unpainted Sculpture* is, as the title states, unpainted, while the gray in the earlier work is painted. The painted shelf is an active sculptural element. One could say that there are three objects in the sculpture: my body, what's on the shelf, and the color. In *Unpainted Sculpture*, the gray is form itself. The sculpture was modeled in a material called gray, thus there was no need to paint it. So, one work uses color as an element, the other as form.

**JR:** *Where is Boy with Frog now, and how are you feeling about its removal?*

**CR:** *Boy with Frog* is in Mr. Pinault's storage. I don't feel great about its removal and hope that one day the boy will return, as all boys do. I will say that *Boy with Frog* was born at the Dogana. The location is in its sculptural DNA. As painful as its removal was, I was surprised by how powerful this outdoor sculpture remained when it was brought indoors at the Kunstmuseum Basel last summer.

**JR:** *I remember seeing Oh! Charley, Charley, Charley...as an art student back in the early '90s and feeling like "this is what an artist is all about, being self-indulgent, doing yourself over and over again by making objects." Do you see artists today still masturbating or being self-obsessed in the same way, or are you not thinking about that? Art can be a very selfish profession, and this piece really speaks to that selfishness. Was this what you meant?*

**CR:** No. I saw it as more generous than selfish. After all, it's a public sculpture, regardless of the private ownership of its current home institution.

**JR:** *Hinoki, which is made of Japanese cypress, is a masterpiece of process—extraction from the site, molds, casting in resin, reassembly, shipping to master carvers in Japan. What did it mean for you to have this piece made by hand?*



*Boy with Frog*, 2009. Painted steel, 96 x 29.5 x 41.25 in.

**CR:** Everything. Though you stated the process, the events of the sculpture's making did not seem to happen in any particular temporal sequence. Intentionality was the hand that fashioned this work from beginning until the end. In my first engagement with the fallen tree, I did not understand or see that one day it would be involved in Japan. If you sweep up all the aspects of its making, the sequence has a weight rather than a temporal order. Before and after have less to do with past and future than with my ongoing experience of the tree. This works in time—the tree continues to darken,



and it will perhaps split and crack in future years. I don't mean to say that I'm interested in this process, but I am interested in how the intentionality of its makers creates a seamless world made of thought and matter.

**JR:** *Who are your favorite sculptors, and what did they do that blew your mind?*

**CR:** That changes continuously. At the moment, I'm thinking about Rodin, Degas, and Matisse. There are many reasons to approach these three artists, separately and together. What interests me one year may be meaningful and intense. How we move from wax to bronze in Degas seems complicated and political. But today what blows my mind is how I find a kind of super clay in Matisse's sculptural work. Bronze is a transformation and a suitable material for the work of these three artists. Without looking at it in a way that's better, I simply see in Matisse another kind of final material. His bronzes are somehow made less of bronze than a kind of super clay. Aspects of the original coils

of clay—pressure of the hand into soft material, a rip in a slab—become all the more clay-like when experiencing Matisse.

**JR:** *You have an important exhibition touring now, "Charles Ray: Sculpture 1997–2014." What surprised you about your work from this segment of time?*

**CR:** The exhibition opened last year in Basel, and it is also being shown at the Art Institute of Chicago. While it is one catalogue, it is two separate shows. In Basel, the exhibition was installed in a traditional European museum—a sequence of rooms, with one sculpture after another. In Chicago, James Rondau has taken out all but two structural walls. He has also encouraged me to engage with the public. Two new works not in the Basel exhibition will be installed outdoors. So, what surprises me has not yet happened because the show still exists in the future.

**JR:** *Robert Rauschenberg once said, "I don't really trust ideas, especially good ones. Rather I put my trust in the materials that confront me, because they put me in touch with the unknown." What do you think of this statement?*

**CR:** I like it. I've met many ideas that I like, but none that have stuck around. Ideas, by their very nature, are fair-weather friends.

*Joshua Reiman is an artist living and working in Pittsburgh, where he is a visiting professor of art at Carnegie Mellon University.*

*Hinoki, 2007. Cypress wood, 68 x 382 x 240 in.*





MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

## ‘Charles Ray: Sculpture, 1997-2014’ Review

Subtle subversiveness and more overt slyness permeate the show at the Art Institute of Chicago.



'Unpainted Sculpture' (1997), by Charles Ray, was made from a wrecked Pontiac Grand Am whose parts were cast in fiberglass, reassembled and painted primer gray. PHOTO: CHARLES RAY/COURTESY MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

By PETER PLAGENS

June 30, 2015 6:23 p.m. ET

### Chicago

What is most important in the sculpture of Charles Ray (b. 1953): the expert technique, the impressive realism, or the joke? Not that Mr. Ray is currently a jokey artist in the mold of John Baldessari or Sherrie Levine; his artistic humor is more laid back, along the lines of Paul Klee's whimsical "Twittering Machine" (1922) or Robert Mangold's "off" geometric paintings. Mr. Ray creates sculpture that is less true-to-life than that of the hyperrealist artist Duane Hanson, but more naturalistic than Kiki Smith's—in a variety of techniques, from his own hand-crafting to machine fabrication.

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Charles Ray: Sculpture, 1997-2014

Art Institute of Chicago

Through Oct. 4

Mr. Ray earned a BFA at the University of Iowa in his early 20s, an MFA from Rutgers at 26, and two years later was teaching sculpture at UCLA (then and now a rocket to stardom in the

L.A. art world). He started out as something of a sculptural prankster, however, making his name with such pieces as “Ink Line” (1987), a thin, ceiling-to-floor continuous pour that looks exactly like a taut black string. From there, he progressed to what might be called department-store Surrealism that looks like weird window displays with such work as “Fall ’91,” an attractive, mannequin-like businesswoman variously coiffed and couture’d who just happens to be 8 feet tall.

“Charles Ray: Sculpture, 1997-2014” picks up where the out-loud chuckling leaves off, and subdues the laughs. This exhibition, which had its debut at the Kunstmuseum in Basel, Switzerland, last year, has been granted 18,000 square feet of gallery space in the Art Institute of Chicago’s capacious modern wing. All that room is given over to a mere 18 works (a 19th is installed outdoors in the Institute’s South Garden); the show is so spread out that it is a hike just to get from a particular piece to its wall label. The reason for the small number of works is that Mr. Ray’s recent sculpture—with its customary variation in scale plus an appetite for new materials (aluminum, stainless steel—both hollow and solid—and fiberglass)—requires complex fabrication that devours time.

Most of the works in the show take on Mr. Ray’s favorite subject, the human figure. Most poetic among them is what the exhibition catalog calls “an accidental trilogy” of boys—two nude, one dressed—at different ages. All are stainless steel, painted white. The youngest boy, who appears in “The New Beetle” (2006), is life-size and lies on the floor playing with a toy car. “Boy With Frog” (2009) is of a larger scale and portrays a youth of perhaps 12 standing and examining the creature at arm’s length. In “School Play” (2014), also larger than life, an adolescent costumed in Classical garb holds a prop sword. The facial expressions of all three are calm, even contemplative—terms seldom applicable to boys but appropriate to Mr. Ray’s last two decades of work.

Nevertheless, a pervasive if subtle subversiveness lurks. “Huck and Jim” (2014), for instance, is a half again larger-than-life rendition of Mark Twain’s characters. Huck bends as if to scoop something out of the water (this is the moment following a debate on the raft as to whether the stars in the firmament are eternal or were made at some point), while Jim, the fugitive slave, stands upright with his hand on Huck’s back. Given Mr. Ray’s sexual wit in his 1992 “Oh! Charley, Charley, Charley...” (not in the exhibition), in which several nude self-portrait figures enjoy a literal orgy of narcissism, “Huck and Jim” has fairly obvious homoerotic implications. The sculpture was originally made—not entirely ingenuously, one suspects—as a commission for a permanent outdoor piece for the new Whitney Museum, which politely rejected it. The Art Institute has rather discreetly placed it—the strongest work in the show—around a corner from the featured galleries.

More human figures—a nude man stooping to tie the lace on an invisible shoe, a homeless woman sleeping on a bench (much is made of the fact that the stainless steel is solid and the piece weighs almost three tons) and an aluminum man sleeping on a cot—confirm Mr. Ray’s prodigious talent in what may be the most difficult mode of fine art. The acuity of his deadpan social observations about our essential underlying unity—after a while, every visitor to the Institute reminds you of a Charles Ray—makes him the Antonio Canova of American middle-classness.

Some nonhuman pieces are, however, sly in more obvious ways. In “Unpainted Sculpture” (1997), for instance, Mr. Ray has taken apart a wrecked 1991 Pontiac Grand Am, cast each part in fiberglass, reassembled the parts in original crash configuration and then painted the whole thing an automobile-primer gray. Due to the inevitable fattening of the parts in casting, much sculptural jiggering—the creative process where the rubber meets the road, as it were—was required to make the three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle fit back together. The work is, however, too gorgeous in a dystopian way to be thought of as merely a clever sculptural feint. On the other hand, Mr. Ray has deliberately plumped up a flattened wreck and titled a painted work of art “Unpainted.”

Some too-insistent trickery aside, “Charles Ray: Sculpture, 1997-2014” is both poignant and beautiful, and the grandly austere installation is perfect. Mr. Ray’s visually arresting works reveal a gently ironic and, in sum, profound take on existence itself. In contemporary figurative sculpture, Mr. Ray is about as good as it gets.

*Mr. Plagens is an artist and writer in New York.*



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# Los Angeles Times

ART REVIEW

## Antiquity cast with a modern sheen



Art Institute of Chicago

**CHARLES RAY'S** "Sleeping Woman" is a stainless-steel nod to the reclining sculptures of old.

Classical figures boldly resound in an exceptional show in Chicago of Charles Ray's sculptures.

**CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT**  
ART CRITIC

CHICAGO - Artists often turn to older art as a guidepost in developing new work. And why not? All art has a contemporary dimension, since it's chattering away today as surely as the day it was made, even if that was centuries ago. Listening to past art is simply a sensible thing to do.

Sometimes, though, the places in which an artist chooses to look are surprising.

For well over a dozen years,

Los Angeles-based sculptor Charles Ray has been looking closely at the art of antiquity. Carved reliefs from ancient Mesopotamia, mythical beings from Periclean Athens and Hellenistic Greece and heroic figures from Imperial Rome now usefully resound in the work of one of today's most significant artists.

Classical education as a primary engine of modern knowledge, a faith born of the Age of Enlightenment, collapsed long ago. Since the widespread replacement of liberal arts and sciences with practical and professional training, antiquity has seemed ever more remote as a source of artistic inspiration.

Yet it's everywhere in

"Charles Ray: Sculpture, 1997-2014," the exceptional survey on view at the Art Institute of Chicago through Oct. 4.

Amazons, Egypt's Akhenaten and Nefertiti, Ninevah's Ashurbanipal, sleeping Eros, the marble Kritios Boy, Aphrodite, the equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius on Rome's Capitoline Hill — ancient precedents hum within the artistic DNA of Ray's distinctive recent work.

He's not a copyist — not in the least. These sculptures and reliefs are not appropriation art. Instead, Ray has been absorbing the lessons of antiquity to infuse contemporary figurative sculpture with an imaginative

inner life.

One astounding result is "Huck and Jim," a monumental new work based on Mark Twain's literary masterpiece. Grappling with America's struggle for a civilized society is a subject as relevant today as it was when Twain's book was published 130 years ago. Ray's sculpture, having its public debut here, is an extraordinary achievement.

### Spare yet potent

The exhibition is presented in a spare and lovely installation in the museum's Modern Wing. It was organized by Bernhard Mendes Bürgi, director at the Kunstmuseum

# Modern eye on the classical

Basel, where it was seen last year, and Art Institute curator James Rondeau. Lucky Chicago, where Ray was born in 1953, is its only American venue.

The show features just 19 sculptures from the past 17 years. Those numbers indicate the slow, steady care Ray lavishes on his production. Each work can require years to complete.

Take “Aluminum Girl,” a 5-foot-tall standing nude fabricated from ductile metal and painted a matte, light-absorbent white. (Think chicken’s egg.) This contemporary Aphrodite, completed in 2003 and his first in the classicizing genre, took shape over the course of six years.

Ray started it while deep into the production of “Unpainted Sculpture,” one of several tour de force works. A smashed-up, 1991 Pontiac Grand Am was refabricated from scratch, fragment by twisted fragment. The actual wrecked car, which the artist found in a salvage yard, had been demolished in a fatal accident.

Ray made scores of molds representing each wrecked piece from the interior, exterior, engine compartment and trunk. A fiberglass model was cast from each mold.

Then, since the process resulted in parts slightly larger than the original, they had to be slightly altered so they could be fitted back together into a coherent whole. The finished object, not quite a doppelganger but an uncanny approximation of life, rests lightly on the ground.

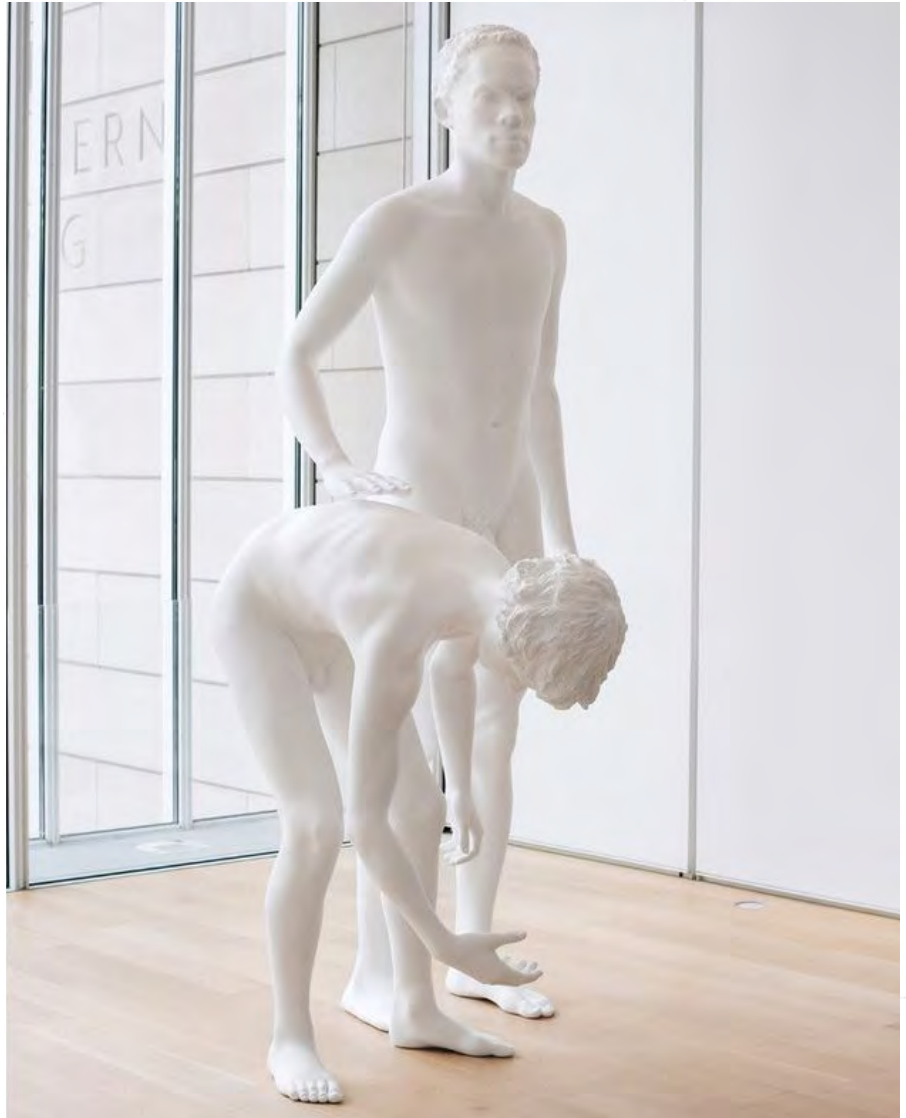
The finished car-wreck sculpture was smoothly spray-painted a light gray, unifying the voluptuous form and tamping down its expressionistic fervor. (Surfaces are critical in Ray’s work, whether metal, wood or fiberglass, painted or unpainted.) As you move around it, the noncolor yields a fleeting shadow-play.

Someone unknown to us died violently in the crash that lurks in the sculpture’s back story. But a sculpture is itself a bodily thing, even if the body is dead and gone. Ghosts lurk in this machine.

## Solidly ethereal

“Unpainted Sculpture” is Ray’s “Laocoön.” That ancient, Hellenistic-style sculpture was dug up in Rome in 1506. (Michelangelo helped with restoration of its vivid, expressionistic forms.) As serpents strangle an agonized priest and his writhing sons, a bravura paradox emerges: Ideal beauty is embedded in a sculptural ensemble of suffering and death.

Magnificent decay is a central theme in “Hinoki,” the artist’s 32-foot-long sculptural twin of a massive, fallen oak tree. Ray, his



“HUCK AND JIM,” making its public debut at Art Institute of Chicago, is an astounding achievement for L.A.-based Charles Ray.

studio crew and Japanese craftsmen spent years casting it in silicone and fiberglass and then carving out a look-alike from blocks of cypress.

In classical antiquity, cypress was a symbol of mourning. A wood sculpture that portrays decomposing wood will itself decompose over a span of centuries. “Hinoki” performs an excruciatingly slow-motion dance of cyclical life and death.

“Sleeping Woman” is Ray’s nod to the recumbent sculptures of antiquity, which also inspired Brancusi’s “Sleeping Muse.” The vulnerability of a corpulent homeless woman asleep on a bench, head lightly resting on a bed roll, is remarkably conveyed in solid, machined stainless steel. Gravity pulls

down on its visually buoyant form, which seems miraculously poised to drift on a gust of air.

An ethereal condition of suspended animation is transformed into something dense and tangible. Carefully burnished surfaces range between finely detailed and loosely abstract, sometimes shiny but mostly matte. Surfaces of liquid light draw the luminous energy of the space around her into the hefty sculpture’s forbidding mass.

She’s in a deep, dead sleep. If, on a fundamental level, traditional sculpture represents dormant consciousness, then “Sleeping Woman” is an entire genre’s brilliant incarnation.

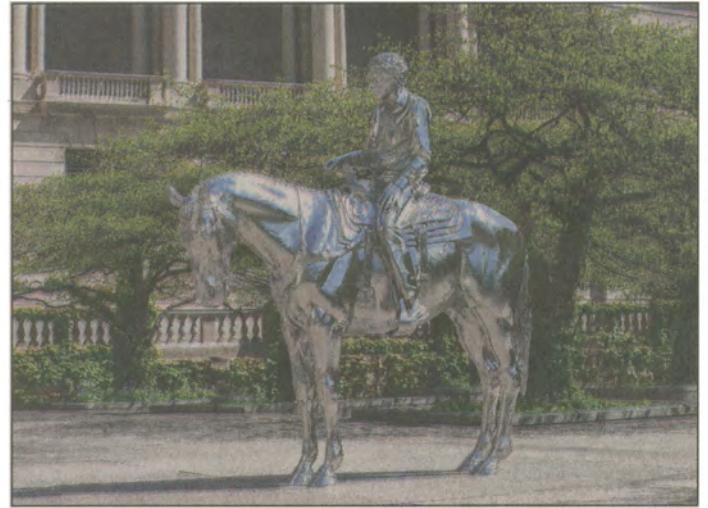
Last year Ray finished “School Play,”





Art Institute of Chicago

**"UNPAINTED SCULPTURE"** re-creates a demolished Pontiac Grand Am that Ray happened upon in a salvage yard.



Art Institute of Chicago

**"HORSE AND RIDER"** is a self-portrait of the artist quite unlike the heroic equestrian sculptures throughout history.

a compact sculpture that traces his work's classical arc. A pre-teen boy is in costume to perform a Roman-themed theatrical production. Wrapped in a bed-sheet toga and wearing beach sandals and a T-shirt tunic, he grasps an elaborate toy sword in his right hand.

Visually, the figure is encased within a snug vertical column. Space is as tightly wound around him as his toga, weight evenly distributed on both feet. But Ray has made the solid, stainless-steel boy 6 feet tall — the size of an adult. The child becomes father of the man, a boy disconcertingly caught betwixt and between.

## Lively interplay

The tensions between childhood and maturity constitute a recurrent theme in Ray's art. It's the core of "Huck and Jim," the breathtaking new work based on Mark Twain's "amazing, troubling book," as novelist Toni Morrison once described "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn."

Ray's two beautifully modulated figures are 150% life size. They're large enough to suggest the monumental place held in the American psyche by Twain's deceptively simple novel about a white boy and a runaway black slave fleeing down the Mississippi River, yet small enough to relate to a viewer's own body.

Both figures are unclothed. (The sculpture was designed for an outdoor plaza in front of the new Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, but the plan unsurprisingly fell apart over institutional nervousness about the nudity.) The 28-year-old man and the 14-year-old boy are shown in keeping with the steamy river narrative — "We was always naked, day and night, whenever the mosquitoes would let us," Huck says — enhancing a sense of sculptural candor.

Jim stands tall, head slightly turned as if in watchful vigilance. Huck bends over, curious and making a scooping motion near the floor. A lively interplay of limbs, sturdy or limp, in the sculpture's lower half contrasts with the focused stillness above.

Ray explains in the show's fine catalog that the composition derives from a book passage about the origin of the night sky's twinkling stars. They've always been there, Huck assumes; Jim says no, they were laid there by the moon.

Huck allows that Jim's poetic possibility could be true, since he's seen a single frog lay thousands of eggs. That explains

what he's scooping up from below.

Yet knowing this cosmic narrative isn't necessary to be moved by the sculpture. The transfixing moment comes in the open palm of Jim's right hand, which hovers just inches above vulnerable Huck's bent back. It's a gesture of reserved protectiveness just shy of human touch.

Twain's book is a knotty chronicle of childhood alienation, sometimes sober, sometimes comic. That little gap between Jim's hand and Huck's back electrifies Ray's sculpture — a space of disconnect between child and adult, black and white, worldly exploration and homey sanctuary, even the artist's hand and art's prohibition against touch. The gap may or may not ever close.

For all of their classical regard, Ray's sculptures don't look backward. His work is not Neo-Classical.

Nor does it clamor for a "return to order" in our time of chaotic upheaval, like the one in the grim wake of the First World War that marked the 1920s Neo-Classical Modernism of Picasso, De Chirico and the New Objectivity movement. The 21st century may be spinning off its axis, but Ray's refined aura is absent starry-eyed idealization.

Instead, a humanitarian resolve distinguishes his work. When Ray quietly depicts himself as a jeans- and loafer-clad rider on horseback in a full-scale equestrian sculpture now installed in the museum's garden, he's neither Bellerophon astride Pegasus nor some imperial general coercing awe. He's just a shrewd and intuitive artist with an animal determination to feel his way through.



## THE NEW YORKER

Charles Ray is a disturbing presence in contemporary art. Famous but little known, an artist who can work on a sculpture for ten years and then wait several more before showing it, he is so far from the mainstream that we sometimes forget he's here. Ray, who is sixty-one, has been unusually productive in the past decade. When I visited his studio in Santa Monica last fall, I counted more than a dozen sculptural models or fragments in various sizes and stages of development. Some of them were being worked on by one or more of his fifteen assistants. Others—a ten-foot-long, highly realistic crocodile; a mountain lion; an amply proportioned female nude, lying on her side—seemed to be temporarily dormant. The only finished work on the floor was "Sleeping Woman," a stainless-steel carving of a homeless person, life-size, half sitting and half lying on a bench. Ray had seen her on Wilshire Boulevard three years ago, and stopped to take pictures of her with his digital camera. "Her sleep was geological," he said. "She slept like a mountain sleeps—unwakeable—with cars and trucks going by. When I got home, forty-five minutes later, I looked at the pictures and realized I didn't have enough, so I walked back and took some more. She hadn't moved. I think she's an incredibly beautiful woman."

Ray's recent work includes some very large sculptures, on the scale of public monuments, and full-scale fibreglass models for two of these were in his studio. "Horse

and Rider," more than nine feet high, is a self-portrait of Ray on a tired-looking horse. "The horse's name is Hooper," Ray explained. "He's a Hollywood horse who's used a lot, because he's docile." The portrait of Ray was sculpted from life: he's wearing jeans, a long-sleeved shirt, and boat shoes, his longish hair is uncombed, his shoulders are slumped, and he does not sit comfortably in the saddle. "I'm over the hill, and Hooper is over the hill," he said, laughing. "It's important that he's here and not up there"—meaning on a pedestal. Twenty-five hundred years of equestrian statuary, all those heroic generals and condottieri, have given way to an ordinary guy on a rented nag, both of whom look thoroughly "embedded" (a word that Ray often uses in discussing his sculpture) in their particular time and space. Ray explained that the fibreglass model of "Horse and Rider" had been digitally scanned in three dimensions, and that some highly evolved, computer-guided machinery at a tool-manufacturing firm in Hemet, California, was carving it, part by part and very slowly, from solid blocks of stainless steel. The finished sculpture, weighing nine and a half tons, will go on view for the first time this month, when a major survey of Ray's work opens at the Art Institute of Chicago.

"Charley Ray spent the first twenty-five years of his professional life taking sculpture apart, and now he's trying to put it back together," I'd been told by Paul Schimmel, the curator who gave



*Ray's work continually mines the history of sculpture in an attempt to renew traditions. "I'm wondering how to pull these things into the twenty-first century," he says.*

PHOTOGRAPH BY ALEC SOTH



Ray his first museum show, in 1990, at the Newport Harbor Art Museum, and organized his first retrospective, eight years later. “He’s taking on the whole history of sculpture,” Schimmel continued. “I think his ‘Huck and Jim’ may be the most important one yet—there’s nothing like it in terms of the public monument.”

“Huck and Jim” was the other big piece in Ray’s studio. Two fibreglass models, one more advanced than the other, stood side by side near the back wall. Jim, the runaway slave, is nine feet tall, a handsome black man in the prime of life, standing very straight and gazing somewhat apprehensively into the distance. His right hand, palm down in what appears to be a protective gesture, hovers a few inches above the bent back of the fourteen-year-old Huck, who is reaching down with one arm to scoop something—frogs’ eggs, Ray said—out of the river. Both figures are naked. Like many of Ray’s works, the sculpture is arresting, powerful, and psychologically loaded, and its future is currently in doubt.

Ray started work on “Huck and Jim” in 2009, when he was invited by the Whitney Museum to propose a sculpture for a public plaza outside the new building that the museum would occupy when it moved downtown, in the spring of 2015, from the Upper East Side to the meatpacking district. The Whitney’s identity as a museum of American art had led Ray to think about “The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,” which he re-reads periodically. “It’s our Homer, in a way, and Huck Finn is the American Ulysses,” he told me. “There’s a moment in Chapter Nineteen where Huck and Jim are on the raft at night, and they’re arguing about the stars. Jim says the stars were made, and Huck says no, they were always there. But then Jim says the moon could have laid them, and that sounds plausible to Huck, ‘because I’ve seen a frog lay most as many.’ That was the genesis of the piece.”

Ray showed his preliminary design to Adam Weinberg, the Whitney’s director, and Donna De Salvo, its chief curator, and both of them knew immediately that it was going to be

a great work of art. The doubts that seeped in during the next few months had nothing to do with aesthetics. They stemmed from the museum’s growing concern that this particular image of a naked African-American man and a naked white teen-ager in close proximity, presented in a public space with no other art works to provide context, might offend non-museumgoing visitors—thousands of whom pass through the area every day on their way to or from the adjacent entrance to the High Line. It was the recurrent public-art problem: once you go into a museum, you have agreed (tacitly, anyway) to put up with all sorts of visual affronts, but, if you’re just walking by outside, you haven’t. In 2010, Weinberg told Ray that the sculpture could be installed anywhere on the museum’s property—on an outdoor terrace, or even in the main lobby—but not on the plaza. Ray could not agree to this. As he told me, “I don’t want whatever becomes of it to be less than the original idea, and the original idea was for it to be there. Listen, I’m not naïve to the controversies this would generate—I told them that controversies would be a forest we had to navigate through. The precedent for their being naked is in the book. At night on the raft, Huck says, ‘We had no use for clothes nohow.’ Huck ran away, Jim was a runaway slave. They were *outside*.” As for the race issue, Ray said, “Huck never questions slavery. Toward the end of the book, he worries that by helping Jim to escape he’s really stealing the property of his Aunt Polly, who has never done him any harm, and that he’ll probably go to Hell for it. And then he says, ‘All right, I’ll go to Hell, but I won’t turn him in.’ That is a great American moment, and it still means something today.” In the end, with enormous sadness, the Whitney declined the sculpture.

Ray didn’t stop working on it. The finished version of “Huck and Jim,” cast in stainless steel, was going to be one of the major pieces in his Chicago exhibition; he and James Rondeau, the institute’s contemporary-art curator, planned to

install it at the entrance to the institute’s new contemporary-art wing, but, once again, problems arose. The site was ruled out because passersby would have to look at full-frontal male genitalia. Then Ray learned that the finished version would not be ready in time. He decided to show the very beautiful fibreglass model instead, but, after weeks of discussions with museum officials, there was still no agreement on where it would go, and Ray was thinking about not showing it at all. A decision was still pending at the time of this writing. “Huck and Jim” can’t seem to catch a break nohow.

During our conversations, Ray had spoken several times of his admiration for the archaic Kouros figure (circa 590–580 B.C.) in the early-Greek galleries of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and when he came to New York in December I arranged to meet him there one morning. We stood for a while in front of the Kouros, a marble statue of a young man, nude and life-size, with powerful shoulders, a narrow waist, and both arms held close to his sides. Breaking with the stiff and formulaic Egyptian sculptural tradition that had influenced it, the Met’s Kouros steps forward with one leg, and the sense of movement and vitality in his stance forecasts the fully developed realism of classical Greek sculpture. “I don’t know what it was about the work that struck me,” Ray said. “The essence of it, the urgency. Why is he smiling? Where is he going? A young man stepping out into an adult world. I was fascinated by the relationship, on the surface, between what’s natural and what’s stylized. His braided hair is like a teen-age girl’s, both stylized and natural. The testicles are full of life. I can project myself into the Kouros. When you get into the classical period, seventy-five years later, I can’t. The classical is so idealized that I can only have a mental relationship with it. I’m really interested in what happens to a work as it tumbles through time, and meaning is washed away. The Kouros is still here, stepping forward. He’s a meaning machine.”

Few artists have mined the history of sculpture more deeply than Ray. He wants to renew traditions, not just



to borrow from them. (To get under the skin of the animal sculptures he's experimenting with in his studio, he spent many days at the Met studying nineteenth-century bronzes of panthers, dogs, stags, and horses by Antoine-Louis Barye. "I'm wondering how to pull these things into the twenty-first century, when coyotes and bobcats and other wild species are showing up in L.A.," Ray said.) Ray's "Young Man" (2012) is a modern Kouros—our own historical moment encrypted in the slightly out-of-shape body of his former student Ry Rocklen. "It's not a portrait of him, but over the years I tried to take his heart and soul and bring them up and out, animate them in sculpture somehow," Ray said. "Young Man," like "Sleeping Woman," was machine-carved in solid stainless steel, a material that Ray began using in 2005, in part because it can suggest, as marble does, the softness of human skin. I asked Ray why he did them that way, rather than casting them. He said that the viewer should be able to feel the sculpture's weight coming up through the surface.

Contemporary sculptors have an ever-increasing range of options in their choice of methods and materials. Like Jeff Koons, Richard Serra, and other artists who don't actually make their own work, Ray depends on the skills of such expert fabricators as Mark Rossi, a former art student who runs his own fabrication shop in Los Angeles. (The shop, interestingly, is called Handmade.) "Mark is my partner on these projects," Ray said. "But I have to be there. It's not just a matter of giving the plans to the fabricator. It's constant thinking and talking and wondering whether to push something or not push it. I'm always looking for branches in the road, what direction it's going to take. 'Young Man' was the first one that took a really long time to make, close to ten years. We'd go in and work on it by machine, then go back and work by hand. 'Young Man' kind of sculpted itself in time—time became the chisel. My decisions were there, of course, but they were the right decisions, because I had time to think about them."

Charles Ray grew up in Chicago. His

parents, Wade and Helen, owned and ran a commercial-art school that Wade's grandmother had founded in 1916, in downtown Chicago, and there were always plenty of art supplies at home for their six children. Charley, the second in line, dabbled with watercolors and colored pencils and banged things together. The family moved out of the city to Winnetka in 1960, when Charley was seven. He and his older brother, Peter, shared a bedroom, and had similar problems in school. "Charley was not as outgoing as I was," Peter recalled. "He didn't have a lot of friends, and he didn't pay attention in school, so he got very bad grades. So did I. We both had some form of dyslexia." Charley was socially awkward. "I wasn't the class nerd, but I was weird," he told me. "I could tell long stories, and be funny, but I couldn't do sports. And I was always terrified of being held back." His parents had limited time to give him, what with the art school, their many friends, and the four younger children. Stacy, the next to youngest, and the only girl, was born autistic and schizophrenic, and her condition eventually became unmanageable. Her brothers still go to see her in the Chicago nursing home where she has lived for the past twenty years, and they take her out on overnight visits. "She's wonderful in her crazy way," Charley told me. "She has a wicked, very sophisticated sense of humor." Her illness affected the other family members in different ways. "It formed us all," Charley said. "There was always the free-floating anxiety that things could get out of hand."

Peter and Charley lived for summertime. Soon after the move to Winnetka, their father gave them an eight-foot, blunt-nosed dinghy, and they became avid sailors on Lake Michigan. It was the first of many boats for both of them, and their passion for being on the water is undiminished today. Peter became a competitive dinghy sailor; Charley preferred solo sailing, often for long distances. His current boat is a fast, forty-four-foot Wyliecat with a

flexible, carbon-fibre mast and one huge sail. Charley's wife, Silvia, says, "We don't have a boat—we have a sail that we hold on to." For the past two years, in another studio that Ray rents outside Los Angeles, he has been overseeing the construction of a thirty-one-foot Pacific proa, a boat designed like the Polynesian seagoing vessels; it tapers at both ends, and has a huge outrigger on the windward side. I asked him whether building a boat had anything in common with making a sculpture. "I don't think it does," he said. "Boat building is intellectual—everything has a reason. In sculpture, it has a direction."

The two oldest Ray boys spent their high-school years at Marmion Military Academy, a Catholic school in Aurora, Illinois. Their father had gone there, and he must have hoped the school would instill some academic discipline in his troublesome boys. It may even have done so, although they both hated the place. "I was a mess," Charley recalled. "I could never comb my hair or do my shoes." Put in charge of a seven-man squad for a drill on parents' weekend, he marched them into a corner of the gym and couldn't get them out. He was so miserable at Marmion that he started experimenting with LSD (which he bought in Chicago and sneaked in), and was surprised to find his grades improving. In the last two years there, his father arranged for him to take the train to Chicago on Saturday mornings, so that he could attend the Art Institute's studio program for high-school students. "I really started doing sculpture there," he said. "I remember making a kinetic piece that the teacher brought other people in to see."

It was the first time he'd caught a glimpse of something he might do with his life. In spite of his academic record, he got into the University of Iowa, in 1971; the school had a strong studio-art program, and Ray came under the influence of Roland Brener, a South African-born sculptor who accepted him into his modernist sculpture course. Brener had studied with Anthony Caro

in London. His own work reflected Caro's abstract, formalist sculptures of welded metal elements, and for several years Ray's did, too. (He thinks that military school primed him for the rigorous discipline of formalist art.) Ray was impressed by the importance that Brener attached to the work being done in the studio. "The first day, I made this sculpture out of scrap steel parts, and I took wheels and welded them onto it," Ray recalled. "I ran into Brener after class, and he said, 'That sculpture you made today was very interesting spatially. But those wheels—they looked like flowers in a still-life. It shows me you want to make something, instead of discovering something. Don't ever do that in my class again.' It changed my life. No one had ever taken me seriously that way. I've thought about it ever since, the difference between making and discovering."

Brener was a harsh and demanding teacher. "We had a kind of love-hate relationship," Ray told me. "I took so much from Roland, and he took from me. When he left and went to Vancouver a year later, I followed him, lived with him and his wife. He had a boat, and we did a lot of sailing together. Once, I overheard him say something to his wife about me—that this kid could contribute to sculpture." They kept in touch, off and on, until Brener's death, in 2006, but after that year in Vancouver Ray was on his own. He went back to Iowa, and his work opened up. Students were encouraged to investigate the proliferating new directions that artists in New York, Los Angeles, and other centers were exploring in the seventies—body art, performance, film and video, process art. He did a series of performance pieces involving his own body, which he got a fellow-student to photograph: Ray trussed to the limb of a tree for three hours, or bent over a wooden plank that pinned him to the wall. I asked him if he had been aware of Richard Serra's lead-prop sculptures in the late sixties. "I'm sure I was," he said. "I was looking at everything—all the art journals, books, catalogues. But I wasn't theoretical. I don't think I understood what minimalism was about. I was too busy trying to make some-

thing that people liked, that resonated out."

He graduated from the University of Iowa in 1975, and after a year in Chicago, working part time and taking classes in commercial photography at the family art school, he began teaching. He taught at the University of Kentucky and at the Mason Gross School of the Arts, at Rutgers, where, in 1979, he received his M.F.A. At night, he made sculptures—visually disorienting constructions using sheets of glass; minimalist wooden boxes with non-minimalist performance elements, such as his own arm emerging from a hole in the top, waving a red flag. (That one was called "In Memory of Moro," after the Italian politician who was abducted and killed by the Red Brigades.) "I was thinking about the world, and trying to engage with it," he said. Later, he worked as a garbage collector at Rutgers, and as a lab technician at Princeton. He had a girlfriend, a former Rutgers student, who was two years older than he was. Ray's shyness had curtailed his ability to meet girls in high school and college, but now his fierce intensity seemed to attract them. In 1981, he took a temporary teaching assignment at the University of New Orleans. His younger brother Aaron was dying of cancer in Chicago. Ray was distraught, and drinking too much. He had married his Rutgers girlfriend, but the marriage broke up. At this low ebb in his life, he was offered a position as a lecturer at U.C.L.A.'s art school, which was becoming one of the most innovative in the country. Ray was twenty-eight years old. He'd planned to stay in New Orleans for a year and then go to New York, but U.C.L.A. turned out to be the right place. He worked hard, got tenure, bought a sailboat.

After almost thirty-five years at U.C.L.A., Ray now teaches for one semester every other year, a seminar on a subject of his own devising, and it is always fully subscribed. I sat in on one of them—or, rather, stood in, because the class was held outdoors in the U.C.L.A. sculpture garden, on a brilliant, very warm October day. Ray, his teaching assistant, and

twelve undergraduates had formed a circle around Rodin's "Walking Man," a monumental, headless, vigorously striding figure. Ray had no notes and no prepared agenda. Craggy and rumpled-looking in worn jeans and sneakers, his colloquial, Midwestern voice rising and falling, he tried to draw out students' reactions to the sculpture. He said, "You don't have to worry about 'getting it,' quote unquote. A lot of young people don't like it, because it's done by a dead guy, and it's bronze, and it's art." A skinny male student eventually weighed in with a meandering observation that I couldn't hear. Ray listened impassively, then said, "I'm just trying to find out how you locate yourself in front of this. Who is the Walking Man? Where's his head? His head is over there"—pointing emphatically with one arm—"thirty feet away, look! The head is where the trajectory of the sculpture is moving. And what a beautiful thing when you get close and see how it was made." He crouched down. "Look at these toes," he said, reaching out to fondle them. "This is still realism, yet if you look at the detail you can't find realism anywhere. The toes are misshapen. They're full of human tension." He was silent for a moment. Then, his voice rising dramatically, he said, "Rodin is here! He's not gone. You can find his thumbprint!"

Other students drifted by, laughing and shouting. The art department at U.C.L.A. was one of the first to do away with basic-skills classes and a foundation course. The policy is to hire working artists and have them teach what they do. Ray can't teach that now, because what he does involves many different people and processes and engineering skills, so he teaches what he's interested in at the moment. One year, every class was about the Matisse reliefs of a woman's back on a wall in the U.C.L.A. sculpture garden. He brings in visiting lecturers, and occasionally takes his students to the Getty Foundation, or to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. This year's class had been told to read certain passages in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, about the descent to Hades, and also J. M. E. McTaggart's 1908 essay on "The Unreality of Time." (Ray's childhood dyslexia did not prevent him from becoming an avid and omnivorous reader.) His teaching



is physical and impulsive, with frequent digressions. Ray doesn't critique his students' work anymore. Ry Rocklen remembers that his critiques could be very tough. "One thing I learned from Charley was that there was a lot at stake," Rocklen said. "That this was important stuff we were doing."

In the seminar that I attended, Ray didn't try to establish one-on-one connections with the students. His connection was with "Walking Man," and with Rodin. "This is not a castrated figure," he said. "The dick isn't there. If the thing was hanging, that's all you'd look at. But I challenge you to make something with the sexual energy of this figure. They'd throw you out of school if you did!"

Ray was talking faster and faster, gesturing with both arms and occasionally rubbing his head and face with his hands. Toward the end of the hour, he calmed down a little, paused, and said, "If you give it time, and get past the image of the bronze sculpture in the garden by the famous guy who's dead—if you slowly give it to yourself, you can shake hands with Rodin. I'm always amazed by how much Rodin is still here, still working. I've been talking a lot, and overtalking, but these are just my ways of getting into it. I make sense of it because his energy is there, and I see that as him."

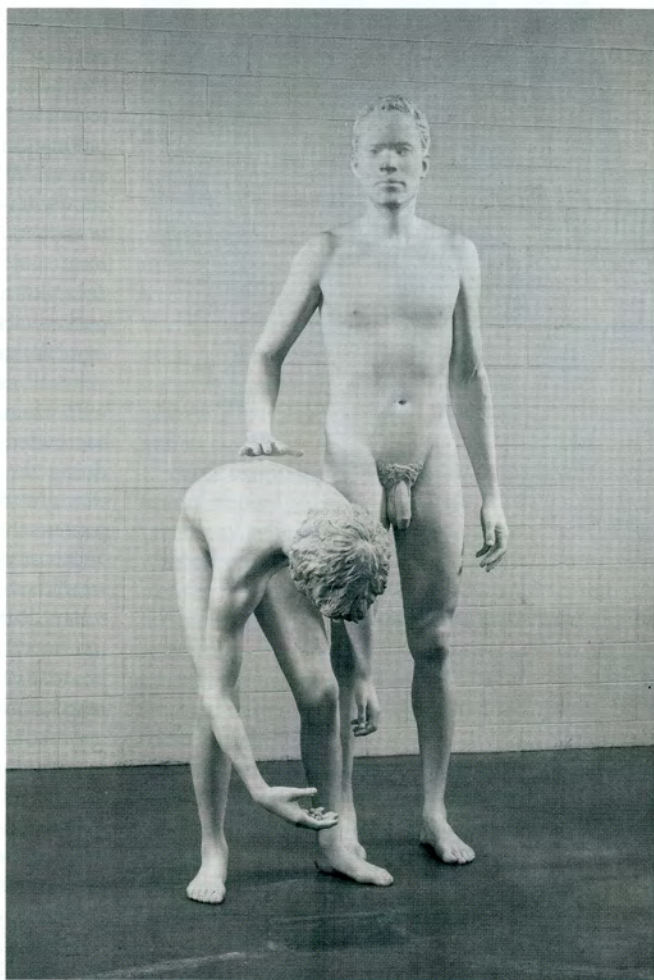
When Ray moved to California in 1981, he was struggling to find a direction in his work. Remembering the plank pieces he had done as a student, he went back to using his body, often nude, juxtaposed with minimalist forms—boxes, tables, shelves. He couldn't get a gallery to show this work, so he rented a warehouse in Venice Beach and presented a series of performance "events." Not many people saw

them. There was "a wonderful moment," he said, when Garry Trudeau satirized him in "Doonesbury" as a crazy, pumpkin-like artist who would do and say anything, but Ray realized that he wasn't comfortable performing. "I saw that it couldn't go on, and that my love was sculpture," he said. He made a series of pieces in which liquids took the place of his body. "Ink

Hudson, and he became Ray's dealer and confidant. "We talked every day on the phone," Ray said. "I could tell Hudson my worst ideas, because sometimes a great idea is buried in one of them."

Ray's new work was also being shown at the Burnett Miller gallery, in Los Angeles, and curators and collectors were beginning to take notice.

In 1989, he made the first of his five appearances (to date) at the Whitney Biennial, and a year later he had a mini-retrospective at the Newport Harbor Art Museum. Both shows included "Rotating Circle," a metal disk mounted flush with the wall, spinning so fast that it appeared to be stationary—if you were close enough, you could hear the mechanical hum behind the wall. He had done an earlier version, a larger disk flush with the floor, which he showed at Feature. The danger that someone might step on it and break a leg required Hudson to hire a guard, and that spoiled it for Ray. He wanted his work to disrupt the viewer's perceptions. "7½-Ton Cube" did so by being exactly what the title said, a thirty-six-inch solid steel cube, painted an innocent shade of white, which weighed seven and a half tons. Just as his work was becoming known, Ray turned abruptly from



*A fiberglass work-in-progress version of "Huck and Jim" (2015).*

Box," in 1986, was a black metal cube, open at the top and filled to the brim with printer's ink. It was followed, a year later, by "Ink Line," a thin stream of ink that issued from a hole in the ceiling and disappeared into a hole in the floor. Both works played on our inclination to touch something that we don't quite understand, and there were a few disasters when they were shown in 1987, at the Feature gallery, in Chicago. Feature's owner was a singular man with a singular name,

abstraction to figuration. His 1990 "Self-Portrait" took Paul Schimmel and other early admirers completely by surprise: Ray had bought a standard Sears, Roebuck mannequin, dressed it in the clothes he wore for sailing, and replaced the head with one that looked somewhat like his own. In Iowa, he had worked briefly as a night janitor in a department store, and the spooky relationship of mannequins to real people had given him the idea to use them as vehicles for a contemporary form of fig-



uration. (He knew about the mannequins in Giorgio de Chirico's paintings and in works by the Surrealists, but he disclaimed Surrealism as an influence. "I am not interested in the uncanny," he said.) Ray studied the techniques and conventions of commercial mannequin-making so that he could design his own. "Self-Portrait" was a breakthrough," he told me. "I realized I'd always been interested in the figurative without knowing it."

During the next three years, Ray's mannequin sculptures established his reputation as a major and rather notorious artist. "Male Mannequin," done the same year as "Self-Portrait," is a standard, unclothed figure whose barely suggested pubic area has been replaced by a fully realistic cast of Ray's genitals. "Fall '91," usually referred to as "Big Lady," is a mid-level executive type in a red business suit; from a distance she looks normal, but as you get closer you realize that she is eight feet tall. (There are two other versions, one in a blue suit and the other in black-and-white.) In "Oh! Charley, Charley, Charley . . ." (1992), eight naked male figures with Ray's facial features engage in various forms of group masturbation—the critic Michael Fried called it "an orgy of one." "Family Romance," a quiet stunner, presents a generic father, mother, son, and daughter, all of them nude, anatomically correct, and exactly the same height (four feet two inches). Some viewers found Ray's mannequin sculptures appalling, but not as many as you might expect. When "Family Romance" was shown at the Whitney Biennial in 1993, it attracted less comment than Ray's immense "Firetruck," a toy fire engine enlarged to the size of a real one and parked outside the museum on Madison Avenue. Ray's game was to jar viewers' mental and visual expectations with changes of scale, and in this he succeeded a little too well. He stopped doing the pieces in 1993, because he thought too much attention had been paid to their psychological overtones. "It's not that I reject subject matter," he told me. "That's one element among others. But I didn't want my things riding into the room on a Freudian surfboard. I've made a lifelong attempt

to involve myself deeper and deeper in my medium. The psychological is real, but it's non-sculptural."

Ideas for new sculptures come to Ray in odd ways. In 1995, a man he had just met was talking at length about his car being damaged in a minor accident. Ray suggested that he have the body fixed but that he leave the dents. "It was just a silly idea," Ray said. "I kept thinking about it, though, and pretty soon I began looking for a wrecked car. When I was young, in the small towns outside Chicago there was always a filling station with a car that someone had died in—like a warning. I looked at lots and lots of cars, all over L.A., and eventually found one that I felt had the presence of its dead driver." The car was a Pontiac Grand Am, circa 1991. Ray and several assistants spent the next three years dissecting it, piece by piece, making plaster molds of everything (down to individual nuts and bolts), casting them in fibreglass, and reassembling them. Many of these elements would be hidden from view in the finished work, but Ray wanted every one of them to be there. "It became more and more an involvement with form, somewhere between abstraction and figuration," he said. "Toward the end, I primed it. I was going to paint it the color it had been, but I saw that the primer was bringing out the form, so I made a paint that imitated the primer." The color, a grayish white, had the strange effect of shrouding catastrophic destruction in a unified and ghostlike serenity—something new (to me, anyway) in the art of sculpture.

"Unpainted Sculpture" was the culminating work of Ray's mid-career retrospective, which opened in 1998 at the Whitney Museum in New York, and travelled to the Museum of Contemporary Art, in Los Angeles, and to Chicago. Organized by Paul Schimmel, who had become moca's chief curator, the show was a problem for critics. Ray's figurative sculptures were so removed from the current post-pop, post-minimalist norms, so full of prankish surprises and visual non sequiturs, that they induced critical uneasiness. The Los

Angeles Times reviewer Christopher Knight, noting the "quizzical expression" in the many Ray self-portraits, called the show "an unexpected mirror for your own nonplused response, in the face of the sculpture you're looking at." Peter Schjeldahl, in a mostly favorable notice in the *Village Voice*, concluded, "Passive aggression, raised to heights of the sublime, may be Ray's ruling artistic principle."

Mid-career retrospectives can leave some artists feeling depleted. Ray's reaction was to go deeper into his work. He began spending much more time on each sculpture, and he didn't have another solo show in New York or Los Angeles for nine years. Apart from the people he worked with, he had few friends in the L.A. artist community. He had been close to Chris Burden and Nancy Rubins, both of whom taught at U.C.L.A. Ray and Burden sailed together in a boat they owned jointly, but after 1998 their friendship lapsed. Ray had a new, ultralight racing boat, called a Santa Cruz 40, which he entered in a qualifying trial for the single-handed race to Hawaii—it was a four-hundred-and-fifty-mile course to Mexico and back. Off the Cortez Bank the first night, while he was below deck and the boat was on autopilot, it collided with a U.S. Navy vessel on maneuvers. His boat was a total loss. Ray wasn't hurt, though, and the insurance company paid him enough to buy the boat that he has now.

Ashore, he lived like a graduate student, in a series of rented, underfurnished and sometimes unheated houses. He didn't watch television, rarely went to the movies, and wasn't interested in music. In 1997, he began to work on the sculpture that would be called "Aluminum Girl." It was his first attempt to sculpt a fully formed human figure, and it started with a body cast of Jennifer Pastor, a young artist who had been a graduate student of his at U.C.L.A. Ray had hired Pastor to work on his figurative sculptures—one of her previous jobs had been with a mannequin factory. They began living together in 1992.

Ray's original plan was to have the model copied in wood. He sent it to Germany, where expert woodcarvers worked on it for a year, but he didn't

like the result—it looked too German, he said, too crafted. He and Pastor kept reworking the model. Two more years passed, during which Ray and Pastor stopped living together but remained friends. While Ray was dismantling a derelict farm tractor that he planned to reconstitute in aluminum, it occurred to him to try casting the Pastor model in that material. “Aluminum is a soft material that doesn’t hold a sharp edge, the way bronze does,” he explained. “It brought a strange quality of flesh.” The standing figure is slightly less than life-size. Although the pupils of her eyes have been left blank, and the surface is painted a uniform shade of matte white that took Ray months to decide on, her nakedness is personal and startlingly specific—stylized yet natural, like the Kouros. Seven years in the making, the sculpture’s strange balance of power and vulnerability, stillness and emotion, carries more than a hint of the complex relationship between Ray and Pastor. “I didn’t want to be a figurative artist,” Ray admitted to me. “I worried about it, felt I had to get away from it. And then I stopped worrying.”

Ray met Silvia Gaspardo-Moro in 2001, at a dinner party in London. She was a book designer, Italian-born, a quietly elegant woman in her mid-thirties who had never been married. Ray had been married twice, both times briefly, and he’d had four or five long-term relationships. He knew immediately that this would be permanent. They wrote each other long e-mails. Whenever Ray’s work was being shown in Europe, he arranged to see her, and when she came to New York he dropped everything and booked a flight, so that they could meet for lunch or dinner. “We both knew it was a serious attraction, and we were very careful with it,” Ray told me. “It developed very slowly.” By 2003, they were spending more and more time together, in Los Angeles or at her parents’ summer home, on the island of Santa Maria, between Sardinia and Corsica, where she had done a lot of sailing as a child. She was in Los Angeles in 2007 when Ray was told that he

needed open-heart surgery. They got married before the operation, so that Gaspardo-Moro could be with him in the hospital. “We were ready to be married anyway,” Ray said.

It took a year and several procedures for him to recover. Instructed by his doctors to exercise regularly, he still gets up at four or four-thirty every morning and walks for three hours. “I figure I’ve walked thousands of miles since the operation,” he told me. His heart, monitored by a pacemaker, is holding up well, and a strict diet, with little or no alcohol, keeps him lean and healthy. (He still drinks many cups of black coffee.) Ray has always been uncomfortable in groups of people, so he and his wife spend most of their evenings at home, in a one-story, modernist house in Brentwood that they bought four years ago. Silvia has an office in the Santa Monica studio, where she continues to design books, including several on Ray’s work. Being with her has changed him in many ways. “He’s more grounded and more domesticated,” Peter Ray told me. “I think she’s put a rhythm to his life that he didn’t have before.”

Most of the sculptures that Ray has produced in the past fifteen years come out of “Unpainted Sculpture” or “Aluminum Girl,” although each of them is definitive in its own way. They include “Father Figure” (a toy tractor with its driver, enlarged to full size); “The New Beetle” (a young boy, Mark Rossi’s son Abel, playing on the floor with a model VW); “Chicken” (a porcelain egg with a hole in its shell, out of which an embryo chick emerges); “Baled Truck” (an industrially compressed pickup reproduced in solid stainless steel, weighing thirteen tons); and “School Play” (Abel Rossi at twelve, larger than life-size, wearing a bedsheet toga). The Art Institute owns Ray’s 2007 “Hinoki,” another obsessive re-creation. Driving along the central coast of California one winter day in 1997, Ray saw a huge fallen oak in a meadow. The way it had settled into the landscape made him want to preserve it sculpturally. Although the tree had been down for twenty years or more and was near collapse, eaten away by in-

sects and rot, the owner of the vineyard it was on refused to sell it to him. (Ray had offered him five thousand dollars.) Ray hiked all over the state looking for another log, but nothing else would do, so he rounded up a few friends, drove down from Los Angeles in a truck, and, without asking anyone, cut up the oak with a chainsaw and took the pieces back to his studio. Over a period of many months, he and his crew took silicone molds of every section, which they combined to make a full-scale fiberglass replica of both the outside and the rotted inside. This was then shipped to Osaka, Japan, where the master woodworker Yuboku Mukoyoshi and his apprentices spent four years reproducing it in Japanese cypress. Mukoyoshi explained to Ray that the cypress (hinoki in Japanese) would be good for four hundred years, after which it would split and crack for another two hundred before entering its final, four-hundred-year decline. James Rondeau, the curator, described the work to me as “a sculpture about time, in time.”

The range of Ray’s ambition has emerged more clearly since 2005. The mischievous humor and perceptual jolts of his early work have given way to more complex investigations of sculpture’s past glories and its contemporary relevance. He wants his work to retain meaning for a very long time. “He’s not affected by the zeitgeist,” I was told by Francesco Bonami, the Italian curator, who has put Ray’s work in the Whitney Biennial and the Venice Biennale. “What drives Charley is his awareness of time. . . . His work is, I think, his ambitious and arrogant way to say, ‘I can stop time. My work will stop time.’” Most of Ray’s income goes back into studio and fabrication expenses. By 2004, having left his first dealer, Hudson, years earlier, he was being represented by Regen Projects, in Los Angeles. At this point, Larry Gagosian, David Zwirner, and several other top New York galleries began actively courting him. He decided to go with Matthew Marks, who represents Jasper Johns, Robert Gober, Brice Marden, and other artists he admires, because he believed (correctly) that Marks would not pressure him to produce for the market. Marks sells one or two of his new sculptures a year, for upward of

three million dollars apiece. They usually go to museums or to major collectors, among them Mitch and Emily Rales, Eli Broad, and the French luxury-goods magnate François Pinault. “Mr. Pinault started coming to my studio when I was pretty young, and I didn’t have anything to sell him,” Ray recalled. “He comes here and just looks—we don’t talk. I can’t speak French, and Mr. Pinault doesn’t speak much English.” In 2007, Pinault commissioned Ray to do an outdoor sculpture for the Punta della Dogana, in Venice, which the architect Tadao Ando was renovating as a museum for Pinault’s collection. The Dogana, Venice’s seventeenth-century customs house, is on a small, triangular promontory where the Grand Canal flows into the lagoon. “Even though my heart surgery was a few weeks away, I knew instantly that I would do it,” Ray told me. He also knew what he would propose: a larger-than-life-size sculpture of a nude boy holding a frog.

The image had nothing to do with Venice—its source was the passage in “Huckleberry Finn” that later inspired “Huck and Jim.” Pinault agreed to it without question. If the work has a subject, it is childhood, an adolescent boy discovering the natural world. The figure was originally going to be fourteen feet high, but when Ray learned that generations of Venetian couples had come to this picturesque spot to kiss under a nineteenth-century lamppost he reduced the scale to eight feet. He wanted his boy to become a permanent “citizen” of Venice, not a monument. The sculpture, cast in stainless steel and painted white, replaced the lamppost a few months before the opening of the 2009 Venice Biennale. Strikingly beautiful and impossible to miss, it was a magnet for controversy—adored by the international art world, condemned by ultraconservative Venetians who dislike modernism and resist change. Four years later, the ultras forced its removal. Venetians can now kiss under the lamppost again—not the old one but a modern copy. The original “Boy with Frog” is currently in storage. A second version was bought by a Philadelphia collector who has promised it

as a gift to the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Ray is not discouraged by the failures of his two most ambitious works to embed themselves in the public domain. “I’m over the fact that ‘Huck and Jim’ is not going to be at the Whitney, and I understand the reasons,” he told me. “The Whitney is my alma mater—their new building should open in good spirit. I also think ‘Boy with Frog’ is a great sculpture, which will continue out in the world.” He is increasingly interested in making sculptures that are not just public but “civic.” To be civic, he says, a work has to engage and reverberate with many people, as the monumental Cubist sculpture that Picasso gave to the city of Chicago has done. “When the Picasso first went up, in the sixties, people thought it was a joke, they couldn’t deal with it, but now you can’t imagine the city without it,” Ray said. “It became a kind of mascot—a citizen.”

Ray was recently asked to submit a proposal for San Francisco’s new rail station. I saw the clay model in his studio—two nude men lying on their backs, visibly dead. The image was inspired by Hans Holbein the Younger’s “The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb” (1520–22), in the Kunstmuseum Basel. “They say Dostoyevsky lost his faith looking at that painting,” he told me. “I was thinking about the AIDS crisis, the ten years of war we’d been in, the violence in our cities, the drugs. I wanted you to look at this sculpture and feel happy that you were alive. Could I make a sculpture about death that was really about life?” His proposal was turned down, not surprisingly, so he is making it on his own. “This one is probably five years away from being finished,” he said. “It’s extremely difficult to make somebody look dead, to drain the body of intentionality. I want them to look really dead. Do they seem dead to you?” ♦



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# THE NEW YORKER



## GALLERIES—CHELSEA

### Charles Ray

The sculptor of labor-intensive tours de force springs two new stunners. “Baled Truck” (2014), six years in the making, is a full-scale rendition of a trash-compacted pickup truck, carved from a thirteen-ton solid block of softly gleaming stainless steel. Its mass astounds. The faithfully represented, violent details—squashed, buckled, creased, dimpled—feel reverential, like the preparation for burial of a back-roads god. “Girl on Pony” (2015), a seven-foot-high aluminum low relief, is charming in image but likewise funereal in aura, with the doleful tenderness of Hellenic tomb art. Ray is our compelling neoclassicist master, whose will to rival ancient infusions of the immediately real with the forever sublime is leavened with just enough irony. Through April 19. (Marks, 523 W. 24th St. 212-243-0200.)

# ARTFORUM

## “Sculpture After Sculpture”

MODERNA MUSEET, STOCKHOLM

Anne M. Wagner

WITH “SCULPTURE AFTER SCULPTURE,” Stockholm’s Moderna Museet staged one of the most suggestive presentations of contemporary sculpture I can remember seeing: a show brilliantly choreographed as both an experience and an argument. Few exhibitions manage to bring the two together; where “Sculpture After Sculpture” outpaced the ordinary offering was in its success in materializing its thesis as an installation, an orchestration of objects in space. Picture a presentation of just thirteen objects: no filler, no extras—just an encounter, straight up. Such a display follows from Minimalism, certainly, but also from postmodernism, though it is not mortgaged to either. Both this recent past and others more distant underpinned the exhibition’s characterization of sculpture at the present moment—sculpture as it survives when “sculpture” is dead. What we have now, as the show demonstrated, is utterly up-to-date in its use of technology. Today’s surfaces can be matte paint or polished metal, just

as today’s materials can be ceramic or stainless steel or polyester. Yet this is not to say that anything goes. Sculpture remains a bodily art. It is just that at present there is absolutely no body, human or otherwise, that isn’t a fit subject for representation in sculptural (i.e., material) terms. Both art and technology are sculpture’s topics, as are labor, leisure, the commodity, childhood, history, mythology: Where does sculpture stop? Or, better, what does its inclusiveness mean?

Asking this question, it bears insisting, depended on only thirteen sculptures, all of them at least life-size (and a few considerably larger). All are the work of a trio of artists who are certainly among the most individual, even idiosyncratic, sculptors today: Katharina Fritsch, Jeff Koons, and Charles Ray. *Sculptors*, notice, rather than *object makers* or any other epithet that might obscure their loyalty to a resolutely figurative practice, a loyalty that doubtless helps to account for the current success of their art. It’s not incidental that in the course of 2014, the work of two of the three (Ray and Koons) was on offer in major retrospectives, while Fritsch’s blue *Hahn* (Cock), 2013, confidently passed the difficult test of London’s notorious Fourth Plinth.

These occasions only underscore the risks courted by “Sculpture After Sculpture” in breaking with the always more manageable monographic model. (Something of the sort was attempted earlier this year at London’s Hayward Gallery, in a show titled “The Human Factor: The Figure in Contemporary Sculpture.” Chaos ensued.) An exhibition must be something other than a thought experiment carried out in three dimensions. Galleries are not abstractions. Thus, it seems worth observing that in Stockholm the show was presented in a white-walled rectangular gallery, in which one sensed immediately the modular system that underpins its 1998 design by architect Rafael Moneo. Nothing could seem more studiously neutral than

its square ceiling bays and wood flooring, nor could the ease of re-partitioning provided by its measured divisions answer more fully to the spatial multitasking demanded of museums today.

All the more striking, therefore, that the curator of “Sculpture After Sculpture,” Jack Bankowsky (a former editor of *Artforum*, who now serves as editor at large), chose to leave its allotted gallery unpartitioned, a measurable whole. The result was a space as strategically active as an exhibition can be. Think gallery as chessboard, its pieces drawn up in formation, a game well under way. If Moneo’s grid system played into this impression, so does the gridded installation plan published as the frontispiece to the exhibition catalogue; Bankowsky took on the guise of master tactician—an art-world Kasparov at the top of his game.

As Bankowsky’s collaged scheme demonstrated, to stage a show as ambitious as this one, every move must be planned. Let no one imagine that pieces like Fritsch’s life-size *Elefant*, 1987, or Koons’s permanently bouncy *Balloon Dog (Red)*, 1994–2000, can be installed on a whim. Instead, think mock-ups and riggers, and surrender the temptation to believe that even the smallest work in the show, Ray’s poignant painted-steel *The New Beetle*, 2006—in which a naked boy plays on the floor with a model car—could have come to rest casually, the way you or I nudge a sofa into place. Yet the installation still somehow kept idiosyncrasy alive. Given that most exhibitions nowadays are curated by committee, it is rare to encounter a particular strategy, let alone a narrative, at work—so much so that it seems fair to ask what “Sculpture After Sculpture” could have left to chance. Nothing and everything, of course. This was an exhibition that risked everything on the flatland of its design laying claim to life in space. For while the sequence and placement of objects were visible on paper—they formed a narrative of sorts—



This page, from left: View of “Sculpture After Sculpture,” 2014–15. From left: Katharina Fritsch, *Elefant*, 1987; Charles Ray, *Tractor*, 2005; Jeff Koons, *Metallic Venus*, 2010–12. Charles Ray, *Young Man*, 2012, stainless steel, 70 7/8 x 20 1/2 x 13 1/2”. Opposite page: View of “Sculpture After Sculpture,” 2014–15. From left: Charles Ray, *The New Beetle*, 2006; Jeff Koons, *Balloon Dog (Red)*, 1994–2000; Charles Ray, *Fall '91*, 1992; Katharina Fritsch, *Frau mit Hund* (Woman with Dog), 2004.





what emerged in the gallery were conversations and echoes, analogies and references, which the physical presence of these objects set in train. All of them concerned the nature of bodies in the world. To encounter these works as an ensemble necessarily meant investigating the qualities of sculptural figuration of the present moment: the ethos and aura of bodies that we—we Westerners, I mean—mostly already know.

Yet simply to speak of bodies in the context of this exhibition is to sidestep one crucial fact: All of these works rely on bodily models or prototypes that they both scrupulously replicate and sometimes expand or inflate. In only one instance, Koons's *New Hoover Convertibles*, *New Shelton Wet/Dry 5-Gallon Doubledecker*, 1981–87—a piece whose “medium” amounts to two tidy shelves of vacuum cleaners arranged in a brightly lit case—do the objects themselves, with Duchampian inevitability, stand in for themselves. As these various degrees of literalism make clear, such procedures declare their difference from sculpture understood as a grand tradition: No chiseling is needed, no heroic blocks of stone. At the same time, they also register the fate of another, longer tradition, one that is technical, technological, and cultural—a matter of production and typology as inevitably intertwined.

Consider how the show declared its large ambitions from the outset, via a narrative that started unfolding the moment viewers entered the show. There stood Ray's life-size solid-stainless-steel *Young Man*, 2012: Naked and love-handled, he greeted us like some postlapsarian Adam. No wonder Fritsch's gorgeous blue *Apfel* (Apple), 2009–12, came next in the installation, as if to stand as the sign of the temptation that brought about man's fall. This was followed by Koons's wanton *Metallic Venus*, 2010–12, raising her drapery in a scandalous gesture that flaunts the fact of female sex; think Venus as Eve. And then—for the plot continued to thicken—there was Fritsch's dreaming

*Madonnenfigur* (Madonna), 1987/2009, in yellow-painted polyester, hands joined in what looks like a powerless (though perhaps only insipid) invocation of prayer.

This sequence sent us back to the origin stories of Western civilization, refigured for viewers today. As types and icons, these objects are entirely familiar, even if the materials and colors that represent them are not: a yellow Madonna, a blue apple (as yet unbitten), a woozily reflective Venus. And a too-sturdy Adam that, though echoing the great tradition of standing bronze statuary, doesn't repeat it. On the contrary, its weighty presence comes from having been milled from a solid block, not cast in

### The exhibition characterized sculpture at the present moment—sculpture as it survives when “sculpture” is dead.

pieces: At some point in this lengthy process the living model Ray worked from took on another sort of being. As the artist put it, “It's a work that I feel I didn't make, but that somehow made itself.” Yet as Ray would also be quick to tell us, his *Young Man* owes its presence to a technology normally devoted to making jet engines—objects, it needs hardly be said, that, like the fashion mannequins he once reproduced so scrupulously, have absolutely nothing in common with flesh.

If Ray's work regularly uses such apparently excessive processes and uncanny surrogates to ventriloquize its relationship to sculptural tradition, then Fritsch's gift as a colorist serves as a gorgeous distraction from her own artistic concerns. Consider, along with the abovementioned elephant, whose creased and drooping skin is moldy-cheese green, the pretty-in-pink protagonist of *Frau mit Hund* (Woman with Dog), 2004. If the latter, one suspects, is the color of its supercute original, the deathly elephant

is nothing if not ironic in tone. What better color for a “life cast” (read: death mask) made on the basis of the stuffed skin that for decades has said *Elefant* to museumgoers at the Bonn zoological museum? As for Fritsch's pink woman, she is a member of the tacky family of sea-shell tchotchkes just as likely to live in dollar stores as in tourist traps by the beach. What the artist presumably saw and then showed us in her chosen example is the strikingly ceremonial presence that inhabits this fashionably fertile goddess: She and her pooch have the bearing of the geisha with lapdog I once saw promenading in Kyoto, while her magical parasol and blossom summon something of the majestic ritual rendered in Assyrian reliefs.

With Ray's *Young Man* and Fritsch's gorgeous *Woman*, the argument of this exhibition comes most clearly into focus. If they speak of sculpture “after sculpture,” then we are right to read them not just as sculpture today—what we have now—but as sculpture that follows on from, or picks up with, the past. And the show's goal, though doubtless not its only one, was to draw out particular sculptural relationships and develop analogies in form. Thus we moved from the trunk of the elephant to the hose of a vacuum, from a boy's toy car to Michael Jackson's “toy” chimp Bubbles, and from Jackson's haunting paleness to Fritsch's spooky, white-shrouded ghost. To say that such analogies were unsettling puts it mildly; one result was that utterly familiar categories and contrasts—between large and small, for example, or machine and animal—were unmoored in such company, an uncanny congeries of objects that seemed both very old and very new. For me, only Ray's playing boy kept firm hold of a sense of the human, and as a result seemed to have a vulnerability more unbearable than ever before. □

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## ARTFORUM



From left: Charles Ray, *Aluminum Girl*, 2003, aluminum, paint, 62 1/4" x 18" x 11 1/4". Charles Ray, *Unpainted Sculpture*, 1997, automotive primer, fiberglass, 4' 11 1/4" x 6' 6" x 14' 2 1/4". Charles Ray, *Tractor* (detail), 2005, aluminum, 62 1/2" x 109 1/2" x 53 1/4".



### Charles Ray

KUNSTMUSEUM BASEL AND  
MUSEUM FÜR GEGENWARTSKUNST

Andrei Pop

**CHARLES RAY'S ELEGANT EXHIBITION** at the Kunstmuseum Basel and Museum für Gegenwartskunst "Sculpture, 1997–2014," turned on one question: Is he classical? It seems strange to ask this about an artist who spent the 1980s inserting his own scruffy body into minimalist oblongs, before lending the trauma-obsessed early '90s such key sculptures as *Fall '91*, 1992, an eight-foot-tall mannequin in a poisonous-pink skirt suit. Yet certain aspects of the latter's more modest counterpart in Basel, *Aluminum Girl*, 2003—her creamy skin, stern cheekbones, hairless vulva, and orb-like eyes—are undeniably classical, although not in Jeff Koons's Caesars Palace sense. As art historian Richard Neer argues in his contribution to the catalogue (presented alongside standout essays by Anne Wagner and Michael Fried), there are countless classicisms, and Ray is indebted to none. What is classical here is not a style but a method, a relation between process and product.

This is clearest in the earliest work on view here, *Unpainted Sculpture*, 1997, the gray fiberglass shade of a wrecked Pontiac Grand Am. In his affable catalogue entry, Ray recounts the project's genesis in his speculation about whether ghosts inhabit the remains of fatal crashes. But the difficulty of casting and mounting the endless parts of the bulky fiberglass replica gave formalist concerns of surface treatment and sculptural mass the upper hand. And

so a piece about death became what Ray calls a piece "about perfection"—and about an ethos of collaboration that is as untimely in this epoch of outsourced expertise as that of the Romantic sculptor choking on stone dust in his attic.

Ray's newest sculptures, then, are classical relative to post-Minimalist habits of manufacture. The car, in its muted tone, recalls and rejects Claes Oldenburg's fabric "ghost versions" of household appliances. Indeed, Ray's most ambitious recent work not seen in Basel, the Art Institute of Chicago's *Hinoki*, 2007, began in Ray's mind as an inflated replica. But "tailoring," as Ray calls it, could not do justice to this wreck of a tree, so after producing a fiberglass intermediary, Ray hired an Osaka master to replicate the oak stump and roots in the titular Japanese cypress wood. It is not obsolescence as such, nor a kind of loving contempt for commodities, that gets Ray up in the morning. It is form, which he guards jealously—not against decay, which *Hinoki*, too, will suffer eventually, but against an apathy that says: "It's all the same if the fetish flops over." Ray's works are rigid—this is really the sole constant—because they are about their form.

They are also, as befits the work of a classicist, about theft. Ray's reproduction of nude bodies in his recent work asserts the validity of clay and plaster molds as parts of people, which can be digitally scanned, modified, and machined in solid metal or carved by artisans to produce new wholes. This process is appropriation in a radical sense, treating the model as a real being to be captured and rendered in its complexity, rather than as an arbitrary form to be swiped in one authorial move, as so many sculptors continue to do in the wake of the Pictures generation. This new concern with complexity can be lyrical: *The New Beetle*, 2006, and the monumental *Boy with Frog*, 2009, depict two stages in the life of one child, first shown propelling a toy car across the floor with the torqued posture of a discus thrower, then holding up a warty amphibian for our attention. It can also be funny: *Young Man*, 2012, is Silver Surfer as Big Lebowski. These works, being self-sufficient, don't like company. The Kunstmuseum's cramped space for temporary exhibitions

(soon to be supplemented by a new building) suited Ray, insofar as each large sculpture reigned over its own separate room, with at most a diminutive partner in a glass case.

Finally, works such as *Tractor*, 2005, are object lessons in another, primal sense of classicism. To produce this work, Ray's assistants split the hulk and proceeded to cast everything, even machine parts hidden by other components or siding. Classicism of this kind is not particularly Greek—Carl Einstein found it in the ways in which African sculptures presupposed the metaphysical reality of the gods they represented. It seems to animate Ray's works with a stoic indifference to the conventionalism that rules our cultural theory as much as our inflationary markets. The quiddity of this sculpture does not inhere in its site, discourse, or opening-night crowds: All of these are asked

**It is not obsolescence, nor a kind of loving contempt for commodities, that gets Ray up in the morning. It is form.**

to orient themselves to something preexisting, as Ray has done. The rhetoric of the artist is thus often both detached and hyperbolic: "It's a work . . . that somehow made itself"; "the sculptural DNA existed in any one of the parts"; "I agree with these interpretations, but the sculpture created them, not me." These quips from Ray's catalogue notes bear witness to a world that is there whether we represent it or not, receptive to but not constituted by our beliefs and desires—a world condensed in the engine of the burnished aluminum *Tractor*, whose many movable parts Ray shrouded with casings, just as the manufacturers of the original at Cleveland Tractor Company had done. This inspires a parting joke from Ray's metaphysical-realist revue: "I think of this sculpture as a tractor in heaven. I would like to rename it *Philosophical Object*." □

"Charles Ray, Sculpture 1997–2014" travels to the Art Institute of Chicago, May 17–Oct. 4, 2015.

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## THE ART NEWSPAPER

### Classical allusions given a contemporary twist

A survey of Charles Ray's work illustrates the gradual shift back to figurative sculpture

By Laurie Rojas. From [Art Basel](#) daily edition  
Published online: 19 June 2014



Charles Ray's *Sleeping Woman*, 2012. Photo: courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

Contemporary art suffered a major blow when Charles Ray's sculpture *Boy With Frog*, 2009, was removed from Punta della Dogana in Venice. When the city council failed to renew the permit for the site-specific sculpture, which was commissioned by François Pinault, major art-world figures including the curator Francesco Bonami and the critic Jerry Saltz were outraged—but to no avail. The tip of the island, where the Grand Canal meets the Giudecca, is now adorned by a 19th-century lamp-post. Ironically, Ray's 8ft-tall, stark-white, naturalistic sculpture could have been misconstrued as one of the Classical works that the city council prefers.



Making its first museum appearance, *Boy With Frog* is one of 15 works featured in "Charles Ray: Sculpture 1997-2014", a two-venue exhibition organised by the Kunstmuseum Basel and the Museum für Gegenwartskunst. Most of the works in the show are large-scale and will be shown in their own rooms, says Bernhard Mendes Bürgi, the director of the Kunstmuseum Basel. He has co-organised the exhibition with James Rondeau from the Art Institute of Chicago, where the show will travel next year.

### Leading sculptor

Ray, who was born in Chicago and is now based in Los Angeles, is regarded by some as one of the leading sculptors of the past 20 years. His work comes out of a rich background of high-Modernist sculpture—he cites Anthony Caro and David Smith as his early influences. But in the past few decades, he has emerged as one of a handful of artists, along with Jeff Koons and Katharina Fritsch, whose work marks a shift back to figurative sculpture after decades of abstraction. "Charles Ray is working on a new three-dimensional figuration," Bürgi says, "and the show is about the recent developments in his art."

The first piece, *Unpainted Sculpture*, 1997, which is on loan from the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, exemplifies this change. For this work, the artist bought a wrecked Pontiac Grand Am (around 1991), dismantled it and cast it piece by piece in fibreglass. He then reassembled the car in a painstaking process that took him around two years to complete. Even though there is no human figure present, it evokes the aftermath of a lethal car accident. The result is a "Classical memento mori", Bürgi says. "You have the allusion to *Death and Disaster* by Andy Warhol, but it is not so much a story about death as it is about sculptural questions at a formal level, about materials and weight."

*Aluminum Girl*, 2003, is Ray's first strictly figurative sculpture. The standing nude makes reference to Classical sculpture, much like *Boy With Frog*, but in this case, the work is lifesize and modelled from life (it is based on the artist Jennifer Pastor). The work appears to be a marble sculpture made using traditional techniques, but closer inspection reveals an accuracy only made possible by cutting-edge technology. The interplay between naturalism and idealism, detail and abstraction, tradition and innovation—key elements of Ray's work—becomes apparent. The art critic and art historian Michael Fried says in the catalogue: "The sculpture as a whole is a seamless blend of mechanical reproduction and the most considered and refined sort of artistic intervention."

Two more recent sculptures, *Sleeping Woman*, 2012, and *Mime*, 2014, are shown side by side. The former shows a bulky, homeless woman lying on a bench, dressed in trainers, sweatpants and a jacket. Art-historical references to sleeping Venuses spring to mind, but for Ray, the inspiration came from the shape of a woman's body that he encountered on a walk in Santa Monica. "Instantly I saw a sculpture, machined from solid metal," Ray said. Despite the seemingly uncomfortable pose—the woman's jacket exposes her lower back and reveals her lace underwear—she is in deep sleep. For Ray, "her sleep had weight". *Mime*, on the other hand, depicts a lighter, more delicate kind of sleep. The shiny aluminium sculpture shows a man lying on a camp bed, presumably miming sleep.

Of Ray's recent works, Bürgi says: "You can see that he is thinking about the very long tradition of figurative sculpture, and somehow, he brings a new approach and a new experience of the world today."

*"Charles Ray: Sculpture 1997-2014", Kunstmuseum Basel and Museum für Gegenwartskunst, until 28 September*



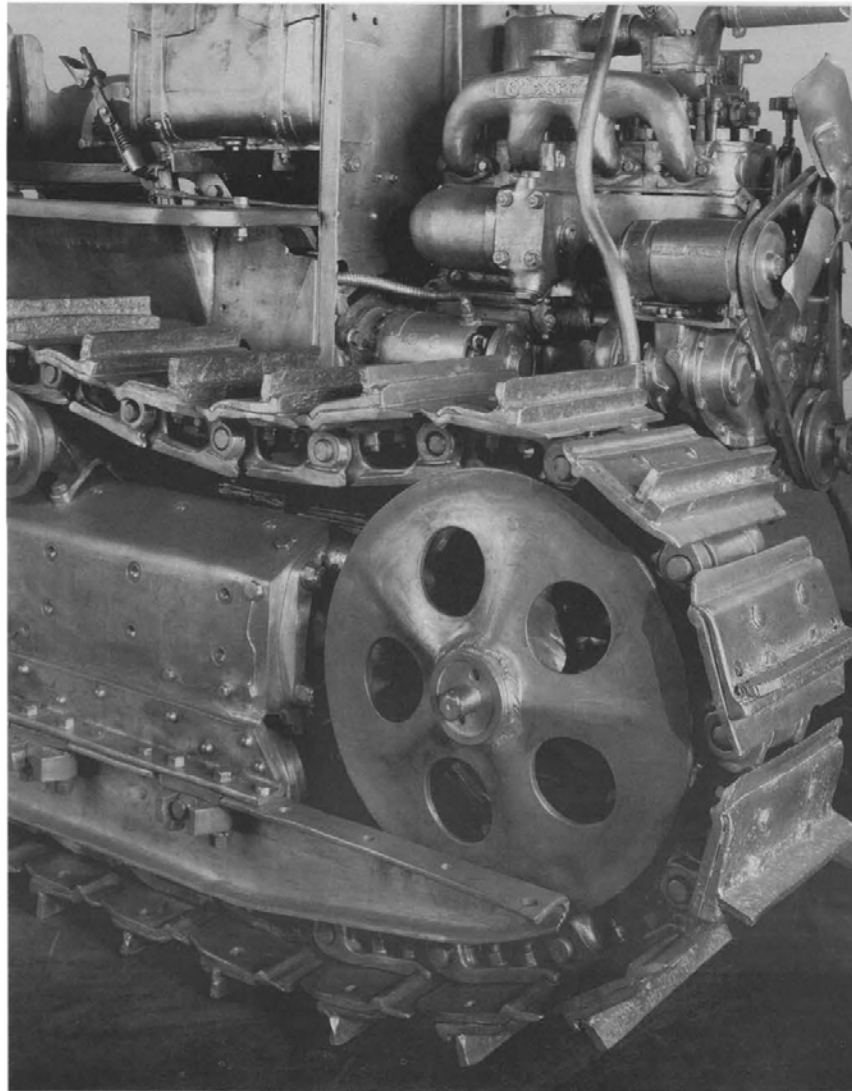
MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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# MOUSSE

## A SCULPTURAL DIFFERENTIAL

BY ZACHARY CAHILL



*Tractor*, 2005. © Charles Ray.  
Courtesy: Matthew Marks Gallery, New York

Charles Ray talks with Zachary Cahill about how sculpture constitutes an intersection between actual space and states of mind. A differential is an automotive part that allows two wheels on the same axle to run at varying speeds. A sculptural differential might thus be a useful metaphor, not only for considering sculpture itself, but also as a device with which to “think sculpturally,” as Ray would put it.

ZACHARY CAHILL: Let's start with why you chose flowers for your drawings.

CHARLES RAY: They're colorful. I use them as an instant armature to engage with color, indulge in color. For me they are a kind of artistic location, or mental location, where I can begin without overthinking things. What's at stake in my sculptures is different from what's at stake in the flower drawings.

ZC: In that *Los Angeles Times* interview, you said you did the flower drawings to relax in the evening.

CR: The drawing is very haptic, in that it's centered on the experience of doing it, in the moment. The sculpture is more an investigation of my engagement with my life, with the world, what things are, how I am, what is around me. The flower drawings are certainly an engagement with life, too—they're sensual, they're in front of me, I'm making decisions—but they're instantaneous. I can go to the same armature every day, in a way. That's a simplistic way of putting it, because one could say there's a developmental quality to the flower drawings as well. But what's at stake is different.

ZC: I love that you use sculptural language for talking about the drawings. Words like "armature."

CR: One can see armature in everything, by which I mean a kind of core to build around. The notion of the armature could shift, within a period of time, or an engagement with a particular work. But, yes, it is like a steel rod that you put clay around.

ZC: How did you decide to start exhibiting the flower drawings, for instance at the Whitney biennial in 2010?

CR: That year, my friend Francesco Bonami was the curator, and he asked me if I would exhibit a flower drawing. I said I would do it if he gave a whole room, so people could see many of them all at once. Surprisingly, he said yes.

ZC: I'm interested to ask you about sculpture's presentness. How important is the spatial component, for you? What is urgent, or necessary, about occupying space?

CR: Well, it's how you enter the question, or what the trajectory into that meaning is. I think it has to do more with building, being able to express haptically through building, and then finding a syntax and a building language. When I was young, I had difficulty expressing myself in writing. Not in speaking, but in being able to put together complex, coherent sentences on paper. When I went to university and actually started making sculpture, I found myself engaging with its sense of the physical. I liked outdoor sports such as sailing, and mountain trekking. I liked certain formalities. I think I mentioned earlier that I had gone to military school, which I didn't like, but it did instill a very rigid set of rules regarding how to behave. Formalist sculpture had rules embedded in it, so I came to understand them pretty quickly. I became able to express myself by putting things together and building. So I devoted myself to that, rather than writing essays or doing historical research for term papers.

ZC: That brings me to your lovely essay on Alberto Giacometti from 2001. You really captured the way Giacometti space-sculpted objects, meaning, the degree to which the space around the figures is activated. How does that relate to how you think about your own work?

CR: I think about that all the time. But it isn't something that deploys; you can't turn it on and off. In an interview,

Giacometti once said, "I tend to make sculptures as realistically as possible." The interviewer replied, "What are you talking about?" and Giacometti replied, "No, it's true, when I look at you, I see your nose, your lips, your groin, your elbow, your knee, your toes. I have to scan you to see all of you. I can't see all of you until I back up, across the room. Then I can see all of you. But I don't only see you. I see this great, huge vista of space in and around you, squeezing and compressing you." That's a really sculptural idea: how is a sculpture in the room, and in the world? How is it embedded in space? It's really complex, and Giacometti goes at it in really interesting ways. We were talking about armatures before; he had a beautiful use of armature in that he made works on the wire, and squeezed the clay, working away at a figure, and at a certain point, he would stop. Then his brother Diego would come in and make a plaster mold. But the work is not necessarily finished now that he has a plaster. He still has the armature and the clay. He might resume working with the clay and take it in a different direction. So one rod with clay on it could produce five, six, seven, eight different plasters. Out of those plasters, maybe six, three, or one would become a bronze. All thought has an armature, in a sense. There is a similar process that goes on in the brain, where you build up and off other thoughts, sculpturally. So when you ask me how Giacometti's process relates to my own work: well, physically, no, I don't have a wire and squish clay on it. But there is the armature, and the building of the armature, seeing the different developmental stages. Once you get an "idea" or "product" finished—you realize there is no "finished"—but the armature doesn't have to be regarded, disregarded. It's not a means to an end; it's a core. So when you build something, you need an armature, you need a structure.

ZC: Space has many facets: psychological, physical...

CR: Well, it's a funny thing. I'm not so sure. There's a lot of talk about how people think about space. Architects, for example, talk about "the space," as in civic space, or interior space. Exterior space. Private space. People used to call the internet the information superhighway. They don't use that term any more. But the spatial metaphor is fascinating. It is kind of interesting to use mathematical topologies in dimensional work. For instance if you imagine sphere-packing—meaning, how many spheres you can pack in a box—what's more efficient? You can throw them all in, or stack them. If, mathematically—which you can do in an equation very easily—you make a four-dimensional box, or a five-dimensional box, or an eleven-dimensional box, you can pack more oranges in it, because it has more dimensions. It is debatable whether such things exist or not. But mathematicians can access them, and deal with them in equations. My point is that I don't see sculpture as "in" space. I see sculpture as using space, bending it, modeling it, manipulating it. I know that's an analogy, because where do you bend, where do you manipulate? I had a designer friend who gave me a very beautiful colander that he designed, for rinsing pasta. I have it in my kitchen. Another friend of mine, a philosopher, saw it and said to me, "Why do you have that perforated object around all those holes in your kitchen drawer?" [both laugh]

ZC: So, it depends on how you approach it. To a sculptor, or a philosopher, the holes could have preceded the perforated object.

CR: Why is David Smith's *Untitled (Candida)* (1965) not a frame? You know, since you can look through it? It's complicated, I think, and a very beautiful sculptural equation.

ZC: For me, there's a psychological register that your work is operating on. It also has humor, although it's more deadpan, not knee-slapping humor. I think humor and psychology often go together, whether it's Freud writing about jokes, or Woody Allen on the psychiatrist's couch so often in his films. Can you talk about those different states, and how you think of them?

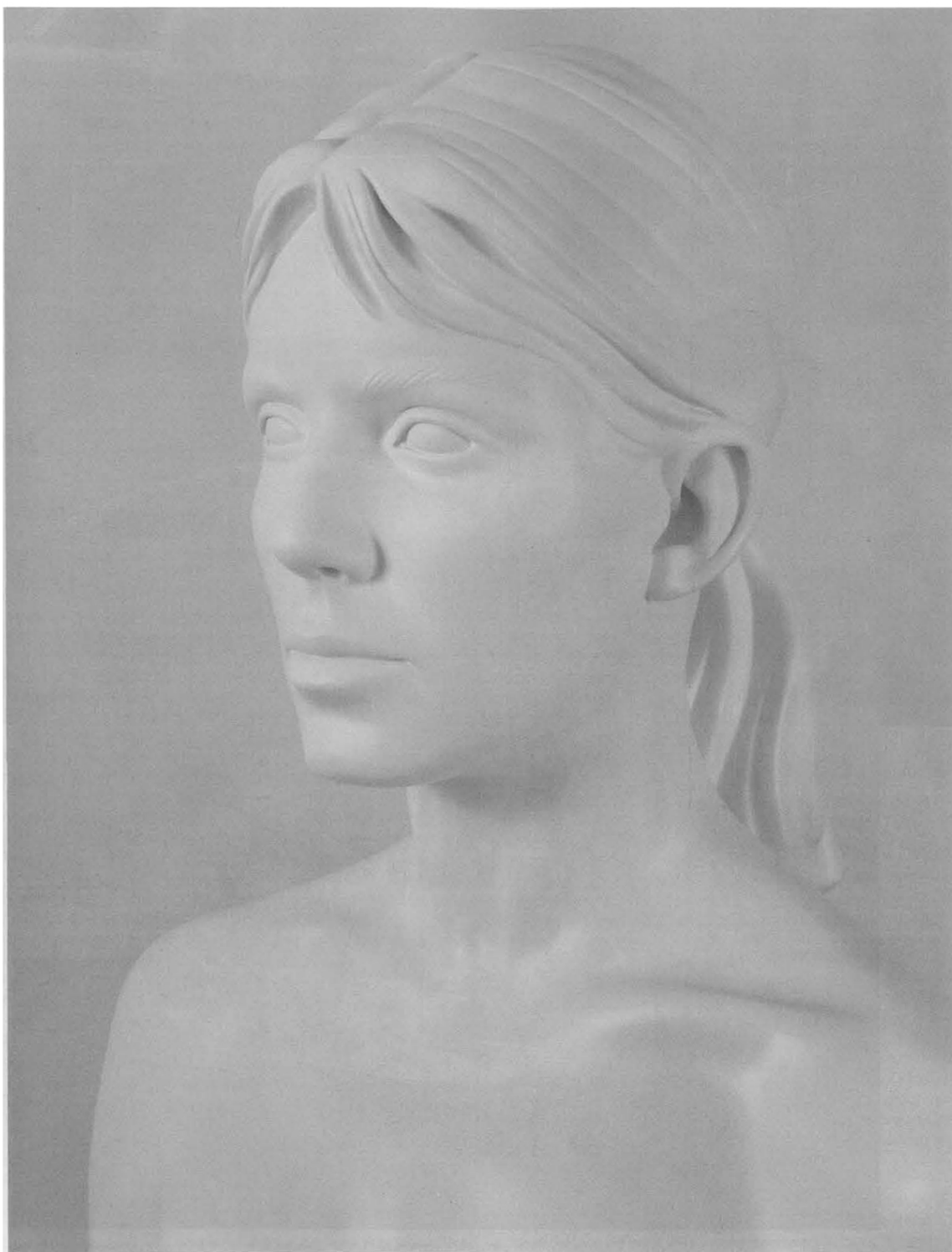
CR: They're inseparable, certainly. You can't take the psychology out





Cahill, Zachary. "A Sculptural Differential." *Mousse*, December 2013/January 2014, pp. 104–13.

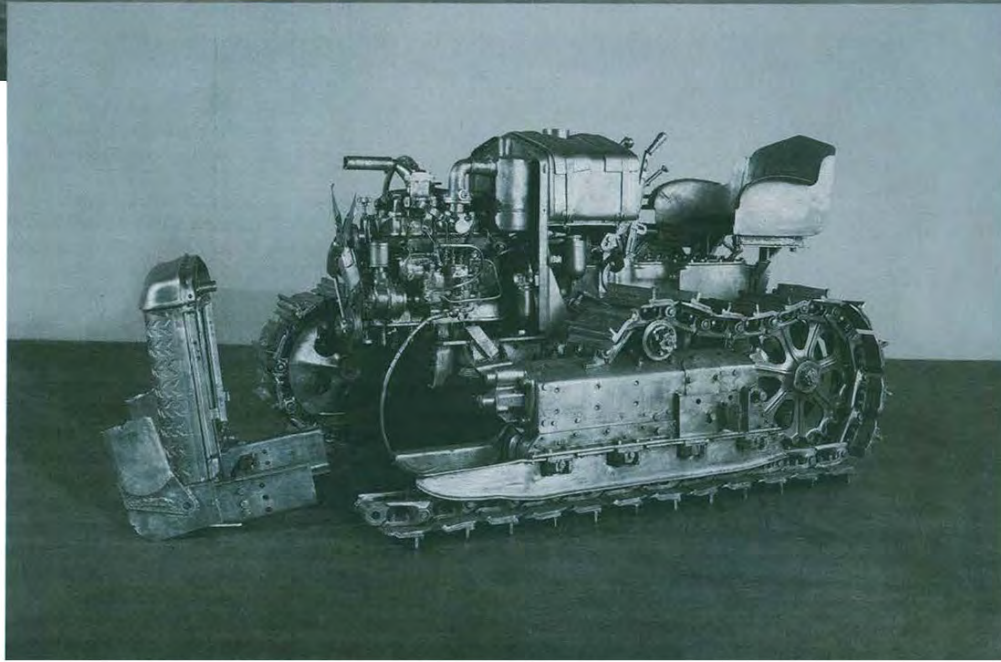




Opposite - Untitled, 2009. © Charles Ray. Courtesy: Matthew Marks Gallery, New York. Photo: Joshua White/JWPictures.com

Aluminum Girl, 2003. © Charles Ray. Courtesy: Matthew Marks Gallery, New York.





Top - *Hinoki*, 2007, installation view at Regen Projects, Los Angeles, 2007. © Charles Ray. Courtesy: Matthew Marks Gallery, New York. Photo: Joshua White/JWPictures.com

Bottom - *Tractor*, 2005. © Charles Ray. Courtesy: Matthew Marks Gallery, New York. Photo: Beth Phillips

of space. Nor can you take the warp out of it. Maybe making sculptures is a process of removal. How much can you take out and still have something? Take out what you know, maybe. I've talked about this aspect of my work a lot: take the black ink in Ink Box (1986). It doesn't work with green ink. It had to be black ink. What's unfortunate is we already intuitively understand why the black ink in Ink Box had to be black.

ZC: It seems like a real coming together of material choice, with an effect on how the work operates.

CR: It has something to do with how deeply and strongly it is embedded in the world, and how much it will live outside its own meaning.

ZC: What do you mean by "live outside its own meaning"? Can you give an example?

CR: An obvious example would be an archaic work like the Manhattan kouros figure. I have no idea what it was made for. But I find it fascinating, and for me it's a contemporary work of art because it's still generating meaning, today, for me. A lot of things don't, you know. They kind of fall away. Or else become "historical."

ZC: You were discussing Tractor (2005) as being like a thought machine, with all those gears.

CR: That work came about from my car having a broken differential. I had the idea to send one of my students to go extract it, and we put it on the seminar table and opened it up. And it was like opening up a human head. It was kind of magical. It was very sculptural. The fluid was like blood, or brain fluid. The gear mechanism for transforming power from direction to speed is like a thought. And thought is physical, as you know. That led to my thinking about the tractor and other aspects of space. The space inside the tractor could be mine, in a way; it was protected, so I could build thoughts, or sculptures, within it. The fabricator made many different parts and access points to the interior of that thing. All the bolts and everything were handmade. As it was coming together, to prove to me that everything was going as I wanted, the fabricator unbolted everything so I could look in and see the crankshaft. And I said, "OK, great, now weld it shut." He was incredulous because it had been so much work. But my thought was, if you leave it open, or leave it so that someone could open it, the collector will always be opening it and looking inside, and that wasn't what the work was about. I wanted it to be a kind of transparent object. I wanted you to be able to look at it, and almost see into it and see through it, and understand without direct visual confirmation that the entire interior was topologically complete.

ZC: Sculpted.

CR: It's called Tractor, but I think of it as Philosophical Object. Like a philosopher's stone, you can look upon it and meditate. Our culture is so in tune with assembled objects—cars, airplanes, and whatnot. The whole is so strong, that at first you don't see the hands that were at play in making it. First, you think it's a tractor, sandblasted. Then, if you know my work, you think it's a tractor cast in some different material. It takes a long time to understand that it's handmade. It's not cast. You start to see, quietly, the different hands that made it. Then you slowly start to figure out and, potentially, look through it and into it. Realize that the interior was handmade as well.

ZC: If a piece is "working," do the parts just start locking together in different ways? Like, the engines start firing, in a sense?

CR: An object has to have authority. An object has to be able to be in front of you, with you seeing it. One could say that early, early sculpture was separated from the natural world. Art historian Richard Neer in his writings says you have to remember, archaic works were the only smooth objects in a rough, rough world. The world was brick, and mud, and dirty. Behold this figurative, smooth object. So, your object has to differentiate itself, it has to speak. And, so, there are parameters. It's nice to imagine that there are no rules, but there are rules. Every time you break a rule, you make a rule. I come out of a rich background of high-Modernist sculpture. It's easy for me to think that that's what I continue to be. Maybe it's harder for other people to see that, but, to speak to your point about locking together, I guess I see my work as a relationship of parts.

ZC: I don't know if "timelessness" is a word you'd use, but there's a certain way that the work...

CR: "Timeless" is probably the wrong word, because it suggests preciousness. "Oh, this is timeless." It's too politically loaded, too.

ZC: But what about works such as Boy with Frog (2009)? If they aren't references to the classical idiom of sculpture, do they still have something to do with persistence through time?

CR: I totally understand why people would see Boy with Frog as classical. It comes to the viewer through that familiarity, but to me, it comes from Modernist sculpture. It's complicated, because it also comes out of my earlier figuration with the mannequins. As well as my sculptural concerns with relationships. I see the figure like Donald Judd saw a box. It is a convenient armature. A number of years ago, I saw figuration as way for sculptural events to unfold. I saw the figure as a really simple armature to make sculpture out of, or on to, or with. In a work like Aluminum Girl (2003) there are lots of different things going on, on the surface. They're not all techniques, but some are techniques. There are aspects of re-sculpting, body molds, there's naturalism, there's stylization. One of the beautiful parts of the kouros figure I was very inspired by is that some aspects of it feel natural, like the step it's taking. Other aspects feel super stylized. The hair has a stiffness, like a nine-year-old girl drew it on the back of a notebook. So there's an interplay through the surface of what's stylized and what's natural, as there is in us. There are certain parts of you that you can't get rid of; they're just you. Other parts you can stylize to be presentable: for a job, in front of your colleagues, in front of your boss. My point is that I can project that way into the kouros figure. But with classical work, I can't anymore. It's so idealized, and mathematical, and spatial, that it's singing a different song. It's in a different cosmos in a way. It's a beautiful shift, I think.

ZC: So, explain to me how something analogous is happening in Boy with Frog.

CR: In Boy with Frog, there are three forms of realism going on. The frog is hyperrealistic, while aspects of the boy are stylized. There are aspects that are in focus, aspects that are out of focus. Those aren't random. Everything is orchestrated through and around it. There's a complexity through it, the child, his "boy-ness." It isn't overblown. It's not a big scale. It's scaled only to hold the ground. That allows me to find the frog and boy: his youth is in that trajectory.

ZC: A lot of what you're saying is helping me understand how you think about the flower drawings in relationship to other works. Maybe the flower drawings are a way of cordoning off



your mind, and not thinking about the kinds of conversations you are having in sculpture, such as these complex, broader relationships to historical precedents.

CR: I would say that I like the flowers because I don't have to account for them to myself, too much. Whereas with my sculptures, there's a lot I need to think about.

ZC: Like embodied thinking.

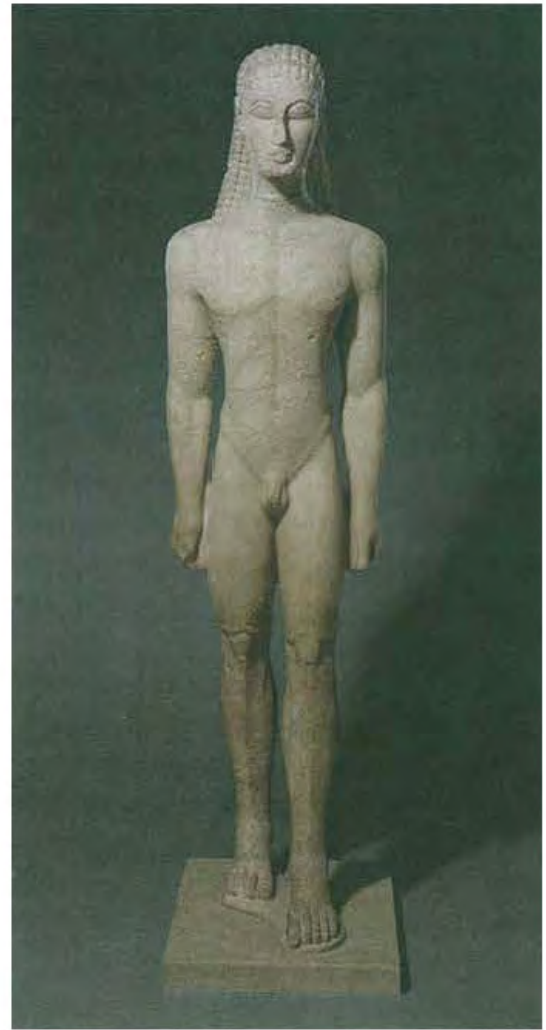
CR: A little bit. They are my thinking, my work. My work is my thinking. A way into the world, for me. Somehow, the way you look sculpturally you can't articulate verbally. It pulls the world into it, without being a tunnel.

ZC: So you're saying that, at some level, sculpture is a kind of transformer? I think John Chamberlain once said that sculpture allowed him to see and share his craziness with other people.

CR: It's hard to articulate, but it has to do with how an object is in a room, and framing. Here, you are sharing the space with that cup, and with your notebook. You put it in a vignette, and you don't share the space with it anymore. It becomes something that you're allowed to read. You start reading the narrative, reading the story. You know what your relationship is to it, even if you don't understand it.

ZC: It seems like you're saying one of the things that sculpture can do, because it doesn't have a frame around it—if it is a machine for meaning- making—is that it keeps things open with respect to how you encounter it.

CR: I am interested in how works bring the viewer into their structure. For instance how Vito Acconci brought the viewer into a work like *Seedbed* (1972). You're manipulated, and drawn right in. You're a viewer, but you're in the aesthetic structure, the literal artistic structure, of the situation. To me, it's interesting where you are in relationship to a work. In an expanded way, if a work can move you physically, it can move you mentally. Sculpture is not objects, if it's good sculpture. You were talking about interior and exterior; one thing I think you can learn through sculpture is that there is no difference between interior and exterior. That's an illusion, in a way; it's psychological. It's a psychological perception if your thoughts aren't physical. That, to me, is a very sculptural realization. It comes from years of thinking about interior space, exterior space, pedestals, bases, and how to embed a work in the world. How is a thought embedded in the world? Or a perception? Does the object come first, or does the perception of the object come first, the identity of the thing?





Opposite - Statue of a kouros (youth), ca. 590–580 B.C.  
 Courtesy: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Boy with Frog, 2009. © Charles Ray.  
 Courtesy: Matthew Marks Gallery, New York



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Interview



Charles

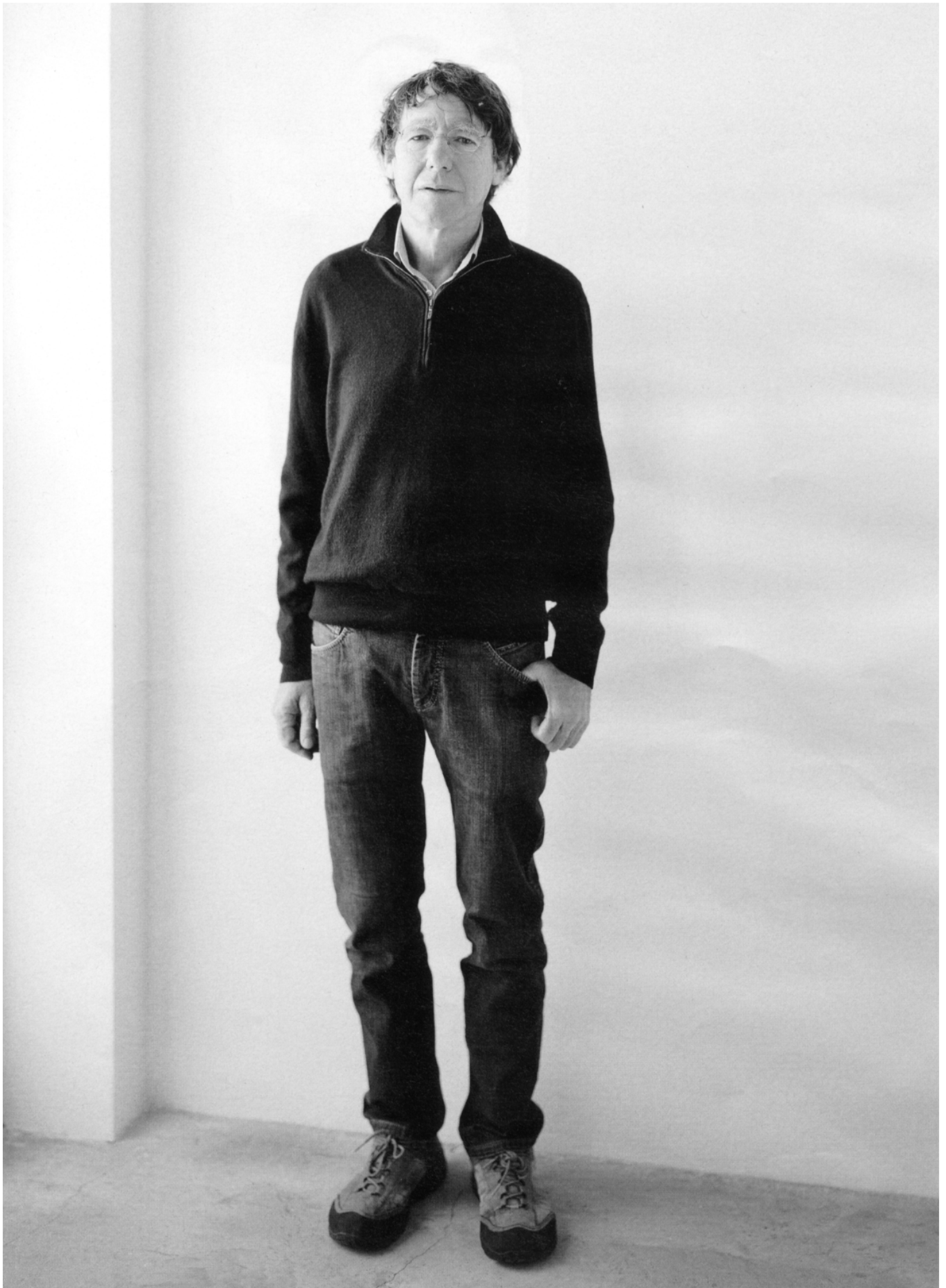
RAY

ONE OF CONTEMPORARY ART'S TRUE SCULPTURAL MASTERS, CHARLES RAY HAS SPENT THE PAST FOUR DECADES CREATING A KINETIC, POLYTROPIC, AND OCCASIONALLY UNSETTLING BODY OF WORK THAT HAS ALWAYS ASKED MORE RADICAL QUESTIONS THAN IT HAS SOUGHT TO ANSWER—SOME OF THEM ABOUT THE VERY NATURE OF SCULPTURE ITSELF.

*By* WILL SELF *Portrait* GRANT DELIN

OPPOSITE: CHARLES RAY IN NEW YORK, NOVEMBER 2012. ALL CLOTHING AND ACCESSORIES: RAY'S OWN.





Self, Will. "Charles Ray." *Interview*, February 2013, pp. 120–29, pp. 134–35.

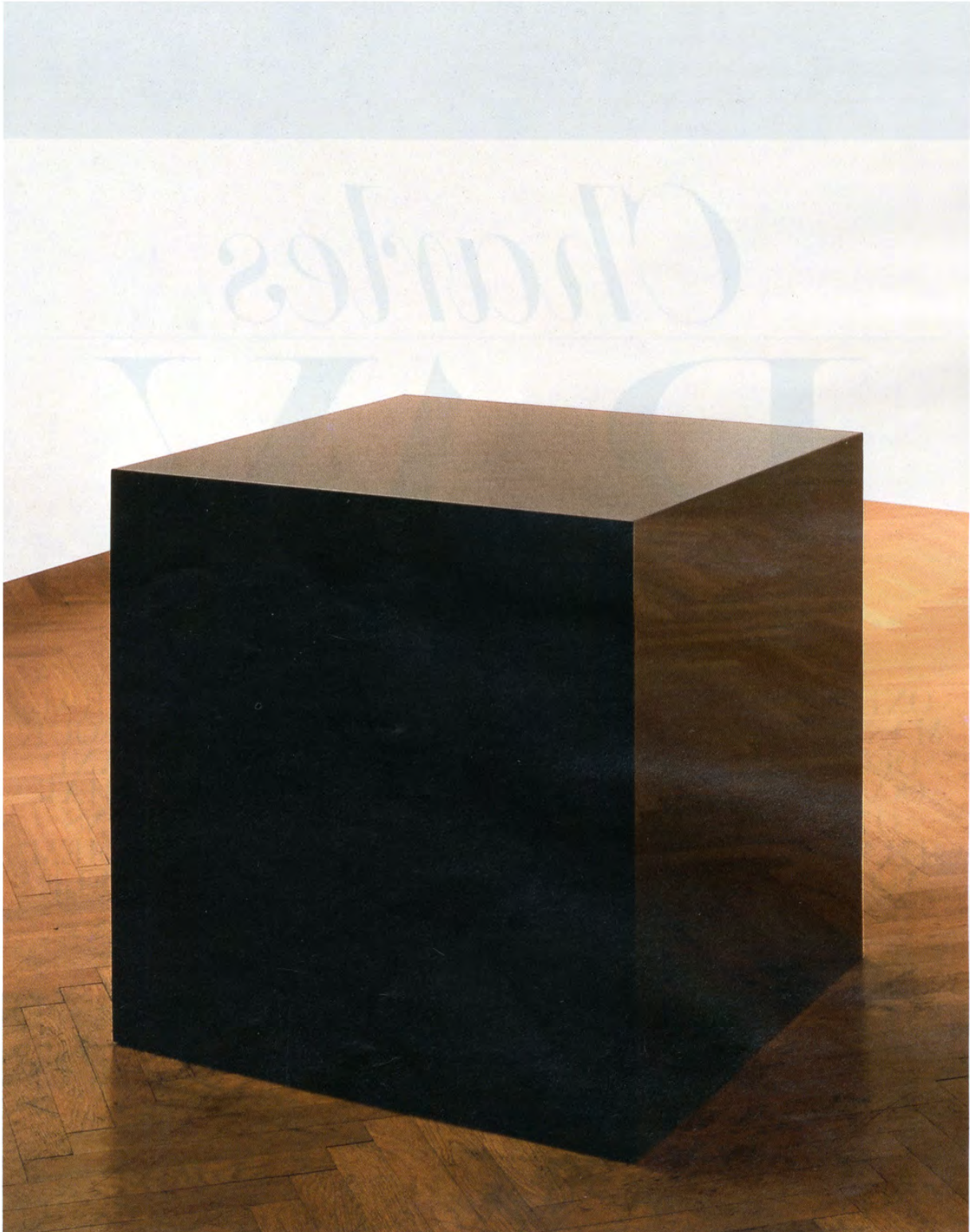


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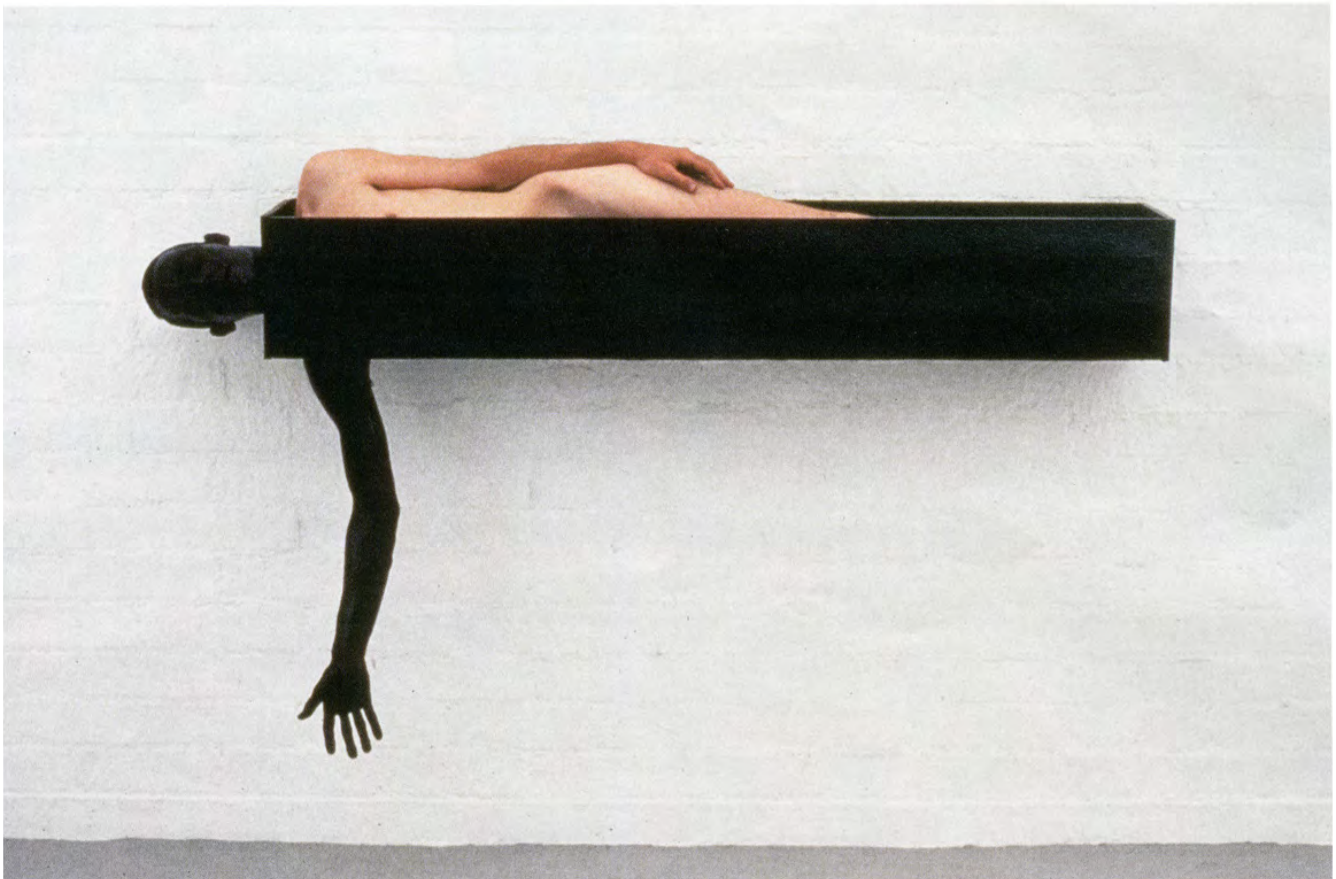
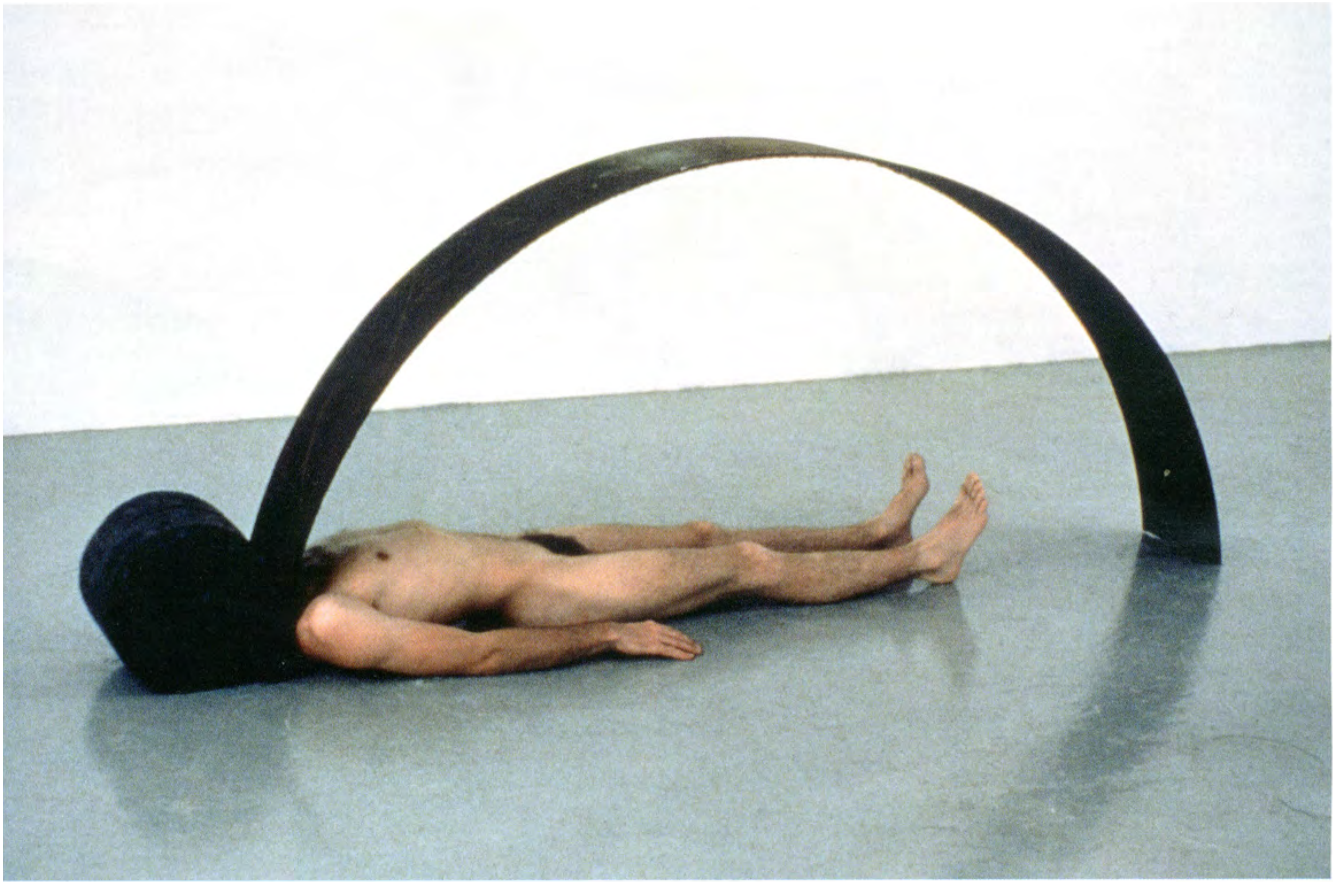
I DO WHAT I CAN DO OR I FOLLOW MY INTEREST. I'LL USE  
ANYTHING I CAN, BUT I HAVE TO BE FIRST INTERESTED IN IT.

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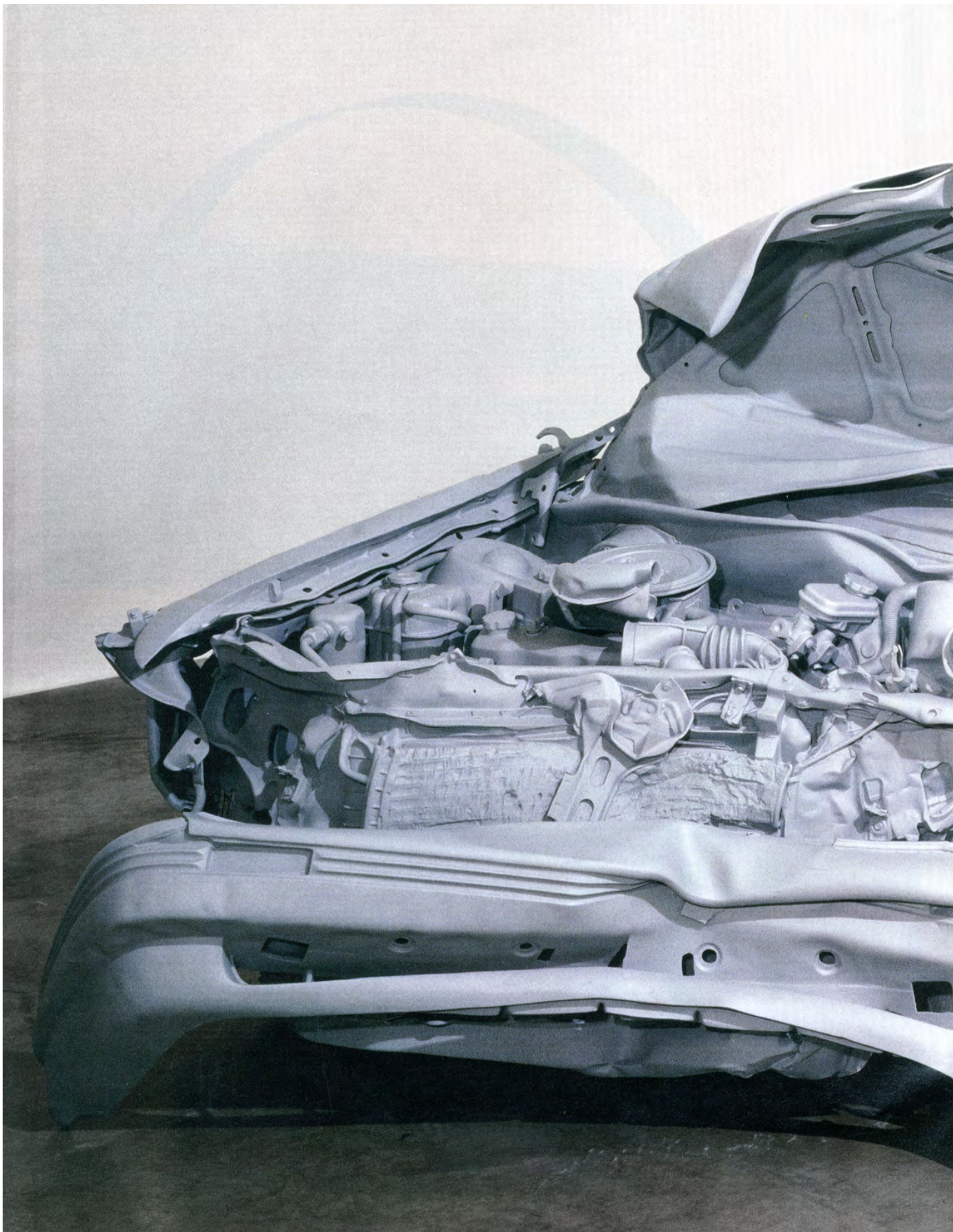
THIS PAGE: CHARLES RAY'S *SINK BOX*, 1986. OPPOSITE, TOP: *UNTITLED*, 1981. BOTTOM: *PAINTED BOX*, 1981–1985.



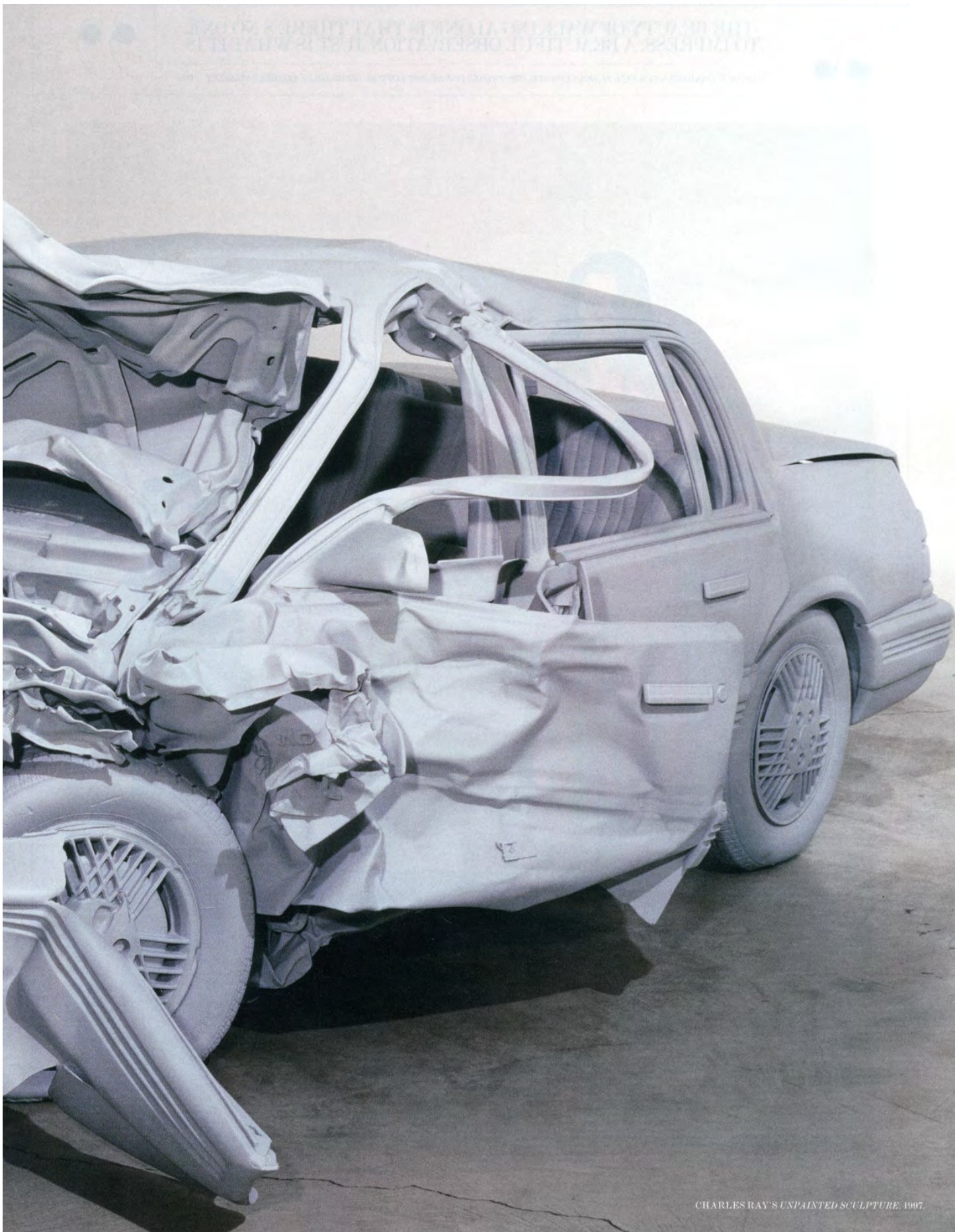












CHARLES RAY'S UNPAINTED SCULPTURE, 1997.



“

THE BEAUTY OF WALKING ALONE IS THAT THERE'S NO ONE  
TO IMPRESS. A BEAUTIFUL OBSERVATION JUST IS WHAT IT IS.

”

THIS PAGE: CHARLES RAY'S FALL '91, 1992. OPPOSITE, TOP: FATHER FIGURE, 2007. BOTTOM: OH CHARLEY, CHARLEY, CHARLEY... 1992.









To say that Charles Ray is an unusual artist would seem—at first glance—a tautology. After all, aren't all artists meant to be unusual? Don't they strive to be away from the flock, leaving the rest sheepishly behind to graze on conformity? Well, yes—and, emphatically, no. It's true that many artists affect a certain eccentricity—of manner, of appearance, of habits even—and it's also true that these affectations may or may not relate to what they actually produce. But to be a truly unusual artist is to be a case still further apart. Artists may work in different media, they may embrace different styles throughout their careers—so as to contrive distinct periods—but what they very seldom do is what Charles Ray does, which is to rethink the entire basis of what it is to make a work of art each and every time he does so. What follows from this—which, surely, is still more freakishly unusual—is that Ray repurposes himself into a wholly new kind of artist each time he commences. It's this willingness to risk it all on the throw of the inspirational dice—and these are big risks, because while Ray's ideas may glissade, his works usually evolve at a glacial pace—that marks him out not only from the commonality of humankind, but from the run of artists as well. A student of sculptor Roland Brener at the University of Iowa in the early 1970s, Ray was trained not to think about sculptures, but to think “sculpturally.” By this I take it he means: with his entire being focused on the aesthetic articulation of formal properties, both psychic and physical. Ray worked through the heavy metal bashing of such unreconstructed high-modernist sculptors as Anthony Caro and David Smith, to embrace the unbearable lightness of interpolating his works with his own body.

In works such as *Plank Piece I-II* (1973) and *Untitled* (1981), Ray used his own body as a vital component of his sculptures—with the former, using a large plank to pinion himself against the gallery wall and, in the latter, positioning his naked and hooded form beneath a curved piece of steel. Other artists have followed this dramatic arc, often through performance work or film. But rather than disappearing into the carceral installation or the deceptive freedom of the wholly conceptual, Ray, at the age of 59, has remained true to his calling as a maker; as adept at carving wood as he is with casting steel, prepared to employ materials as diverse as manmade polymers, liquids of all sorts, and mechanical or electric components for his kinetic works. Nevertheless, his sculptural thinking means that he gives no form of praxis primacy—speaking with me from his Santa Monica studio, he said that he might mold something in clay, analyze it through a computer design program, and then cast it in metal, at each stage suspending his disbelief in the eventual form the work will take. Presumably this is at least indicative of how the stainless-steel figurative works on display this past January at the Matthew Marks Gallery in New York were arrived at.

Some art lovers may be struck by Ray's distortions of scale, such as *Fall '91* (an almost twice life-size sculpture of a professional-looking middle-aged woman), *Firetruck* (the massively enlarged child's toy fire truck that was “parked” outside the Whitney during the 1993 Biennial), or *Boy With Frog*, from 2009, his vast depiction, in white painted steel, of just that: a boy holding a frog above the Grand Canal in Venice. Others may be taken by his works' shock value. There's *Ob! Charley, Charley, Charley . . .* (1992), a collection of Ray-like mutually pleasuring life-size naked mannequins, and *Yes* (1990) and *No* (1992), his in-your-face self-portraits that encode psychotropic perception as photographic representation. Then again, there are Ray works that seduce their viewers with their silkily kinaesthetic subtleties. In this class are the celebrated *Ink Box* (1986) and *Ink Line* (1987)—the former, a large







different. Like bits of cell phone conversations or what people are saying three feet behind you or the strange interactions you have. I was getting an espresso a couple of months ago and this guy said, "Are you going to see the shuttle come in?" Turns out that day the shuttle was flying into Los Angeles, piggybacked on a 747, on the way to its final destination, the California Science Center. This isn't something I normally do, but I took a walk over to the beach and there were hundreds of people out to see it. It flew over the beach before going over the Hollywood sign and over Griffith Park.

SELF: They did the same thing with the Concorde in London. They flew it around the city before parking it for the last time. It's almost like they're placing it in a context before they mothball it.

RAY: Do you walk in London a lot?

SELF: Yep. I've been walking today. I have a job at a university out towards Heathrow Airport, so I'll take the over-ground train out there and then walk the last few miles, just in order to clear my head. I live fairly centrally in London, so I can walk to most places in the ordinary course of things.

RAY: The hunter-gatherer walked something like seven or eight miles a day.

SELF: I enjoy doing very high mileages, partly out of masochism and also because I like to feel the shape of the landscape. That's the point at which it starts to become an experience of the sculptural or the topographic—when you do 25 or 30 miles in a day.

RAY: I haven't done that. I've had fantasies in the past of walking across America or some great distance, but it's such a commitment of time that it's stopped me.

SELF: You have the commitment of your studio and your work. Do you want to talk about that?

RAY: I do a lot of thinking about my work while I'm walking. More in the early morning when I'm trekking in the mountains. When I'm walking in the city, I think more about people around me—my brothers, my wife, some business situation, commitments. But walking in the early morning has affected my work. It's more allowing a meditative, contemplative process into it. You know, work for me has always taken a long time. But in recent years I've used time to make work rather than taken the time. Maybe you know what I mean. It's the same with walking.

SELF: You can't rush walking. Once you get into it, as

a discipline, you also have to accept that your thinking will inevitably follow its own course. Maybe something will come out of it and maybe it won't. Maybe you'll get some kind of dreadful earworm of a pop song running through your head that you can't shake, or maybe some resentment will surface and you'll just be obsessed by that, but you can't really do anything about it, and that acceptance is very calming in a way.

RAY: It's like sailing in that way.

SELF: How does a constructive thought concerning your artistic practice come to you?

RAY: In walking, it's never in a "eureka" kind of thing. It's never, "Oh, I know what I will do." It's more like, "Oh, let's follow this river or this stream." Or, "Let's plant this seed." It's never a solution. It's never, "I'll go back and make a sculpture of this or a picture of that." It's more of a gentle approach.

SELF: Do you think about materials?

RAY: I think about materials, but not like, "Let's roll up our sleeves and start thinking about them." Maybe I'll think a little about time or different aspects of a tone of space or what my relationship is to it. It's like when something takes a long time to look at. Why am I enjoying looking at this aspect of a sculpture? Where does it come from? A few years ago I was walking in Chicago after my father passed away. He was a very strong figure for me. I was walking along the Lakefront between McCormick Place and the Hancock. And I had grown up watching them build the Hancock when I was a little kid. It was near where my dad and grandmother had their offices. But this walk I took was on a cold February morning, and I remember I couldn't separate my father from the building. It was that kind of feeling that happens on a walk for me. It's not hallucinogenic or super-poetic. It's more personal. The beauty of walking alone is that there's no one to impress. A beautiful observation just is what it is. I remember thinking this about my father, and I was thinking I should get an apartment there where my wife and I can stay. Then one of my next thoughts was about going to the airport on Monday morning back to California. [laughs] The thought ended that quickly. And there's nothing wrong with that because I was alone. I'm thinking about my father and my youth, looking at what was around me, walking. It was a beautiful moment, but almost kind of unsharable.



SELF: [*Blasting sound through Self's phone*] You can probably hear the fireworks going off in the background. On November the fifth, every year in this country, they make an effigy of a man called Guy Fawkes.

RAY: Didn't he try to burn the Parliament down?

SELF: He tried to blow it up. He was discovered with large quantities of gunpowder in the cellars of the Parliament. He was a Catholic, the government were Protestants. He was hanged, drawn and quartered, and such is the queer savagery of history that it goes on annually on the same date 400 years later.

RAY: But today is the 21st. It's still going on a half a month after the anniversary?

SELF: It's all an excuse for letting off a firework. But getting back to what you were saying about your father. I walked a lot with my father and I also think you discover your same-sex parents through your physicality a lot, because, in time, you come to resemble them. My father died over 10 years ago but I still keep discovering aspects of his physicality when I'm walking.

RAY: I know what you're saying. I'll see it sometimes when I see a photograph of myself. I say, "Jesus Christ, I hold my hand just the way he did."

SELF: My father was already in his forties when I was born, and he died when I was 38, so I got to know him after he died through my body. I started to recognize his presence from my own childhood in my own physicality.

RAY: Yes. I feel I can feel my father's stoop in myself.

SELF: Did you get on well with him?

RAY: Yes and no. He was very powerful for me and I was a little suspect in his eyes. I do think he was always very proud of me.

SELF: My father used to say that we should be rivals, that we should be in dispute with each other.

RAY: Was he a writer?

SELF: He was an academic. A political scientist. But he had a literary bend as well.

RAY: When you teach, do you teach writing or political science?

SELF: I teach walking, actually. I've just started on a course on what we call psychogeography. You've been a teacher and mentor to many artists for a long time now. Is teaching important to you?

RAY: I came to California in 1981 for a teaching position at UCLA. It was a good place to teach because they considered art as they did any other field. It was a research institution, so there was a lot of time where the teaching load was rather light, and part of the position was being a professional in your own field. I think I've matured a little bit in how I teach and how I think of teaching. I only teach half-time now, but lessons I've learned from teaching have actually impacted my own work in the studio. There's become a lot of patience in something that could take three years to make or four years or

ten years. And not everything that starts gets finished. And each different piece goes through many different hands and materials. It's sort of allowing things to go on even when they don't seem to be productive and seeing where this is headed. I think the ability to do that without worrying came from teaching.

SELF: Is that because students don't respond to a formalist approach?

RAY: Yes, but also you can step back and wonder as you grow a little bit if what you're really doing is teaching everyone to make your work in some kind of bizarre way. It's really hard to break from that.

SELF: Your teachers were very influential to you, right?

RAY: Super-important. But it's a very murky thing, teaching. I didn't feel it then, but from my experience, good teaching is super-bloody and almost verges on being illegal today. I don't mean abuse in any way, or beating students with a stick. It's more that the relationship I had with my teacher was super-personal and intense and emotionally colored. I got a lot from him and took a lot from him, and he took from me as well. That kind of taking isn't allowed anymore—mentally and artistically and emotionally. He was, at times, so difficult and critical and nasty to me. And it was personal. The work and the attitude about the work were being criticized in front of me. But it was like a tumor. The roots were deep in me. The criticism was so important. Good criticism always has a ring of truth to it, you know? I could try to work with it and correct it, and I think that really shocked my mentor.

SELF: It sounds like he was tempering you like you might temper steel.

RAY: It wasn't like hardening up in the military, because I never hardened. It was more about how to see in order to survive. It was not to think about sculpture—which is what they taught in the university—but to think sculpturally. That's what I learned to do. Anyway, what I mean is that it was a very powerful relationship between mentor and student and you don't really see that so much anymore.

SELF: The experience is just too overpowering to be contained in the university context now.

RAY: You'd get in trouble.

SELF: You're looking for a visceral, intuitive response of some kind, and that's just not going to get covered by grading systems. Have you had students you've felt a powerful reaction toward, as you did with your mentor?

RAY: Yeah, I think so. But I've been shocked with people who have come up to me who I didn't really remember who mentioned something I said—or that they're still angry with me 20 years later at something I said.

SELF: They've been walking around for 20 years chewing over it in their minds.

RAY: If they'd been out every day walking, they would have walked it off! I find that happens with me. I've been really careful when I walk in the city that I don't get into a fight. Not that there are fistfights or may-



hem all around me. But I've slowly been learning not to get pissed off when something starts to burn in me. I had the weirdest thought today. I'm sure it's not mine alone, but it's the ubiquity of the media and cell phone texting. Somewhere between 70 to 90 percent of the people I pass while I'm walking are texting or talking on their cell phone. There's no engagement.

SELF: They are not actually where they are physically anymore. I was thinking today about how in the past, having drug scenes in the street was a fixture. In a way, the cell phone has removed drug culture from the streets, or translocated it. A lot of behaviors are no longer part of the context of street life.

RAY: Another thing I thought today was that in my area of the city there are a lot of homeless people. Santa Monica is not unfriendly to homeless people. What I mean is that they don't hurry them over to the next town. If homeless people behave, they're left alone to sleep in certain parks and not shooed away. I pass my fair share of people talking to themselves while walking down the street, like a bottled behaviorism, and then the people on the cell phone talking to themselves. Obviously it's not the same situation, but I was wondering, behaviorally, if it's the same effect. The homeless person or the schizophrenic person talking to themselves are disassociated from their immediate environment. They're off in a fantasy, and it's very similar to what happens on a cell phone.

SELF: I couldn't agree with you more. I remember flying to Sweden in the '90s, before there were hands-free sets for cell phones in England. I landed in the airport in Stockholm and saw these middle-aged businessmen wandering around the terminal talking to themselves. I couldn't even see a cell phone. I thought, "This is schizophrenia. It's a form of electronically produced schizophrenia."

RAY: Yeah, it's amazing.

SELF: Also, when people drive now, they're looking at their satellite systems so they're not even concentrating on the windscreen anymore, they're concentrating on a video screen within the car.

RAY: And now the windscreen is getting to be like a jet-fighter's screen. The Audi has a feature where it will pick up a pedestrian on the windscreen and map its silhouette so you're aware of a dangerous object ahead of you.

SELF: That's a very compelling thing, the virtualization of real perception. It seems to me a paradigm shift. Looking back over your work, one of the things that occurred to me was a quotation from Lévi-Strauss's *The Savage Mind*. He writes: "The intrinsic value of a small-scale model is that it compensates for the renunciation of sensible dimensions by the acquisition of intelligible dimensions." That's what the Audi windscreen is doing. Arguably it's what some of your pieces do as well.

RAY: Yeah.

SELF: Although, in the case of the Audi windscreen, it seems much more sinister. In your case, it's an artwork, it's provocation. Often you've changed the scale or material or altered the dimensionality so subtly that the

viewer isn't sure what has changed. Sometimes it's very overt. But the witness to the work is asked whether they want to enter into that. With the Audi screen, it's essentially imposing it on you as a condition moving through space. Maybe it's only worrying because we are getting older. [laughs] Should we just embrace it?

RAY: I don't know. The Audi windscreen intrigues me. All gadgets intrigue me. I have to say I've trained myself on my urban walks not to use my iPhone. I bring it, but I do not use it; I don't look at the time or check e-mail while I'm in the shade or at a stoplight. It's difficult, but in the end, all gadgets are intriguing toys.

SELF: I resisted the iPhone until July of last year. Now I've embraced it. But I think it's different for writers because we've clearly entered a period in which the analog of text is no longer important or relevant. All text will be electronic. I accept that fact. My house has thousands of books in it, and I've started to look at them completely differently in the last few months. They now seem to me to be like antiquarian objects.

RAY: They feel more object-like.

SELF: Totally object-like. Their use value has become negligible to me because I'm perfectly happy to read on an e-reader.

RAY: One of my favorite artists is Daniel Defoe. I've always been in awe of his relationship to technology—how the printing process affected writing, how he was able to use the everyday vernacular after being a pamphlet writer, and all the other things he did in his life. But it seems that *Robinson Crusoe* could have been written without that technology. I think we haven't really worked out what's going to happen to us in terms of writing, and how it will change in the near future.

SELF: We're in an interregnum between two modes of production, and we don't know what is going to emerge. But we've already grappled with a lot of similar questions in art—technological reproducibility, the duplication of artworks. It started with the invention of photography. And a big problem with sculpture is, in some capacity, being able to mass-produce objects. You've dealt with that and so have other artists in a notable way. You've responded by rolling with that punch—integrating it into your practice through conceptualism or kinetic art or videos and installation. Therefore electronic media and the web don't appear to me to be such a threat to you.

RAY: No, I don't find them a threat at all. I feel a bit outside of the mainstream. I'm losing track of exactly where we are, but the media has always just been a means to something else.

SELF: Right. For example, you wouldn't feel tempted to start producing computer art. You're sticking with your original direction.

RAY: No, I wouldn't do that at all. But we use a computer all the time as a tool; work that, in the last number of years, goes in and out of a computer while we're making it. An object can be scanned, be put into the computer, and then printed or created in another material and then worked



by hand on it again. A figurative artwork for me can go from clay to plaster. Clay has a much different quality than plaster when it's being worked. What happens when a work's in the computer is akin to that. Clay, plaster, virtual clay—they move differently and have different kinds of uses. There isn't any way one shouldn't work.

SELF: No, but it strikes me as important to get your hands dirty.

RAY: No. If it happened without my getting my hands dirty, that would be okay. These days a lot of design is perhaps too dependent on the computer alone. Everything looks like a tennis shoe, like my new pair of Nikes—a boat, a car.

SELF: I noticed that about 10 years ago—cars started to look like tennis shoes. What is that about?

RAY: There's something super-modern about making something by hand. I think people don't always want the look that something is built in a computer. There is something modern with dealing with something haptic or of the moment.

SELF: A lot of your work subverts the manufacturing process quite powerfully by either using materials of great weight and density—such as your most recent steel figures that are being shown at Matthew Marks Gallery in New York City—or finishes that would be unachievable except through the production of a single work, like the tree you laboriously purloined and then replicated [Hinoki, 2007]. Is that something you consciously engage with or is that just the way you want to make it?

RAY: It's just the way it comes out. It's just the way it is . . . [pauses] I don't want you to think I'm being resistant to giving you answers.

SELF: What stands out for me when reading materials related to your work is a steely determination to resist a lot of art-critical discourse on your part.

RAY: Well, yeah, I resist, but I don't think it's even a conscious resistance. I do what I can do or I follow my interest. I don't mean to say, "Oh, my ideas are so original, I don't follow any discourse." I'll use anything I can, but I have to be first interested in it. The important aspects of it are always much different than the subject of the work.

SELF: William Empson described some piece of art-critical writing as "a steady iron-hard jet of absolutely total nonsense."

RAY: Nonsense? Yeah. A lot of everything is pretty nonsensical. Someone told me they were at a dinner with [Governor] Jerry Brown, and someone said, "God, this is such nonsense." And he turned and said, "It's all nonsense." [laughs]

SELF: I suppose you're right. I don't mean to single out art criticism. Maybe because it seems to me that a lot of art criticism closes its reader off from experiencing the works of art it is discussing in many different ways—which is the point of art. And so much critical discourse is working directly against that intention. But I would like to ask you about the making of one piece in particular—about the use of LSD in the production of *Yes*

and *No*. Did you use it a lot then? Did you feel it gave you valuable insights at the time?

RAY: *Yes* and *No* are two separate works. *No* came a few years later, in 1992. The photo used in *Yes* was a photo taken of me on LSD standing in front of the same gallery wall where the work was to be hung. This portrait was taken as per my written instructions before I took the LSD and well before I altered the wall itself. The physical structure of the work will perhaps explain my intent: A photo of me is taken while I am on LSD. A glass manufacturer put a bend into the glass that was used in the framing of the photo. The photo is life-size. A frame maker carved a simple wood frame to match the curve of the glass. A builder built a new wall in the gallery. This wall had a curve from floor to ceiling. The curve, or swelling of the wall, matched what I was experiencing from the hallucinogenic drug. The portrait and its curved glass frame and photo were hung and fit the curve of the wall perfectly. Entering the room, everything looked fine. The interest was in the peripheral vision where the curve of my wall met the straight, unaltered walls of the gallery architecture. The room seemed to breathe at the periphery of the viewer's vision—a place where interesting events seem to occur, the pictorial space of the work into the lived space of the viewer. I titled the work *Yes* in reference to Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No" program, which was somewhat concurrent with the time of my project. At the time it seemed to me that a hallucination was affirmative. You say "Yes!" to the burning bush. This thought was perhaps what led me to *No*. *No* is about an infinite regress. The impossibility of art to push a subjective state out into the world. My self-portrait in *No* is a plastic sculpture of me. I brought the sculpture to a photo portrait studio and asked the photographer to take a portrait of it, treating it as if it was a normal subject he would encounter in the course of his workday. My idea being that once you moved through the artifice of the photo genre—with backdrop, film stock, lights, etc.—you would still not reach me there in the photo being another artifice of me. As an ancient philosopher explained: "It's turtles all the way down." I took drugs when I was young. Being a teenager in the late '60s, I found the mind-expanding experiences so body-felt in drug usage. They're a sculptural link between the mental and the physical. A few often republished quotes attributed to me concerning drugs are actually from a fictitious interview that Dennis Cooper wrote in the early '90s. I enjoy coming across this and other information from that particular interview.

SELF: Okay, we may have said enough.

RAY: When you come to L.A., we should take a walk together. It would be really fun.



MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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# ARTFORUM

## NEW YORK

### Charles Ray

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

For more than five years now, Charles Ray has been making sculptures based closely on the human figure, somewhat in the manner of his first work of this type, *Aluminum Girl*, 2003. In his 2007 show at Matthew Marks Gallery, another such piece, *The New Beetle*, 2007, depicted, if that is the word, a naked young boy seated directly on the ground playing with a small model of a Volkswagen. Since then, Ray has been mining this vein in a number of works, three of which, all dated 2012, made up his recent exhibition in the same gallery.

The first to be completed, *Sleeping Woman*, had its origin in more than a hundred photographs taken by the artist of an African-American woman asleep on a bench on Wilshire Boulevard in Los Angeles. She seems to be wearing sweatpants, a lightweight jacket (which pulls up in back because of her bodily position), and sneakers. She's seated on the bench but is half-lying on her left side, with a ribbed blanket folded under her head and hands. The sculpture is life-size (actually, just over, so as to appear life-size), and has been machined from solid steel. The sense of solidity is tremendous, as is the implication of sheer weight (in fact, the piece checks in at just over two tons), which correlates, we are made to feel, with the theme of sleep itself, at least as encountered here. The character of her slumber—"geologic," as Ray put it in an e-mail exchange—finds powerful expression in the sculpture's weightiness as registered by the viewer, subliminally or otherwise. (In another work currently being completed in Osaka, Japan, *Sleeping Mime*, the character of the sleep—hence of the work as a whole—will be fundamentally different.) As always in Ray's work, but in the figures with a new explicitness, the viewer is invited to reflect on the host of specific decisions that went into the finished sculpture: in *Sleeping Woman*, for example, the decisions as to exactly how to treat her hair and her sneakers, two elements that called for a greater degree of stylization than did any others; or, less obviously, precisely what degree of exactitude would best suit the detail of the top of her underwear, which becomes visible above the waist of her sweatpants at the rear of the piece. To a remarkable degree, the success of the sculpture depends on the felt rightness—individual and cumulative—of such determinations. The woman's face in particular is a tour de force of affectionate near-literal realism in gleaming metal that at the same time is devoid of the least hint of sentimentality.



Charles Ray, *Sleeping Woman*, 2012, solid stainless steel, 35½ x 44½ x 50".

Then there is *Young Man*, a naked figure of a bearded man apparently in his thirties, who stands with his hands at his sides, his feet turned slightly outward, a bit of excess flab visible above his hips, and a vaguely sappy expression on his face. (The sculpture went through countless revisions at different stages in its creation before it was finally resolved, a process that is, of course, not visible to the viewer.) The naked male figure of *Shoe Tie* is slim but no longer young, crouching—the lower knee doesn't rest on the ground—while he pantomimes tying the lace of a nonexistent shoe. Amazingly, the "theatricality" of what the latter figure is doing in no way registers as problematic: The viewer accepts almost without thinking about it the rightness or, say, the naturalness of the implied model's pose, even while crouching in turn in order to make out the figure's face, which is otherwise hidden from view. (Crouching, one also sees more plainly the figure's pendant genitals, a tribute of sorts to the early kouroi Ray greatly admires.) These sculptures too have been machined out of solid steel, but the aura of each is distinct and indeed contrasts with that of the other two pieces in ways that there is no space to elaborate on here. A magnificent, deeply thoughtful show.

—Michael Fried



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# Flash Art

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**CHARLES RAY**



Genta, Umberta. "Using Time." *Flash Art*, January/February 2013, cover, pp. 50–52.



# Charles Ray

## USING TIME

Umberta Genta



**UMBERTA GENTA:** *Do you have an obsessive personality? I can't help wondering about it when I look at the extreme perfection of your work.*

**Charles Ray:** I would say someone might say that I was obsessive, but really I am not. I have discipline and persistence. Obsession is undisciplined and mindless, two qualities that are out of place in good artwork — or any work, for that matter.

**UG:** *Does your meticulous approach manifest itself in your daily life?*

**CR:** It depends upon what vantage point you view me from.

**UG:** *Compared to other artists, your output seems very thoughtful but also very spare. Is that a function of being a perfectionist, or is it more of a deliberate production strategy?*

**CR:** My sculptures are born from a personal necessity to create and communicate; other aspects of this drive are secondary.

**UG:** *Do you think this "slower" output has had an impact on your career?*

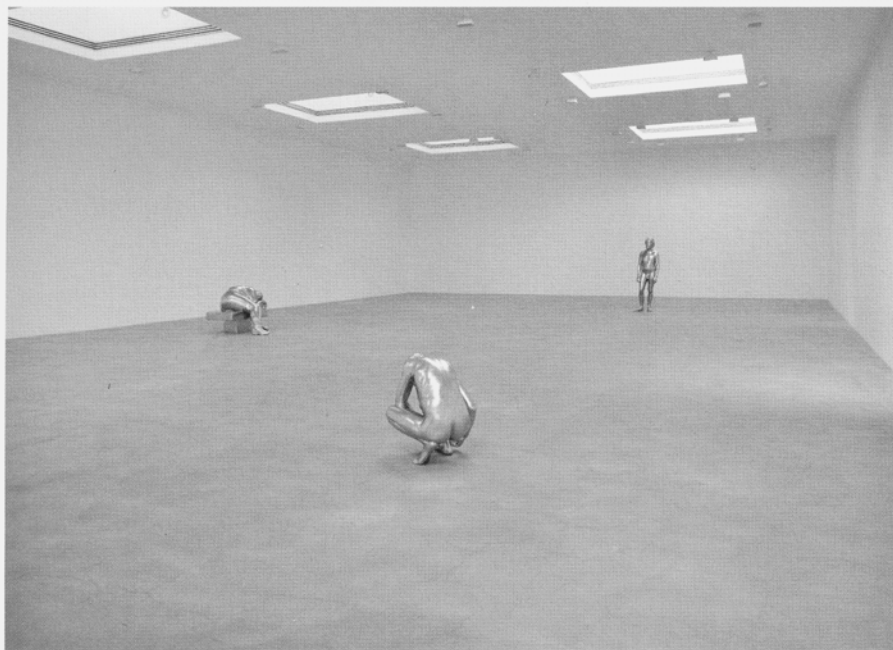
**CR:** Aspects of my previous answer address this question. My output follows the essence of my sculptures. Output and production are not strategies; they are necessary or rather emergent qualities of my relationship to work.

**UG:** *How do you know when a work is finished?*

**CR:** That's a good question. In the past many people have commented that I am slow. I have often thought that I take a long time to produce a work. Recently I am beginning to understand that one does not necessarily have to take time but can use time to create a work. If you want to think of time as a river eroding stones, you can begin to see how time itself can be used to create a sculpture.

**UG:** *From your earliest works to Oh! Charley, Charley, Charley (1992) to more recent pieces such as Light From the Left (2007), your own image reigns supreme. When researching your*

CHARLES RAY, *Young man*, 2012. Solid stainless steel. 180 x 53 x 34 cm. Opposite: *Shoe Tie*, 2012. Solid stainless steel. 73 x 74 x 60 cm. All courtesy the artist and Matthew Marks, New York.



work, I sometimes couldn't distinguish you from your sculpture! Has anyone mistaken this for mere narcissism?

**CR:** I'm sure they have, but I never make that mistake myself. They are sculptures and they are directed towards viewers, and that structure between the work and the beholder breaks the mirror of self-absorption.

**UG:** It must be challenging to reproduce yourself so realistically. Have you encountered any difficulties?

**CR:** No. Realism is structural rather than emotional.

**UG:** I recently spent a little time in L.A. My impression was of a place where much of one's life is concentrated around the home. Do you think that's accurate? Why are you based in L.A.?

**CR:** I've always tried to live near water. I grew up on lake Michigan, and when I came to LA I gravitated towards the beach. I now live a few short miles from the Pacific.

**UG:** I see a shift in your work from expressions of completed actions to incomplete actions. One of the new works at Matthew Marks is a man lacing his shoe, but there's no shoe. Do you want viewers to complete these actions in their minds?

**CR:** No, my sculptures are seldom only about the spark of inspiration that ignited them. *Shoe Tie* (2012) came from an idea I had about a ghost. I do not believe in ghosts, but if they did exist and a ghost wanted to tie his shoe he would not need to have a shoe. This simple observation led me on a path or trail to make this work. The act of making the sculpture and the sculpture itself create a sort of meaning machine that, when the work is good, is hard, if not impossible, to turn off.

**UG:** In the '90s you made a sculpture of a giant woman dressed in a corporate outfit (Fall '91, 1992). Do you still see women as "giants" today, or do they have a more human scale?

**CR:** I disagree that the sculpture you are referring to depicts a giant woman. It simply transforms the viewer into a very small person.

**UG:** What does a subject need to embody in order for you to feel motivated to create its sculptural version?

**CR:** It does not really work that way. The true nature of the subject is rarely there at the beginning.

**UG:** In some of your works depicting boys, *Boy with Frog* (2008) especially, I get the sense of being in a transitional state — of being on the cusp of adult consciousness. I guess this consciousness happens at different ages for each of us. What do you recall about being a boy, and what meaning do you attribute to that period of your life? Do you see yourself in that boy?

**CR:** I don't see myself in that boy, but I certainly look for the boy that I no longer am. The other day I was fondly thinking of a particular mistake I made as a young kid. It was then that the impossibility of time travel finally came home to me. ■

Umberta Genta is managing editor of *Flash Art International*.

Charles Ray was born in 1953 in Chicago. He lives and works in Los Angeles.

From top: "Charles Ray", installation view at Matthew Marks, 2012; CHARLES RAY, *Sleeping woman*, 2012. Solid stainless steel, 90 x 113 x 127 cm. All courtesy the artist and Matthew Marks, New York.



# NEW YORK OBSERVER

## Shoeless Ray

CONTEMPORARY ART'S  
MOST OBSSIVE PERFECTIONIST  
HAS A NEW SHOW  
AT MATTHEW MARKS

**A trio of sculptures,  
years in the making**

*By Andrew Russeth*

**ART** A few years ago, Los Angeles-based artist Charles Ray had heart trouble that required surgery. After he recovered, one of his doctors told him that he should start walking as much as possible. "So I was taking these really long walks," he told *The Observer* last week at the Matthew Marks Gallery in Chelsea, where an exhibition of his work has just gone on view. Every day, he said, he would find himself walking by the same bench at the corner of Wilshire Boulevard and Seventh Street, in Santa Monica, "and usually a homeless guy was on it, and I would talk to him and give him some money and stuff like that."

In Matthew Marks, Mr. Ray was standing next to a life-size, realistic metal sculpture he has made of that bench with a woman lying on top of it. She leans over on her side, slumbering peacefully on a blanket like a contemporary Ariadne. Her jacket is pulled up, exposing part of her back. She is based on a homeless woman he saw while he was walking by one day. He went on to spend years on the sculpture—three of them on her shoes alone.

Asked why he invested so much time in what would appear to be a banal scenario—a woman on a bench—he began his answer by retreating from his sculpture. "I came up from this direction," he said quietly, approaching it from behind. The shape her body made on the bench was, he recalled, "so big and transcendental in a way, you know? I saw the underwear and the lace, I just immediately knew I wanted to machine it. I knew I wanted to make a sculpture out of it. What would happen with the machine tool? I was trying to push her, to bring her *ka*, or her soul, up through her physicality and out across her clothes, that was sort of the attempt." As far as he knows, the woman is unaware that she has been shown in art galleries twice, a few months ago at Matthew Marks's new Los Angeles branch, and now in New York.

It's an old cliché that you can get a pretty good idea of what an artist is like by the work they make. Though it's not universally true, big, bold paintings tend to be made by big, bold people. But who makes a delicate, detailed sculpture of a homeless woman or, for that matter, a work like *Oh! Charley, Charley, Charley...* (1992), a set of eight identical, terrifyingly lifelike, self-portrait nude sculptures engaged in an orgy? (That one is on permanent display at the Rubell Family Collection, a private museum in Miami, and is probably Mr. Ray's best-known work.)

On the day he met with *The Observer*, Mr. Ray, who will turn 60 next year, was weathering the chilly gallery in a blue knit cap and scarf—the heat had not yet been restored following Hurricane Sandy. Aside from those moments when he is really excited, which are few and far between, he speaks slowly and deliberately, in a voice just a notch or two above a whisper. He has a guarded warmth that betrays his Midwestern roots—Chicago-born, he went to college at the University of Iowa.

Unlike the artist who made them, Mr. Ray's sculptures are often unsettling, frequently because of their mind-bending proportions, and they defy the reigning attitudes of much high-end sculpture.

A key characteristic of art in the market boom that started in the late 1990s was that art got very big, and very shiny. Artists became almost as well known for their staggering fabrication costs as they did for the works themselves. Something was born that one writer referred to as “bling conceptualism.” Many of the pieces made in the “bling” mode tend to have more than a whiff of luxury goods about them, like Jeff Koons's mammoth candy hearts and beveled diamonds. Which makes Mr. Ray's sculptures startling—a perfect replica of a crashed car, assembled part by part (*Unpainted Sculpture*, 1997), for instance, or here, a woman sleeping on a bench. His pieces include a female mannequin, dressed in a pantsuit, 30 percent larger than life-size, and a family of four, all the same dwarf height, completely naked.

‘We’re all  
equal  
in sleep.’

But he prefers talking craftsmanship to talking content.

“I spent a long time taking pictures,” he said, recalling the day he came across the homeless woman. “She was just out on a very busy intersection and just amazingly sort of asleep like a mountain, just unwakeable. And then I walked home, which was about 40 minutes away, I looked at my pictures and thought, ‘God I don’t have enough pictures,’ and I walked all the way back and she was still there. Trucks were going by, and she was just totally asleep.”

The sculpture, *Sleeping woman* (2012), is solid stainless steel and was cut with a machine normally used to build large motors and injection molds. Though it weighs about 6,000 pounds, it looks remarkably light—Mr. Ray and his assistants polished the piece such that reflections in it appear in soft focus. He takes a certain pride in the solidity of his sculptures. To demonstrate it, he draped part of his sweater over one, and asked *The Observer* to bang a hand on it—the thing was as immovable as a boulder.

Because of his slow, deliberative process, Mr. Ray's exhibitions are relatively infrequent, and are greeted with the kind of enthusiasm usually reserved for auteur filmmakers. He may be his generation's greatest sculptor, for his relentless inventiveness and ability to flout convention with grace. He's appeared in five Whitney Biennials and two Venice Biennales, and—if you're someone who judges these sorts of things using dollar signs—he is one of only a handful of artists working today who can command

more than a million dollars for a new piece. All three sculptures in the Marks show have sold.

His art has always rewarded extended viewing. He packs artworks with details, and fashions them in unorthodox, irreverent ways. In the 1980s, when he was focused on abstract sculptures that resembled common objects (tables, shelves) and minimalist forms with unexpected quirks, he made what appeared to be a black string that extended from floor to ceiling. In fact, it was a thin band of heated ink, continually circulated via a pump system. Another piece from that time looks at first glance like a nondescript cube but, on closer inspection, reveals itself to be a black steel box filled to its brim with 200 gallons of newspaper ink. His art reveals and plays in the gap between the eye and the mind.

As we stood together in the gallery, examining his sculpture of the woman from a few inches away, he pointed just below her blanket. “There’s a purse in there,” he said. “See the purse?” It’s easy to miss the small fold of metal. “Initially that was sculpted really obviously, but over the years, you go, ‘No, it’s better if you don’t even see it or over a long time, you see it eventually—someone sees it one day.’”

The more you look at the figures in the Marks show—aside from the woman, there’s one of a nude young man and a self-portrait—the weirder they become. He typically starts with photographs of his subjects, which he uses to make a clay model, scans that into a computer, reshapes it, uses a machine to cut a foam model, covers that in clay, works that and then scans it again. Periodically he uses a plaster-like



material called Forton to make casts that serve as “lighthouses so I can see my way back if I go in one direction too far,” he said. “They go in and out of the computer.” It’s an elaborate process, but eventually a steel sculpture is cut. He and his assistants worked the surfaces of the three machine-cut sculptures in the show so that they have the soft look of clay in some places, the hard-edged technical perfection of the machine in others. Because of these variations, they seem to glide in and out of focus as you examine them. It’s art as slow food. “There is a time that it asks of you,” he said. “It’s not a special effect or a trick. It’s a richness of events on the surface of the sculpture.”

He spent three years working on the woman’s running shoes, finally alighting on a solution only after he and his assistants agonized over her hair. “It was just totally a mess,” he said. “As soon as you try to start sculpting that, you bring your hand to it and you bring style to it. So very quickly she started looking like Don King, when we’re doing it. You know, because you’re touching it and you’re handling it. So we’re doing it over and over and after many months, it would just never really resolve. One morning I came in and they had loaded it up with fresh clay, and I said, ‘Just don’t touch it, just leave it.’ Countless hours of work, only to realize they should just slap clay quickly on her head. He left the shoes similarly raw. “It’s like a quote,” he said. “There’s a passage from the ground to her mind, or from her mind to the ground. She’s in the dust. There’s something about the earth in her head, the earth on her shoes, the dirt, the mud.”

Those are the obsessive details that comprise the big ideas. “She can be almost a modern narrative, if you will,” he said. “Sleep as geology. She sleeps as a mountain. She’s homeless—the sculpture is

hard to get rid of. She’s here for good. I see her as very Egyptian actually, this idea of a *ka*, a soul. And there’s another beautiful thing that I see. We’re all equal in sleep. She sleeps, you know, the same as Donald Trump sleeps, you know what I mean? We’re all equal there.” Mr. Ray has called his works “meaning machines”—intensely strange, beautiful objects that we are gently invited to make sense of.

‘It came from this idea that if there was a ghost and he was to tie his shoe, he wouldn’t need to have a shoe.’

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“This one is just so sort of stark—just a naked guy,” Mr. Ray said, as he walked us a few yards over from the woman to *Young man* (2012). *Young man* is a standing figure. He appears to be in his mid-20s. He has shaggy hair and a beard, and his arms are at his sides. “He’s surly a little bit,” said Mr. Ray. “Not surly: he’s nice but a little aggressive, a little passive-aggressive.” The sculpture is based on a friend of Mr. Ray’s. “He doesn’t go to the gym,” he added. “He’s a boring guy, if you will. But I spent so much time trying to sculpt an aspect of him. Many of my sculptures take a long time to make. This is the first one where I think I *used time* to make it. I spent so much time trying to find his gestures, his self.”

In the self-portrait, Mr. Ray is again nude. The work is called *Shoe Tie* (2012), and it’s the newest sculpture in the show. He’s crouched down and appears to be tying his shoe,

only there’s no shoe because he is completely naked. It’s as though the artist is ducking out of sight, trying to avoid being seen by someone, but there’s nothing in the gallery to hide behind. “It came from this idea that if there was a ghost and he was to tie his shoe, he wouldn’t need to have a shoe,” he explained.

“Here’s a remnant of that, of the original idea,” he said, pointing to the figure. “See how the arm goes through the knee?”—in the sculpture, his left elbow glides just barely into the his lower thigh—“It’s transparent, but it’s solid steel. And that was more obvious before, and with time I’ve kept it, but made it less and less obvious. So he was originally like a ghost. He’s also bigger than life, a little bit.” He crouched alongside the sculpture and pretended to tie his shoe, in order to show that his own thumb was just a touch smaller than the sculpture’s.

“When you make a sculpture,” he explained, “you’re working in experiential space, so if I were to make you exactly your size, you would appear diminutive because when you talk you’re always moving or shaking or your hands are going here, so that vibration makes you bigger as one experiences you.”

It’s a bracing thought: we are smaller than we think. And just as we work to understand things like that about ourselves, Mr. Ray struggles to understand his sculptures over the time he spends with them. “My ideas about what I was going to be doing changed over the years,” he admitted at one point in our interview, examining *Young man*, and later, as he surveyed his exhibition, he said that he sees the three sculptures “as very modern, very much in the future, in a way. They kind of tumble into time. They’re solid. They’re off into time now.”

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MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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# The New York Times

## Art in Review



CHARLES RAY, MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

"Sleeping Woman" (2012), a sculpture by Charles Ray.

### Charles Ray

Matthew Marks Gallery  
522 West 22nd Street, Chelsea  
Through Jan. 12

Figurative sculpture is almost as old as the human body but also as new as whatever fresh materials, techniques and meanings artists can rally to their cause. The latest confirmation of this comes from Charles Ray's new forays into post-Conceptual realism, three works based on actual people (but 10 percent larger) and carved by computer-driven machines from solid stainless steel. Luminous rather than reflective, they form a beautifully spare arrangement in Matthew Marks's large, nearly empty gallery and produce a cat's cradle of ricocheting ideas. Their solidity is not immediately apparent, but they sure don't seem hollow. They are as much heirs to process-oriented Post-Minimal sculptors like Richard Serra and Barry Le Va as to postwar realists like George Segal and Duane Hanson.

They circle ancient themes and conventions. The standing male nude of "Young Man" echoes the pose of the "Kritios Boy," the early Classical Greek sculpture thought to be the first instance of contrapposto, but he is clearly a 21st-century nerd: unsteady on his feet, with sloping shoulders, incipient love handles and a slightly too-large head, partly a result of thick hair

and a full beard. Factor in his open mouth and slightly buck teeth and the figure becomes a study in unwitting insecurity. It implies social notions of manhood as a facade beyond the reach of most men.

"Sleeping Woman" is a clothed, heavyset black woman asleep on a bench. She is clearly homeless, making her very much of our era. But she is also implicitly regal and descended from various sculptures of sleeping Venuses, muses and goddesses, most interestingly the small, broad-hipped Neolithic figurine known as the Sleeping (or Dreaming) Goddess of Malta, as well as the compact, bodiless head that is Brancusi's "Sleeping Muse."

"Shoe Tie," a nude self-portrait of the artist crouching down to tie a nonexistent shoe, echoes the Greco-Roman "Boy With Thorn," but is also a modern-day jogger about to go for a run in the park (implied by the other two sculptures). This figure is as at ease in his body as "Young Man" is not, and as focused as "Sleeping Woman" is oblivious. His completely unfettered genitals may be something of a first for sculpture. Such an unusually pure if visceral expression of gravity — long an interest of Post-Minimal sculptors — might be seen as an attempt to compensate for the pendulous female breasts that have appeared in sculpture since forever. It's a start.

ROBERTA SMITH



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A R T O B S E R V E D

*LOS ANGELES: CHARLES RAY AT MATTHEW MARKS THROUGH JUNE 23, 2012*  
May 18th, 2012



*Charles Ray, Young Man (2012)*

New works by Charles Ray are currently on view at Matthew Marks Los Angeles through June 23. Two stainless steel figures inhabit the gallery space; *Sleeping Woman* is perched on a bench with her head resting on a blanket while across the gallery *Young Man* stands nude, his body aligned with the sleeping woman. Ray asserts a calculated tension of space with nuanced attention to perception that has been the essence of his sculptural practice for decades.

The incident between *Sleeping Woman* and *Young Man* could be a moment in time, arrested, and stripped of surrounding elements. All but two cold and weighty figures remain, a heavy question mark of physical and psychological presence in what is now an intimately shared place.

While both figures both appear relaxed in their respective statures, there is a discomfort that is created by the proximity between them, neither near nor far. Each figure's vulnerability is amplified by the presence of the viewer.



*Charles Ray, Sleeping Woman (2012)*

Since the 1980s Ray has created a body of work that varies greatly in style, materials, and subject that constantly disrupts the normal order of reality. His early sculptures were minimal, abstract, and at first glance offered a sense of geometry to assert that truth and lies look very much the same. Figurative works continue to investigate perception with heightened attention to the body in relation to sculpture and place. His sculpture *Family Romance* (1993) presents a nuclear family hand in hand; the mother, father, prepubescent son, and young daughter figures stand at the same height, despite their difference in age and development. Like *Sleeping Woman* and *Young Man*, an investigation of the bodily is at play, imbued with psychologically troubling implications.

—A. Wilkinson



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## Los Angeles Times

### Visual links to the past



Matthew Marks Gallery

**CHARLES RAY'S** "Sleeping Woman" (2012) is machined from solid steel, a chipping-away process that is a high-tech version of what sculptors of old did.

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BY SHARON MIZOTA

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Known for realistic sculptures of oversize children and incredibly detailed recreations of smashed cars and fallen trees, Charles Ray has made a career out of playing with our perceptions. Two new sculptures at Matthew Marks are no exception, evoking classical statuary and confounding assumptions about materials.

Each work depicts a life-size figure. One is a man whom Ray made a cast of about 10 years ago; the other is a woman he photographed sleeping on the street. The man is nude and stands with a slight contraposto, but his figure deviates

a bit from the classical ideal — softer, with love handles. The woman, curled awkwardly on a hard bench, can be seen as a modern-day version of the languid sleeping nymphs of antiquity, although she slumbers under far less ideal circumstances.

Both are rendered in super-shiny stainless steel, a uniform color that gives them the monochromatic stature of marble. They also have a floating, weightless quality, although perhaps I've been influenced by too much time with Jeff Koons' stainless steel inflatable bunny.

However, Ray's figures are not cast but machined

from solid pieces of steel. This means they are insanely heavy: The man weighs about 1,500 pounds; the woman, a whopping 6,000. It also means they were produced using a subtractive process, like that of ancient carvers, albeit with a 21st century twist. Instead of chipping away at stone with a chisel, Ray used a computer-controlled industrial machine to shave flakes off a metal block. To get the forms just right, the computer reads a digital model that Ray created from a clay sculpture, which was in turn based on an initial digital drawing.

This process — which

took five or six years to come to fruition — is key to the work's meaning. Of course art history reverberates through the sculptures whether or not we know how they were made, but by insisting on faithfulness to the concept, not just the look of classical sculpture, Ray creates a deeper connection across the ages.

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**artdaily.org**

The First Art Newspaper on the Net

Established in 1996

Wednesday, July 27, 2011

### **Getty Museum Puts Sculpture by Celebrated Los Angeles Artist Charles Ray on View**



LOS ANGELES, CA.- The J. Paul Getty Museum announced that a work by the acclaimed contemporary sculptor Charles Ray has been loaned to the Museum and has been placed on view beginning July 26 at the Getty Center, on the steps leading into the Museum's main entrance. *Boy with Frog*, an 8-foot-tall figure of a boy holding a frog, projects a sense of power and youthful inquisitiveness. The larger-than-life adolescent figure, painted white, is a 2008 fiberglass pattern that until recently has been a popular outdoor installation at François Pinault's Punta della Dogana museum in Venice, Italy. Last month Ray completed a final version of *Boy with Frog* that is identical to the one on view at the Getty Center but made of stainless steel and painted white.

The installation of the sculpture at the Getty was championed by James Wood, the former President and CEO of the J. Paul Getty Trust, who died unexpectedly a little more than a year ago. During his tenure as director of the Art Institute of Chicago, Wood became friends with Ray. The two of them often hiked together on the hillside behind the Getty Center. In the spring of 2010, Wood asked Ray if he would be interested in displaying the sculpture at the Getty when it returned from Italy. Ray enthusiastically embraced the idea. *Boy with Frog* has been compared to Donatello's bronze David holding the head of Goliath, a famous Renaissance sculpture of a youthful male nude, dated to about 1440, which is in the Bargello museum in Florence.

It also calls to mind the *Apollo Sauroktonos*, an ancient Roman sculpture at the Musée du Louvre in Paris of a nude adolescent reaching out his arm to catch a lizard climbing a tree; and, the *Spinario*, a bronze statue at the Palazzo dei Conservatori, Musei Capitolini, of a seated Roman boy plucking a thorn from the sole of his foot.

"Getty Museum Puts Sculpture by Celebrated Los Angeles Artist Charles Ray on View." *Artdaily.org*, July 27, 2011.



“We feel this piece works beautifully at the Getty. It was something that we wanted to do when Jim was alive, and now, sadly, with his death, it has become something that has a more poignant significance for us,” explains Antonia Boström, the Senior Curator of Sculpture and Decorative Arts at the Getty Museum, who is overseeing the project. “The whole project has become a memorial as the installation falls a little over a year after Jim died.”

Ray said that Wood often visited his airy Venice, California, studio while the Boy with Frog model was being constructed and prepared for its journey to Venice, Italy. “He understood the spirit of the sculpture,” Ray said. “I’m really happy it is going to be up at the Getty because its nice to show it in the city where it was made.” Boy with Frog shares the Museum steps with Aristide Maillol’s *Air*, one of more than two dozen modern and contemporary outdoor sculptures donated to the museum by the late film producer Ray Stark and his wife, Fran. It will be on view until January 2012.

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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# PURPLE

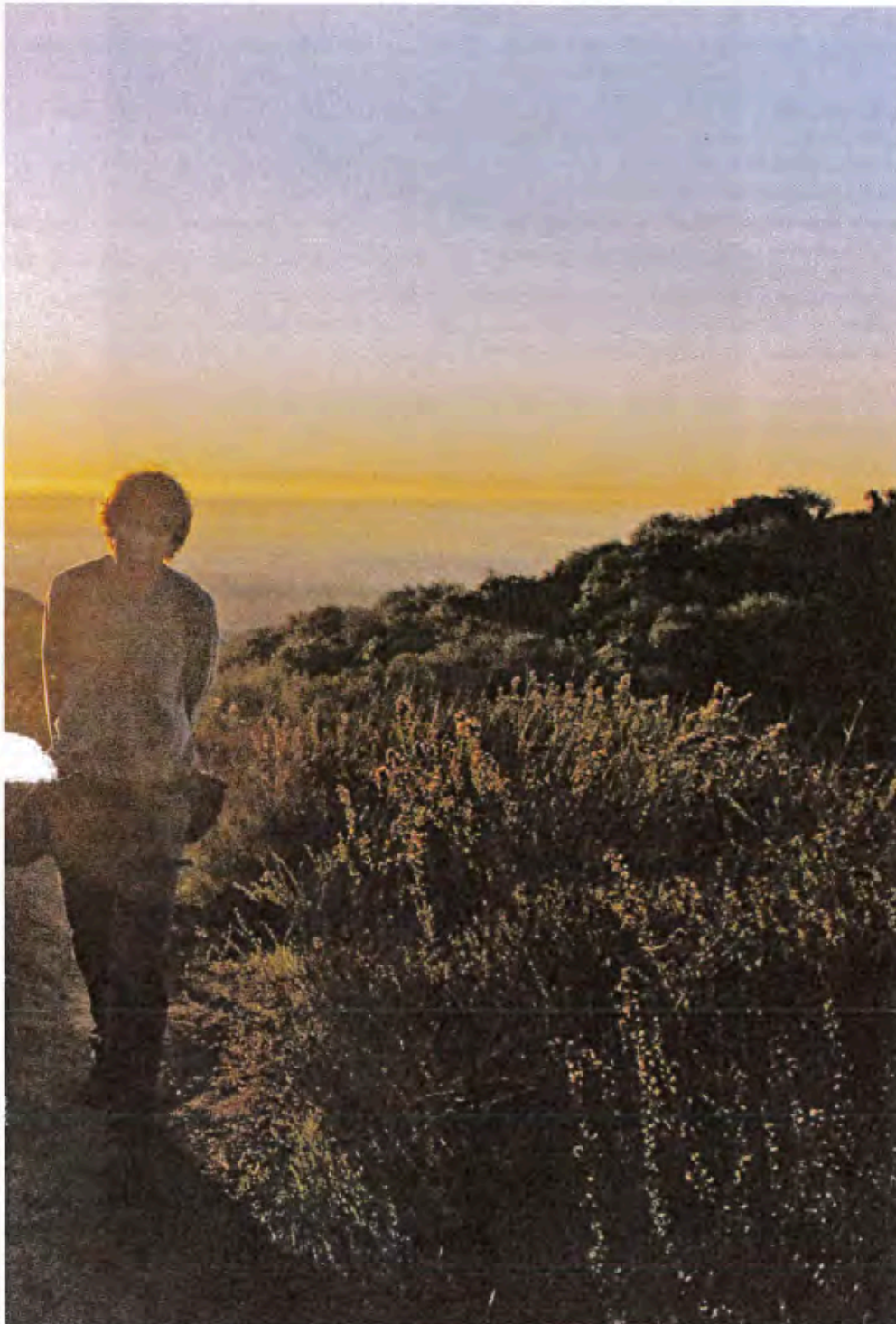
*For three decades now **CHARLES RAY** has been considered one of the foremost American sculptors. His works question empirical truths, while occupying physical and conceptual space. 7 1/2 Ton Cube, a 91-centimeter white cube of solid steel, looks easily portable but it actually measures the weight of gravity; Firetruck, a toy truck the size of a real one, posits a child's memory against reality; Unpainted Sculpture, a fiberglass copy of a wrecked car in which a person died is like a modern-day Pieta; Log, the 10-meter-long hollow trunk Ray cut up and cast in fiberglass, and then sent off to be carved in Japanese cypress by master woodcarver Yuboku Mukoyoshi, is hyperrealistic. Ray's pieces are magisterial in their making, and unforgettable as **sculptural gestures**. This is a rare interview with an artist whose energies are drawn so profoundly from the natural world and human history.*

**interview and portrait by ALEX ISRAEL**

Artwork images courtesy of the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery, New York







It's 5:45 A.M. At Charles Ray's request, I'm making my way toward the cabin at the entrance of Temescal Canyon Park. Moments later Charley — as he prefers to be called — arrives in his silver Prius. He takes me to the beginning of the looping five-mile trail he climbs every morning. The trail begins in the woods and it's still moonlit this early in the day. Feelings of wonder and fear lie at every turn. As we work our way uphill our eyes adjust as night slowly turns to day. The gold California light leaks over the mountaintops and silences

the hooting owls. The expansive view reveals Los Angeles and the Pacific Ocean.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Tell me about your connection to nature.*

CHARLES RAY — It's wonderful to be here early in the morning. We couldn't do this hike just anywhere, because in most other places it gets too cold. We're on the edge of a system of parks called The Big Wild. It's quite amazing. We're in the middle of LA and we can hear owls. Two months ago a mountain

lion wandered into the Pacific Palisades in the middle of the night. A bobcat came into my yard last year. The birds, the whales at sea, seeing the sunrise on the ocean — it's all so expansive. I'm not a nature nut. It's not my life, but this beats a home gym. I hike the same trail loop day after day. We could talk about it as being exercise, but there are other aspects of the hike: the subtlety of the different smells, and the slow temporal quality of the seasons changing in Southern California. There's a moment in April when this whole place is in



flowers. The wildflowers are out for about two weeks and then in the summer it's all brown. The trail connects me to my childhood. Down here in the woods, it's like being a kid. It's scary in the dark — the different sounds of the owls, the footfalls of the animals in the brush, and the shadows. Then, as you climb, you become aware of the dawn, the city, and the universe.

ALEX ISRAEL — *You've spoken about certain works you've made that came out of your childhood experiences, like Boy [1992], referring to a time you had to wear a sailor suit, or Firetruck [1993], when you brought a toy firemen's truck to a party and felt embarrassed about being too old to be playing with a toy truck. Does much of your work come from specific memories or experiences?*

CHARLES RAY — A lot does, I think. It doesn't happen in a moment where I'm thinking about *this* story or *that* party. The work is suddenly conceived, but those things come out later, as I'm working on, or thinking about, the piece.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Are your daily hikes a way to re-experience childhood?*

CHARLES RAY — No, not intentionally. But inevitably I do just that, because the experience is like childhood — like the fear of being eaten up by animals in the dark woods.

ALEX ISRAEL — *You're scaring me!*

CHARLES RAY — It could actually happen higher up because it's further from the road. But that childhood-like experience of fear, the intensity of a relationship to the woods, is stronger down here in the dark. It makes no sense, but as you climb everything becomes more apollonian. Your mind drifts out of the shadows and the light trickles in from behind the mountains, and you start seeing the city, the moon going down, and the ocean.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Your drawings of flowers have a childlike quality.*

CHARLES RAY — Doing them, and responding to my mistakes — the aesthetic process of *working directly* — is what happens with the flower drawings. They're something I do at home at night, and if I make a mistake I simply do something to correct it. If I fall asleep and my hand goes whoosh, the next day I have to fix it. It sounds superficial, and maybe it is, but for me it's about the activity of doing them. There's a kind of immediacy that I experienced when I was a kid, sliding things around, thinking about them.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Do you make an effort to observe kids to reconnect with these ideas?*

CHARLES RAY — No. I wouldn't want to be young again, not for anything. There's a real beauty in not reliving things, but to



*Firetruck*, 1993, painted aluminum, fiberglass, and plexiglass, 12 x 8 x 46 1/2 feet,  
photo by Ari Mintz



loop back through childhood, and have your eyes momentarily opened as they were in childhood.

ALEX ISRAEL — *You make this bike every day, and I've gathered from our exchanges that your days follow a kind of pattern when the bike is over: you visit the studio, go sailing, visit your fabricator's workshop, or teach, and then you spend time with your wife, Sylvia. Has it always been a kind of routine?*

CHARLES RAY — I think so.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Is this symptomatic of how you were raised, of attending a military academy high school?*

CHARLES RAY — Yeah, I'm very disciplined. Even if I'm late, I can't leave the house without making the bed.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Where did you study art?*

CHARLES RAY — I went to The University of Iowa. I studied sculpture primarily.

ALEX ISRAEL — *You studied with the British sculptor Anthony Caro. Did his work impact your own?*

CHARLES RAY — I was in the right place at the right time, and I became the artist I am because of it. The experience was a perfect fit for me — it made some sort of beautiful sense. I could express myself intellectually through this particular activity. At that moment in time I totally understood it and pulled it into myself. I don't see a break from Caro's in my work — it's as if I just got over that way of making sculpture and moved further. My work just developed from that.

ALEX ISRAEL — *There's a Caro sculpture on the cover of your retrospective catalogue, and again on the cover of a catalogue for a group exhibition you curated in 2006.*

CHARLES RAY — That work, Caro's *Early One Morning*, is very interesting to experience in real life — what happens when you walk around it. It's from 1962 and it's very prophetic. It was very much born out of a moment in time, and it's very alive. It accords space as you walk around it: those 30 feet just compress.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Does this occur because from one angle it's entirely foreshortened?*

CHARLES RAY — Yes, it's foreshortened because of its easel component, but the sensation occurs for many different reasons. It's not the sculpture that's breathing — the whole room is compressing and expanding. Here's a good example of my relationship to Caro: *The Big Lady, Fall '91*. It works like an accordion too, but in a different way. I'm not interested in *The Big Lady* as an image, as a big Barbie doll, and that's why it's still such

a difficult work to show. She really has to look like a mannequin in a department store, but it's seemingly impossible to explain that to people, including the collector who owns the piece. You need a window dresser or a display expert to deal with the piece every three or four days, to fix the hair, straighten everything up, get the wrinkles out of the clothes, and clean it all up. She gets all disheveled. It has to be perfect. It's because the work is hallucinatory. It's like the burning bush. You walk up to it and you shrink — or it grows. That kind of spatial fluidity is what happens with it. I didn't necessarily start off thinking, "How do I make a contemporary *Early One Morning*?" It doesn't work that way. These things are simply carried around in me, through my artwork, and from being in the studio and working. They kind of stream out intuitively, arriving in the present. I'm constantly editing. *The Big Lady* was originally a male figure with a big hand. These things edited themselves out, and sort of tumbled and rolled along, like Caro's eyeballs: moving around the studio floor until they locked together aesthetically.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Is it about searching for the moment when everything comes together, trial after trial?*

CHARLES RAY — Yes. I'm trying to make a piece. I'm trying to end up somewhere. But trial after trial implies being in a lab, like trying to come up with a new pill. For me, the activity that's going on has its own beauty. It becomes a way of life, rolling along with this thing.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Knowing when to stop must be difficult.*

CHARLES RAY — Stopping can be both difficult and a relief. That moment of stopping — what constitutes a finished piece — that has really changed for me over the years. Maybe *The Big Lady* was in my head when it stopped. "Okay, I'll try it this way and commit and move forward, hire a mannequin sculptress, go shopping for the clothes, and find a tailor to make them."

ALEX ISRAEL — *I read about how you showed The Big Lady, Fall '91 in Heller Skelter; the show curated by Paul Schimmel at LA MOCA in 1992. Viewers saw it in the distance, and then approached it, experiencing this accordion-like scale-shift as they got closer to it.*

CHARLES RAY — That was the only time it was shown correctly. Since then, every time it's been shown you end up right on top of it. You have this experience solely of *The Big Lady*, not of the abstractness of the thing moving, shifting in space.

ALEX ISRAEL — *How much space does it need?*

CHARLES RAY — That's something I used to think I could tell people. But I can't, because it's about the eye. It's about sensitivity to the space. It's about the quality of how the thing gets embedded in the space.

ALEX ISRAEL — *You've lived, worked, and taught in Los Angeles for 30 years. Do you feel a relationship with the other LA artists?*

CHARLES RAY — Maybe in aspects of my work I see a tie-in, but I also see things going another way. In a certain sense, I've tried to get people to stop making that connection, because it isn't what drives me forward. I guess any artist would say something like that.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Do you find inspiration here in the city?*

CHARLES RAY — Yeah, but I find it more generally in America.

ALEX ISRAEL — *What is it specifically about America that inspires you?*

CHARLES RAY — When I say America, I guess I mean the West. LA is American and suburban and it has the ocean. I'm drawn to water.

ALEX ISRAEL — *You seem to take full advantage of being in LA, in terms of your leisure activity.*

CHARLES RAY — LA has been a great place to lose myself and get away. I've sailed almost every day for the last ten years.

**How I live,  
taking advantage of  
being outdoors,  
getting up early,  
going to bed early,  
thinking about things,  
the openness of space  
— all those things  
have influenced my work.  
So yes, one could tie that to LA.  
I'm just not so much tied  
to the scene.**

**I see myself more as a sculptor  
than as an LA artist.** I've made sculpture in Europe and I find it more difficult, because of language issues, and issues of just getting around and getting things I need. I'm really comfortable in LA, because I live here and I know where to go and how to find things. In terms of fabrication it's really helpful to be here, so close to my fabricators, and to work one-on-one, rather than by telephone.

ALEX ISRAEL — *You've also said that the real medium of your work is space.*

CHARLES RAY — I meant space in a very general way — as the sculptor's primary tool. For instance, the mannequins came out of being in a lot of shopping malls and thinking about contemporary figuration via the mannequin. I could've been in New Jersey or





*Untitled*, 2003, ink on paper, 26 x 40 inches, photography courtesy of Art Institute of Chicago

Chicago. The real driving force of my work is formal constructivism.

ALEX ISRAEL — *In terms of American popular culture, what do you look off? Do you watch television?*

CHARLES RAY — No.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Do you go to the movies?*

CHARLES RAY — Not very much. I fall asleep in them.

ALEX ISRAEL — *What about music?*

CHARLES RAY — My wife Sylvia listens. I've never listened to music. I listen to more now because of Sylvia's interest in it.

ALEX ISRAEL — *What have you been reading lately?*

CHARLES RAY — A lot about Native Americans — the Comanche, in particular — America's western expansion, the Comanche Barrier, and the Great Plains.

ALEX ISRAEL — *What sparked your interest?*

CHARLES RAY — A book called *Comanche Moon*,

which is about the last Comanche chief, whose name I can't pronounce. It's a long beautiful Indian name. His brother's name was Peanuts. Take Crazy Horse. He was Sioux, but the Sioux hated the word Sioux. They preferred the many other names of their sub-tribes, such as the Lakota. The man we now know as Crazy Horse — who fought at Little Big Horn when he was 26 or 27 — got his name from his father, who was a highly respected chief of the Lakota. He gave his son his own name, Crazy Horse, and took on the name Worm for himself.

ALEX ISRAEL — *That's humbling.*

CHARLES RAY — Well, we have one idea of a worm and maybe they had another. I thought that was quite interesting.

ALEX ISRAEL — *How has your interest in Native American culture developed?*

CHARLES RAY — I wish I could articulate it. It feels connected to things I'm thinking about. It's fun to read older historians and compare their views to how we look at things now.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Are you researching for work or just reading for pleasure?*

CHARLES RAY — Research and pleasure are the same thing for me.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Hiking this loop has got me thinking about looping, and about the related phenomenon of spinning in your work, like Spinning Spot (1987), Rotating Circle (1988), and Revolution Counter-Revolution (1990). Frances Stark, the artist who stars in your work, Fashions (1996), is consistently spinning in the film. Then there's the items positioned on the table in Tabletop (1988). Even the boy in The New Beetle (2006) seems to be frozen mid-spin. I'm curious to know why spinning is such a recurring theme in your work?*

CHARLES RAY — Spinning is like energy that disappears. It might have something to do with simple physics. When I made the rotating floor and wall pieces I was reading a lot about physics.

ALEX ISRAEL — *But when you spin, physically, it makes you sick. Is that a related effect?*

CHARLES RAY — You're thinking about





the whirligig or carnival aspect of spinning. Spinning is hypnotic. It grabs your attention. Even when you're little you like to look at rotation. Kids love tornadoes and whirlpools. When you're a kid you can stare at a fan forever.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Or at a mobile spinning above a crib.*

CHARLES RAY — Mobiles are very hypnotic. It's wonderful to think that Alexander Calder invented the mobile. He didn't just use it — he *invented* it! That's an achievement. Such a simple thing. People have been hanging things from hooks since the beginning of time. When I was doing the discs people talked about them as a commodity fetish: taking a phenomenon and solidifying it.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Yes, the phenomenon of spinning.*

CHARLES RAY — Philosophers have long thought about the nature of things, beginning with Plato's cave. Kitchen philosophers talk about salt and pepper shakers. The whipped cream in your glass is talked about in chaos

theory. Spinning has an authority that really holds you.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Like if you walk into a room and someone is spinning, you're going to look at that person.*

CHARLES RAY — Or at an object turning. Sometimes I think about how, when people meet, they can say one thing while thinking another. We can't access each other's minds — and some people are terrifying. Spinning was also about that for me: it was mental. That's why *Rotating Circle* took the form of a disc set at the height of my head — it became more of a portrait. I guess one way to look at it is as an equivalent to mental intensity that is felt but can't always be let out.

ALEX ISRAEL — *So spinning is an abstract way of signifying intense mental activity.*

CHARLES RAY — Yeah, but that sounds wrong, doesn't it?

ALEX ISRAEL — *You don't like it when things are translated into quips or phrases, do you?*

CHARLES RAY — I really don't. That's why I make sculptures. I express myself through the sculptures — and I talk about them, as well. I'm not against talking about them. Maybe it's like a pre-literate's fear of names. Like Ishi, which means *man* [the last survivor of the Yana group of California Native Americans]. He never told his true name, his Indian name, to white people.

ALEX ISRAEL — *How are you thinking about your recent figurative sculptures?*

CHARLES RAY — In my mind, the new figurative work I've been making is relational. If you see the figure as a manifold of sculptural events unfolding, you can see the relationship to Anthony Caro.

ALEX ISRAEL — *How are these sculptural events to be understood?*

CHARLES RAY — In a sculptural sense — in a way of thinking unique to sculpture. The sculptural sense is what makes a pure idea *sci here*. What's often lost to us is the voice quality of a sculpture. We're lost



to the urge to celebrate, whatever that is. It's why the sculpture of a young man, a Kouros from the fifth century B.C. in Greece, can still work today. A lot of contemporary artwork has such qualities. That's what makes them powerful: the sculptural sense. I don't mean that it works because it's pretty. I mean that it's still a machine producing meaning: a meaning machine. I want to make a meaning machine, and the only way I can do that — since I can't do it through writing or talking or giving lectures — is sculpturally. I see the potential for sculptures. Sometimes I use pre-existing meanings. Things are of their time. But as a sculptor, I ask myself things like, does *Oh! Charley, Charley, Charley...* [1992] depend too much on...

ALEX ISRAEL — *Virtual time?*

CHARLES RAY — Yes, on virtual reality, on kinky sex. Or is something else going on in it sculpturally that creates another meaning? That's actually what I'm trying to say, and what I'm after.

ALEX ISRAEL — *It's like you're trying to create a machine.*

CHARLES RAY — One that I can potentially create, sculpturally. Sculptures are like people, in that you see them more fully over time. Some of the things that you knew at the beginning, that worked, may end up not being important in the end. Or the things that you liked, which oftentimes are trite, may drive you away later. It's all very tricky. But the more one becomes aware of one's sculptural vocabulary, the more evident the danger of losing the urgency of one's direction becomes. I'm not trying to deny the subject, because the subject is important. Do you think a subject can have urgency?

ALEX ISRAEL — *I think a subject has the potential to be urgent. But it's difficult to equate subject with urgency. Firemen's trucks won't always be urgent, because maybe there won't be firemen's trucks in 150 years.*

CHARLES RAY — I'm sure that there won't be. But one doesn't make art for the future. I don't, anyway. Meaning is generated in the present.

ALEX ISRAEL — *But like you said, the Kouros keeps generating meaning thousands of years later. Don't you hope that your work will, too?*

CHARLES RAY — Yes, but art isn't about immortality or the future. The Kouros was generating the same meaning when it was made. It was just made so well.

ALEX ISRAEL — *But you suggested that when it was made it had a valid meaning, which may have had something to do with its subject matter, a young male.*

CHARLES RAY — Well, maybe there won't be dogs made of balloons in a hundred years, either, but the beauty of Jeff Koons' *Balloon Dog* is that you could take a sledgehammer to one leg, crack it, ding it up, and it would still work — the thing is so sculptural,

ALEX ISRAEL — *As an abstract object?*

CHARLES RAY — Yeah, but there's a soul in its form.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Do you think a naked figure can be an urgent form?*

CHARLES RAY — In itself, no. For me, starting from the figure, clothed or naked, just feels very, I won't say urgent, but that I like it at the moment because it's really basic. I don't have to go too far to find a form to start working from. For me, it's not ultimately about revealing the naked figure or some feeling about it. You asked me what I meant by events unfolding upon the figure. Well, *Boy with Frog* [2009], for example, has within it three forms of representation.

ALEX ISRAEL — *I haven't seen it in person. Do you mean the way the form is rendered? Some parts being smoothed out or stylized, and other parts being highly detailed?*

CHARLES RAY — Yeah, there are three forms of representation used on the sculpture: a natural effect, a much more stylized effect, and a super-realistic effect, which isn't necessarily naturalistic. How those effects interact and intersect is one aspect of the work. Then it's how you move through the sculpture and process it. It's not just an image.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Are you saying it's about the experience of letting your eyes roll from one form of representation to the next?*

CHARLES RAY — How long does it take your eye to get from a toe to the frog? I'm sure a lot of people see it solely as an image of a boy and a frog, and then they try to kiss the frog. You can see it different ways, but there is a strong image there.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Very strong. That's what's so interesting. But seeing the piece in person is completely different from seeing it on the Internet or in books.*

CHARLES RAY — The meaning isn't just a boy with a frog. Anyone could have done that. You could ask someone to make it.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Why is it white?*

CHARLES RAY — That's a really good question. I knew that the paint would have to be fairly consistent so that the actual relationships I talked about before could come out, and they come out strongest in white. When I see a classical Greek sculpture that was once

painted, I always imagine a restorer thinking about what color he should use to repaint it — and then just leaving it alone.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Would you say that white sculptures have a timeless quality?*

CHARLES RAY — That's one reason I'm not into white. Maybe a better way to put it is that I didn't know how to paint it. The intersection with classical sculpture — I don't know if that's problematic for me or not.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Why do you say that Boy with Frog has within it three forms of representation?*

CHARLES RAY — **Look at his face — it's out of focus.**

**It looks like an old weathered sculpture.**

**The feet and certain other aspects are very natural looking.**

**The frog is hyper-real.**

**And there are really specific sculptural reasons for all of those choices.**

**That's where my energy lies, not in the simplistic image of a boy with a frog.**

ALEX ISRAEL — *Why include the frog, then?*

CHARLES RAY — François Pinault commissioned the work three weeks before I found out that I had to have an operation on my heart. Frogs are the first animal kids cut open and look inside in science class. It also comes from chapter nineteen of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. It's such a beautiful passage. Huck and Jim are on the river one night, looking up at the stars. Twain describes the river and the spatial quality around them. Jim and Huck are discussing whether the stars were made or just were. Huck thinks they just were. Jim says they were made. Huck thinks about it and says something like, "I once saw a frog laying eggs, so I reckon they could've been made." Have you ever seen a frog laying eggs? It's like a billion eggs coming out the back of it.

ALEX ISRAEL — *They leave a trail?*

CHARLES RAY — Yeah, they leave a trail that looks like the Milky Way. It's really beautiful. And the boy holding the frog in my sculpture is looking at the other. A frog is the first thing that I ever blew up when I was an adolescent.

ALEX ISRAEL — *The first thing you ever blew up?*

CHARLES RAY — Yeah, killed.

ALEX ISRAEL — *You killed a frog?*

CHARLES RAY — Sure. It's your other. It's something kids pick up. The boy in the sculpture is coming to grips with this



thing that isn't him. Which is the struggle: to actually stop and look at things that aren't you. It's really hard.

ALEX ISRAEL — *But he's also looking at something that is him, because, as you said, a frog is one of the first things you cut open. By doing that you relate it to your body, your own biology to that of the frog.*

CHARLES RAY — Yeah, that's a good point.

ALEX ISRAEL — *But, is all this kind of beside the point of a sculpture?*

CHARLES RAY — No, not at all. But that's when I sound like I'm contradicting myself.

ALEX ISRAEL — *So they're just two things working in tandem, the sculptural and the imagistic?*

CHARLES RAY — In the end, I can't separate them. Honestly, how can they be separated? I wait, and after time passes I hope the sculpture still does something, like you said about the firemen's truck going away.

ALEX ISRAEL — *When frogs are extinct.*

CHARLES RAY — I hope that someday, when there's no more *Huckleberry Finn*, and when frogs are extinct, and when François Pinault is long gone, there will also be no more biology classes, and that the thing, *Boy with Frog*, will somehow still work.

END



## sculpture

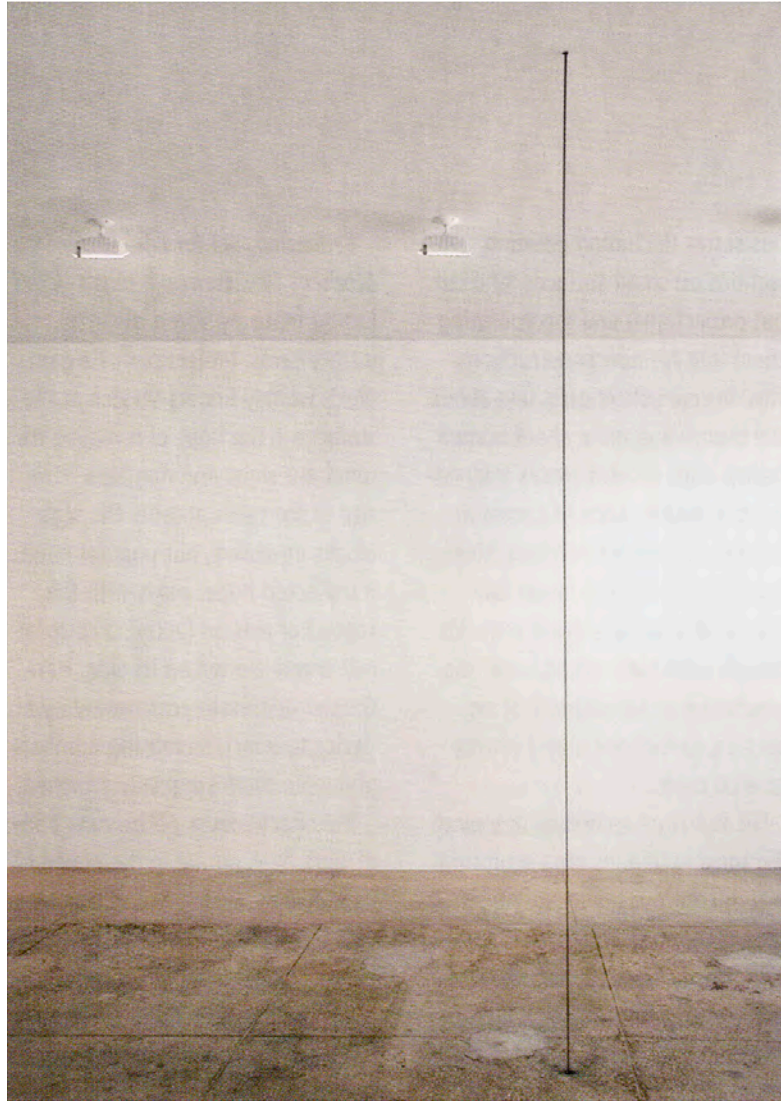
### NEW YORK

#### Charles Ray

#### Matthew Marks

Charles Ray's wizardry with boundary-breaking was conspicuous in this low-tech but high-interest exhibition. Three works from a little more than 20 years ago defied ceiling, floor, and wall, showing the viewer how simple interventions can result in sculptures of startling intelligence and rough beauty. In each piece, Ray conceals a motor or pump that causes the sculpture to do what it does, but his instruments, while concealed, feel rudimentary. Ray is a thoroughly classical postmodern sculptor, if such a characterization makes sense. He creates one-off pieces that range widely without necessarily relating closely to each other—for example, there are the pictures of him wrapped around a branch in a tree, which contrast with the Minimalist *Ink Box* (1986), a black steel cube filled to the brim with black ink (the latter is a cousin of *Ink Line* [1987], one of the three works in the show).

Much of the pleasure of this exhibition derived from speculation about how the sculptures were devised. Press materials confirm that machinery of a basic sort is involved, but still, we don't know *how* each sculpture was built, and so a mystery attaches itself to the works. *Ink Line* is a marvelous trick of the eye, consisting of a thin column of ink

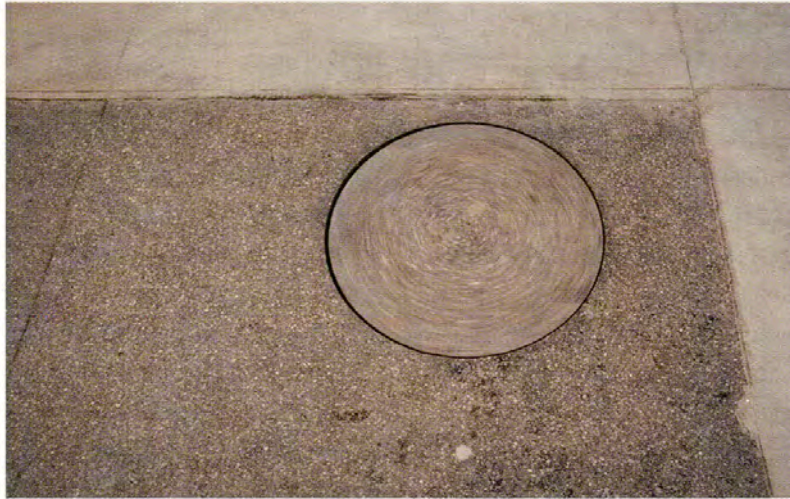


Charles Ray, *Ink Line*, 1987. Ink, electric motor, pump, and plastic, dimensions variable.

running from ceiling to wall. Using an electric motor and pump, Ray has created a compelling illusion whose subtle changes document movement—from a few feet away, the line feels solid and static, but up close one notices small aberrations on the surface, which demonstrate that the ink is, in fact, mov-

ing. Just as the viewer must focus sharply on the ink surface of *Ink Box* in order to know that the top of the cube is liquid and not solid, so he or she must closely investigate the line of ink to determine that it is not *Wire* (1988), while not so dramatic, are also prepossessing. In *Spinning Spot*, a section of the floor, a circle





Charles Ray, *Spinning Spot*, 1987. Aluminum, electric motor, and electric components, 24 in.

24 inches in diameter, rotates at 33 rpm. Bemused at first, viewers wonder about its reference as well as its construction: Does the spinning spot refer to music LPs, which were ubiquitous at the time? Whatever its meaning, *Spinning Spot* exists as a compelling visual conundrum in which a piece of the floor rotates at a consistent speed. The gee-whiz factor, present in all three sculptures, is particularly strong here. *Moving Wire* (1988) also has a seemingly simple appearance; it is

composed of a single strand of wire 8.5 feet in length. Both ends come out of the wall some 14 inches apart from each other. Gradually the wire moves in and out of the wall—as one end lengthens and pulls out toward the viewer, the other end diminishes and moves back into the wall. *Moving Wire*, like its two companions, may seem conceptually simple; however, all three pieces develop a singular sleight of hand and prove compelling as art.

—Jonathan Goodman

THE  
NEW YORKER

## NO OFFENSE

*The Whitney Biennial.*

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

For me, the most arresting work in the Whitney Biennial is, not for the first time, by Charles Ray. The California creator of aesthetically potent oddities rattled the 1989 Biennial with a disk-shaped section of wall that inconspicuously rotated at fantastic speed; the 1993 Biennial, with a veristic sculpture of a naked family of four, all the size of its young

nilly from solid centers, but meticulously crafted, with apparent overlaps that, in unforgiving ink, are exactly managed. Their ostensible spontaneity is a calculated illusion, as is an impression of earnest innocence that suggests outsider art. Seemingly numb to both nature and artifice, they might be by someone who had heard of flowers but never seen one,

choices to the election of Barack Obama. Their catalogue essay adduces an abatement of social discontent under the new Administration: "The presence of a reassuring and inspiring political figure allowed people to focus on their intimate concerns again. Traditional forms of protest and resistance were no longer needed." People whose intimate concerns were already of intimate concern to them, or who hadn't deemed themselves political resisters, are not addressed. To Bonami and Carrion-Murayari, "it feels as though artists all across the United States are reaffirming the importance of the individual gesture in order to produce a collective change." That wouldn't seem to rule out much except foursquare "protest art," which, honestly, wasn't all that rife in the George W. Bush years, an era that will be bookmarked in art history by a prevalence of pricey glitz. (Socially critical art last peaked during the Clintonian nineties, heralded by the identity-political Biennial of 1993, at which the artist Daniel Joseph Martinez dispensed buttons that read, "I can't imagine ever wanting to be white.") As it turns out, the valuing of "individual gesture" imposes a criterion of its own: moody bemusement, more or less. Tentativeness is all the rage.

Amid the inevitable video installations, there is more painting at the Biennial than there has been for many years. Much of it is abstract and restrained to a fault, tending to monochrome and textural effects, shy of being unduly seductive. Tiny pictures of rural buildings, done with a minimum of strikingly deft strokes by Maureen Gallace, stand out pleasurably in the context. So do Expressionistic whimsies by George Condo, Verne Dawson, Robert Williams, and Aurel Schmidt, in my favorite of the show's rooms, which also features a wonderful sculpture by Huma Bhabha: vestigial mask faces in gouged and blackened Styrofoam and clay-slathered wire mesh atop a charcoal-graffitied plywood box,



Charles Ray's "Untitled" (2006).

son, and a life-size plastic toy fire engine, parked out on Madison Avenue; and the 1995 edition, with a wooden, carved and painted, full-length self-portrait in a clear-glass bottle. (The self-portrait reappears this year in a chewy selection, on the museum's fifth floor, of artists who have starred in Biennials—or, for an interim spell of thirty-five years, Annals—since the exhibition's inception, in 1932. There we learn that Edward Hopper figured in twenty-six shows, Willem de Kooning in sixteen, and Andy Warhol, amazing to say, in only two.) This time, Ray's outstanding impertinence is a roomful of fifteen large drawings of flowers in multicolored inks. The blooms are schematic exaggerations, with wire-thin stems and snaking petals. Singly or in gardenlike profusion, they are gawkily styled, with the petals exploding willy-

and had heard of art but hadn't encountered it, either. As usual with Ray, a gulf yawns between speculating about what he thinks he's doing and staring, blankly, at what he has done. The experience induces a buzzing, somehow salutary state of mind.

Ray is a gadfly conscience of a culture given to the myth that artists are free to do whatever they like. The show surrounding his dramatically uncalled-for flowers argues to the contrary. Artists ambitious to be noticed who don't reflect the manias of the moment seldom qualify for exhibitions like the Biennial. That's no scandal. Scanning the Zeitgeist, though it tends to foster an indulgence of timely mediocrities, is a public service of such shows. The present Biennial's curators, Francesco Bonami and Gary Carrion-Murayari, relate their



with metal and wooden detritus and scattered dirt. Schmidt's large drawing—in materials including, it says, beer and blood—depicts a Minotaur composed mostly of cigarette butts and consumer goods, including condoms. The strident unwholesomeness proves oddly refreshing in the show's ambience of fretful compunctions. It extends to a vast wall piece in raw jute and hemp, ripped and sewn and clotted with clay and paint, by Piotr Ukiński: lobby art for a condemned office tower, perhaps. Less audacious, beyond a first impression, is a work by the much publicized artists' group the Bruce High Quality Foundation, titled "We Like America and America Likes Us," which involves a nineteen-sixties Cadillac hearse crudely painted white and given a flashing roof light, to evoke an ambulance. A filmic montage of national clichés (the space program, Jackson Pollock, Madonna) is rear-projected onto the cracked windshield. A silky female voice recites an interminable prose poem that speaks of America in terms befitting dysfunctional families and romantic imbroglios. The cumulative effect is punishingly fey. If the Bruces signal Bonami and Carrion-Murayari's incipient "collective change," we can plan on going nowhere.

The atmosphere of irresolution favors some respected but little celebrated veterans. A big space is given to a sculpture by Robert Grosvenor, a member of the minimalist generation whose relatively complex, allusive work has never snuggled into any stylistic category. A standing grille of aluminum rods bent into incomplete circles faces a flat-topped arch of red-flocked fibreglass. The shapes of the rods are echoed by a regular pattern of lumps in the arch. Sort of theatrical and altogether abstruse, the piece seems an apt symbol for a time of befuddled striving in art and, for that matter, most other things. Likewise rescued from semi-obscurity is the studio-setup photographer James Casebere, a sometime associate of the late-nineteen-seventies Pictures school, whose more renowned alumni include Cindy Sherman and Richard Prince. Large color photographs render tabletop models of suburban subdivisions—in Dutchess County, New York, we are assured—from low-flying-airplane points of view. Atmospheric, pretty pastel tones bespeak an impulse toward verisimilitude that

deliberately falls short of deception. The houses are cardboard, plainly. Casebere's neighborhood-scapes, like successful paintings, are interesting to the precise extent of our interest in them. They entertain and reward reveries. What they're about is anyone's call. I like them.

Video and film works in the show are notably boring, on the whole—dancers rehearsing voguing moves, a car being equipped with sculptural appendages, and other ho-hum goings on. But, mercifully, most are either short or obvious enough not to use up your day with sitting them out. The most prepossessing is an energetic performance by Marianne Vitale, who, from a wall-hung monitor, harangues "patrons" with colorfully worded, dominatrix-style insults and commands. The provoked notion of contemporary art as an arena of sadomasochism is just cogent enough to chill, a trifle. But gradually you may pick up on how much fun Vitale is having being a mean girl—multiple quick cuts hint at omitted moments when she cracked herself up. Live performances by several artists, which I have not seen, are scheduled for the run of the show—appropriately, given a recent efflorescence of inventive theatrics in small theatres, dance spaces, clubs, and, sometimes, galleries.

Apart from a few works, such as those by Bhabha and Ukiński, and a couple of mutedly horrific sets of photographs—by Stephanie Sinclair, picturing Afghan women who had set themselves afire, and by Nina Berman, of a disfigured Iraq War veteran—this Biennial seems intent not only on not offending aesthetic appetite but practically on sedating it. The tone may be purposeful, like someone whispering to find out if you are paying attention. That would befit the curators' thesis of a strategic withdrawal among today's artists. Maybe we will have deserved more to look at when 2012 rolls around, and Charles Ray won't be tasked, again, with jolting us awake. ♦

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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## NEW YORK

**Dude, You've Gotta See This**  
Charles Ray's minimalist  
installations are as mind-blowing as  
any hallucinogen.

BY JERRY SALTZ



*In Ray's Ink Line, now at  
Matthew Marks, black fluid flows  
from ceiling to floor.*

**T**HE NEW YORK TIMES art critic Ken Johnson is writing a book saying that “psychedelic drugs and psychedelic culture have had a deeper, less obvious influence on the art of the past 60 years than has generally been acknowledged.” Johnson doesn’t mean that the intermingling of art and drugs is new; they’ve probably been canoodling as long as both have been around. And his idea isn’t about artists who actually use drugs. Sober-looking work is made by stoners and addled-looking art is made by teetotalers. Van Eyck’s hyperreal paintings are among the most hallucinogenic works

Saltz, Jerry. “Dude, You’ve Gotta See This.” *New York Magazine*, June 15–22, 2009, pp. 138–39.



ever made. In some ways, all art is a hallucination. Johnson's idea has to do with the widespread availability and use of psychedelic drugs and the increasingly common understanding of their effects.

This notion has been around for a while. Five years ago, I wrote about a wily show called "Drunk vs. Stoned," which postulated that "stoned art" is introspective, hypersensitive, detail-oriented, and prone to surprise, spirals, and repetition, while drunk art is outward-looking, impulsive, romantic, and unafraid of messiness and sloppy emotions. Under these criteria, Expressionism is drunk; Pop is stoned. Pollock, Rauschenberg, and Nan Goldin are drunk; Warhol, Johns, and Cindy Sherman are stoned. Johnson's lens provides an interesting alternative to teleological-stylistic versions of art history. It is experiential rather than detached. Look at John Chamberlain's crushed-car-part sculptures this way, and you don't see commentary on consumerism and waste, or formal arrangements of color and line; you see exoskeletal creatures of folded space. Pipilotti Rist's burning color becomes the morphing of alternative universes, and Matthew Barney's crawling through Vaseline makes the malleability of space palpable.

The three Charles Ray installations at Matthew Marks right now, all brilliant examples of post-minimalist/conceptual sculpture, each created in the late eighties and new to New York, rattled my perceptions, jangled my faculties, and made me go "Wow!" They exemplify a drug-added view of the world. Ray's sculptures, part of a long tradition of minimal installations, are also forerunners to much of the theatrical Festivalism of recent times (e.g., Maurizio Cattelan and Olafur Eliasson). Each piece is nearly invisible and formally economical. Yet each is outrageously labor-intensive. *Ink Line*, the best and showiest of the three works, is a sculpture/drawing/fountain consisting of a stream of jet-black ink pouring from a dime-size hole in the ceiling into a dime-size hole in the floor. Initially *Ink Line* looks like a strand of yarn strung the height of the gallery, a pulsating Fred Sandback sculpture, a free-floating Barnett Newman zip, or a disembodied Sol LeWitt. Get close and you'll realize the line is liquid, glimmering, the consistency of syrup, moving fairly fast, fluctuating slightly, and thinner at the bottom than at the top. The ink forms a weird climatological aura around itself, slightly changing the humidity of the room. I was blown away when I was allowed to see the elaborate apparatus that makes

this simple effect possible. There was a large, noisy electric motor in the show-room beneath this gallery, all sorts of wiring, and plastic tubes that go under the floor, behind the wall, and above the ceiling. A gallery assistant arrives two hours early each day to drain the ink, "de-gas" it (!?), heat it with lamps to between 90 and 95 degrees, and put it back into the system. Anyone who looks at *Ink Line* can figure out how it works—yet the piece is as much a phenomenological event and a mystery as it is a work of formalist sculpture.

*Spinning Spot* is a circular section of floor, 24 inches in diameter, spinning at 33 ⅓ revolutions per minute. Never mind that the section weighs more than a quarter-ton, is more than a foot thick, and is supported from beneath by a huge motor strapped to the basement ceiling. The effect is mesmerizing. Sometimes the spot seems to be standing still and the room to be moving, other times the room disappears and all you can see is the spot. Meanwhile, the third piece, *Moving Wire*, is a thin gleaming steel wire whose ends poke out through a wall into space. Get close and you see the two halves slowly changing length, one wire shortening as the other gets longer, then appearing to reverse.

Since the birth of the avant-garde in the mid-nineteenth century, art history has been considered mainly in formal ways: What led to what, who begat whom. That approach has a way of shutting out a basic idea—namely, the visionary, shamanic inexplicability of most of what we see. Johnson's idea brings such an escape from reason back into the discussion, and could relegate some major art to the margins and move marginal (and questionable) things to the center. Keeping psychedelia in mind as you look at art stops it from being just a building block or part of a stylistic family; it allows recent work to regain some of the value that art has had over its 50,000-year history.

All three of Ray's pieces, especially *Ink Line* (which some New York museum should buy and install, pronto) and *Spinning Spot*, are more than Merry Prankster sight gags. Each makes you ultra-aware of spaces outside the one you're in, of rooms above and below you, the things that make these rooms and effects possible, and how your own body relates to all of this. They put you back in the realm of the unknown, of double vision and oddity. In addition to making me imagine the gallery was moving, blurring around the edges, turning liquid, spinning, being sucked into itself, and sprouting shiny metal tentacles, each is a total trip. ■



# ARTNEWS

## Reviews

## Charles Ray

Matthew Marks

In his first New York solo show since a 1998 retrospective at the Whitney Museum, Charles Ray offered just three objects: an egg, a boy, and a tractor. Each was perfectly obvious yet sublimely ambiguous. Involving space and time, trust and disbelief, the anxieties of scale, and the implications of psychosexuality, Ray's works sometimes take years to gestate. They reveal their intentions equally gradually.

For the sculpture *Chicken* (2007), a white-painted stainless-steel life-size egg, Ray actually raised chickens in his studio. The piece has a circular portal through which viewers can glimpse the tiny beak and claws of a porcelain chick on the verge of hatching. At 2½ inches long, the work is minuscule. *The New Beetle* (2006), also white stainless steel and life-size, is about as big as a four-year-old boy. In contrast to *Chicken*, which conveys fragility, this work exudes classical purity: a naked child, his small genitalia lined up in an egglike row, concentrates on a toy Volkswagen; his hand grasps the little car as if seizing power.



Charles Ray, *Father Figure*, 2007, machined solid stainless-steel and acrylic polyurethane, 93½" x 137½" x 71½".

The last sculpture, *Father Figure* (2007), is based on a toy tractor that Kiki Smith gave Ray. Enlarged to 18½ tons of solid steel, it consists of a bright green man merging with his bright green tractor—a monumental, rigidly frontal centaur of the industrial era. His foot presses the accelerator. The man may be benevolent, for all we know, but his tractor's huge black wheels are aggressive and inexorable.

It's no accident that the portal into the egg recalls Ray's *Rotating Circle* (1988), which, set in a wall at eye level, spins so quickly that it not only appears perfectly still but seems barely to exist. And the egg certainly has something to do with Ray's *Puzzle Bottle* (1995), a self-portrait trapped in a bottle.

That *Father Figure* is surely related to the life-size fire engine the artist parked outside the 1993 Whitney Biennial is not an accident either, nor is the connection with his famous giant mother figure, also an unnerving image of parental authority.

But why did the artist select the '90s remake of the Beetle, which started life as the "people's car" in Third Reich Germany? Why are the words "empire" and "USA" embossed on the wheels of the colossal toy tractor, which looks more like a relic from the old Soviet Union than anything from farm-belt America? Besides his allusions to the tricky questions of content, the politics of scale, and, as Ray says, "the abstract notion of an intrinsic space," is it really possible that this artist—who has insisted his work is not about the images but the artifices of sculpture—is now looking at the space appropriated by politics? This show may not simply have been about birth, childhood, and masculine power. By intention or serendipity, Charles Ray traces the evolution of empire with these three objects—as surely as Thomas Cole once did. —Kim Levin



## THE NEW YORKER

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### CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK TRIPLE PLAY

Shows of new sculpture by the L.A. artist Charles Ray are rare—his labor-intensive works may be years in the making—and reliably amazing. He targets aesthetic and conceptual bull's-eyes that you didn't know existed. So it is with



his three pieces at Matthew Marks. “Father Figure” is an enormous blowup, in machined and glossily painted solid steel, of an old (made in America, that old) plastic toy tractor with a benignly beefy driver. It weighs a Richard Serra-esque eighteen and a half tons. “The New Beetle” is a life-size nude, cast in steel and painted white, of a young boy seated on the floor and playing with a toy Volkswagen. Its astute beauty reflects Ray’s ongoing fascination with the integration of realism and abstraction in Classic Greek sculpture. Then there’s the tiny “Chicken,” a pedestalled egg in white painted steel with a circular cutout revealing a porcelain chick about to be born. The gristly little bird struggles to get out; we look in. The show seems to be about childhood as an ever-recurring state of nature, history, and the soul.

—Peter Schjeldahl

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## art on paper



### Charles Ray

Visitors to the 1993 Whitney Biennial were startled by a large fire truck parked on the street at the entrance of the museum. What was going on? Was it an emergency? Where was the fire? From a distance, it looked like the real thing—something seen every day on the streets of the city. But up close, the reality shifted. Yes, it had the size and the generalized details of a real fire truck; but *Firetruck* was something else: a child's toy enlarged to life-size.

*Firetruck* was my first encounter with the art of Charles Ray and the start of a journey of admiration and anticipation that, like any meaningful artistic journey, has had its non-understandings, its rethinking, and its eureka moments. As a curator focusing on printmaking, I had a nagging wish to see Ray turn to the medium. Equally, I knew that the traditional forms of printmaking were antithetical to what I was seeing in his sculpture and installations. So, when *Pumpkin Poster* appeared in the fall of 2006, my wish was answered.

Ray conceived and designed the work to be a poster—albeit, one published in a limited edition of twenty-five. It has the size and clarity of presentation one associates with advertising posters found in store windows or on construction hoardings. The press release for the debut presentation of this work at Matthew Marks Gallery notes that Ray was inspired by finding a packet of seeds in 2004 at a gardening center near his studio. If one considers *Pumpkin Poster* to be the front image of the seed packet, the back was printed on the announcement postcard for the exhibition, which describes the wonderful qualities of this “new” fruit (“a novel white pumpkin excellent for painting and carving”) and offers instructions for planting and harvesting.

The white pumpkin in the poster is Ray's own photograph of a cast-plaster sculpture he made. The pumpkin, of course, is one of the many seasonal items stocked by shops in early September in anticipation of the upcoming Halloween festivities. In contemporary society, we have grown accustomed to manufacturers and advertising agencies catering to our desires for the perfect product—the fantasies of the perfect tomato, the right pair of shoes, or the car that will fulfill our dreams. With his *Pumpkin Poster*, the artist discreetly asks the viewer to pause, to think about these issues. The seeds for sale are sterile, the promised future is improbable. Yet, we can chuckle at our own frustrated dreams, like Linus at the end of yet another Halloween without the appearance of the Great Pumpkin.

Charlie Brown, Charles Schulz, Charles Ray. Self-portraiture in its broadest definition lies at the essential core of Ray's art. His genius centers on this knack to take an aspect of himself and incorporate it into a work that stimulates an “everyman” dialogue with the viewer. *Pumpkin Poster* is the latest episode in this ongoing dialogue—and one that I would like to live with.

—David Kiehl

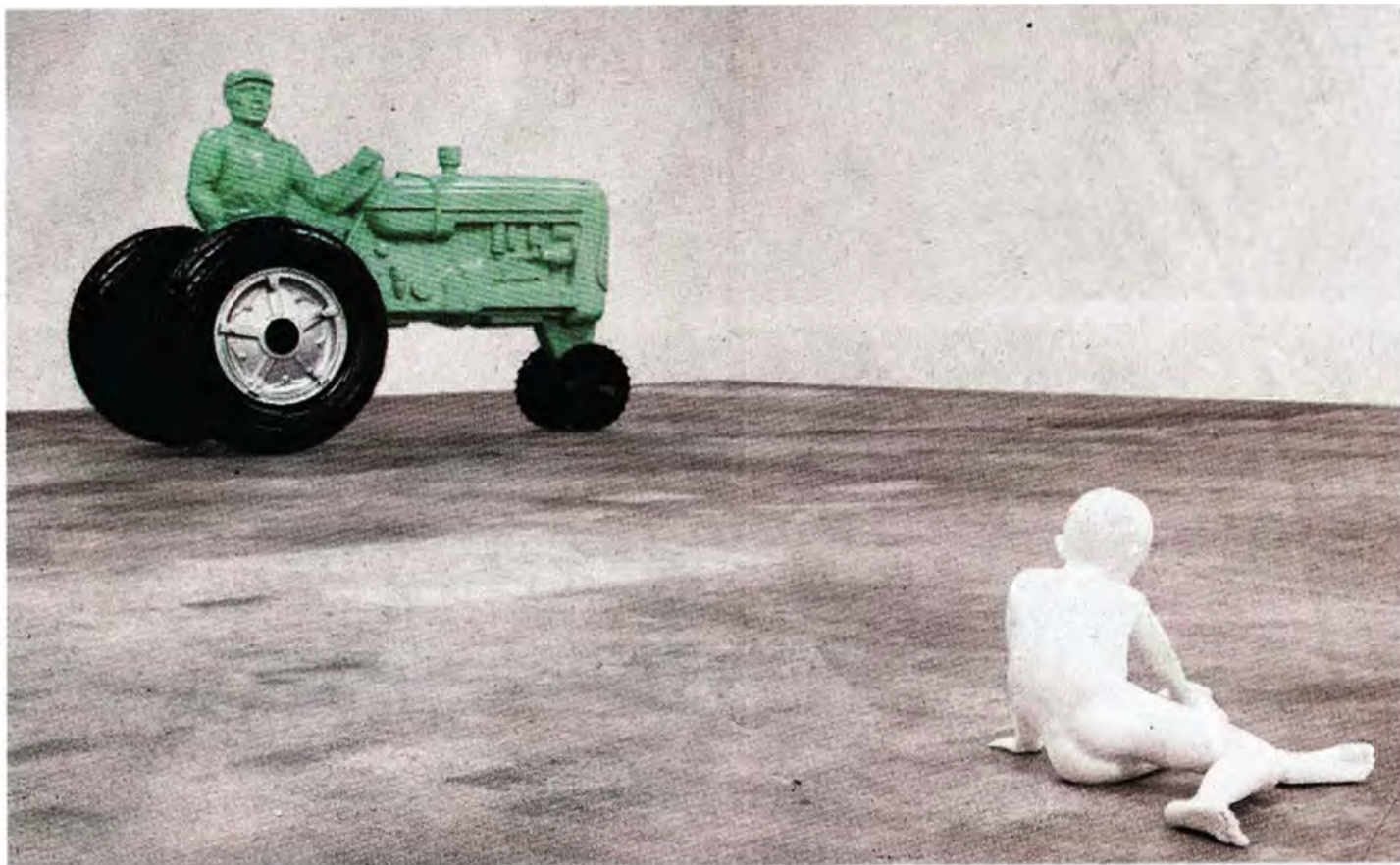
Above left: Charles Ray, *Pumpkin Poster*, digital C-print (43 x 29 1/2 in.), 2006. Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery, New York. © Charles Ray



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## The New York Times



"Father Figure," left, and "The New Beetle," in Charles Ray's show of three works at Matthew Marks in Chelsea.

### Charles Ray

Matthew Marks  
522 West 22nd Street, Chelsea  
Through Jan. 19

Charles Ray began his career as a craft-conscious Conceptual joker tackling different sculptural properties: scale, gravity, weight and illusion. His early work includes a photograph of him trussed and tied to a rather slender tree branch, a black cube filled to the brim with printer's ink and a series of objects on a table that rotate slowly and almost imperceptibly, creating an unstill life.

He later filmed a young woman standing as motionless as a mannequin on a revolving turntable, wearing a succession of rudimen-

tary garments he had made. He has made a toy fire truck the size of a real one and a fastidious ghostly gray fiberglass reproduction of a car involved in a fatal collision. He is probably best known for his mannequin sculptures, including enlarged versions of the store-window variety and some hyper-real self-portraits.

Mr. Ray's first New York gallery exhibition since his 1998 retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art is an obviously costly, deceptively sedate affair in which three very different works are set far apart in a bare, cavernous gallery. They indicate that he is becoming something of a sculptor's sculptor, parlaying his interests into meditations on sculpture's presence,

above all its stillness and solidity, its ability to mimic yet deny life. Each work is more resonant than the next.

"Chicken" is a life-size porcelain and stainless-steel sculpture of a tiny chick breaking out of an egg. "The New Beetle" is a life-size sculpture, in cast stainless steel painted white that resembles vein-free white marble, of a naked young boy curled on the ground and resting on one hand while he plays with a toy car. The slouchy pose suggests Narcissus, but the boy is just the opposite, oblivious to himself and his nakedness, completely lost in the make-believe of the car, which is more exactly rendered than his face.

Like the fire truck, the third work, "Father Figure," is a cast

plastic toy enlarged to life size, a height of about eight feet. All green except for black tires, it shows a farmer driving a tractor; his head and torso are turned to the right as if to say hello. But the tractor is immensely powerful, and his body is fused with it in a way that seems implicitly monstrous. That the sculpture, which appears to be fairly lightweight unless you touch it, is actually solid stainless steel adds a primal force. This guy is Frankenstein's monster on wheels, in a good mood for the moment, but don't push it.

ROBERTA SMITH



# ARTFORUM

**CHARLES RAY DID IN FACT STEAL** the thirty-two-foot-long fallen tree that inspired his recent sculpture *Hinoki*, just as rumor has it. After spotting the tree in a California field, Ray tried and failed to acquire it through legitimate channels. Not to be deterred, he returned to the site, chain saw in tow. Over a series of trips, he transported the tree, in hundreds of pieces, back to his studio in Los Angeles.

Thus commenced *Hinoki*'s decadelong backstory—protracted even for Ray, who often spends years on his intricately fabricated sculptures in order to achieve just the right subtle-yet-delirious mimetic shift. *Hinoki* is no simple copy of the pilfered original: Every piece of the disassembled log was re-created in fiberglass; the pieces were then fitted together into one jigsawed “log,” which was sliced into five sections that were shipped to a team of traditional wood-carvers in Osaka, Japan, who made replicas of each. Eventually, the carved sections were conjoined to form an integrated object that rests on blocks of the same type of Japanese cypress from which the sculpture is made (and that gives the work its title). Finally, last May, *Hinoki* arrived in Los Angeles for its debut at Regen Projects.

It was Ray's first gallery show in LA since his 1997 unveiling of *Unpainted Sculpture*, a fiberglass re-creation of a Pontiac Grand Am that had been pummeled beyond recognition in a fatal crash. Both *Hinoki* and *Unpainted Sculpture* involve the meticulous re-creation of an object, effectively stalling its transition into a defunct or disappeared state. It's a process that emphasizes formal qualities over the narrative of the object's previous life. The car's mangled components become abstracted, strangely “pure” forms. Similarly, the precise dimensions and lyric contours of the fallen tree are reproduced in *Hinoki*. But step closer, and surface variations—chisel marks, straight seams, and artificial color gradations—disrupt verisimilitude. The wood, Ray explains, will keep changing: After two hundred years of cracking and shifting, it will stabilize for four hundred years, and then settle into a four-hundred-year decline. While *Unpainted Sculpture* concretized an instant, the moment of impact, *Hinoki* embeds itself in a different kind of time: protracted and quasi-eternal.

—RACHEL KUSHNER



1000 WORDS

# Charles Ray

TALKS ABOUT *HINOKI*, 2007

**I FOUND THE LOG** when I was going back and forth up the Central Coast one winter. I could see it from the road, embedded in this very green meadow. I was immediately attracted to it and stopped the car. I liked its decomposed state. It had been maybe thirty years on the ground. Another ten and I think it would have disappeared back into the earth. I kept going back to look at it, knowing I wanted to do something with it, and not a naturalistic version of the car wreck. But I couldn't figure out what its sculptural armature might be. Everything has an armature, every idea, every object. Once you locate the structure of something, you can start to think about it.

I tried to purchase the log, and the property owners wouldn't sell it to me. So I hiked for about a year on the Southern and Central Coast, hoping to find another beautiful log. But I realized it wasn't a log so much as this particular log's form I was after—it had almost a platonic form, whose integrity I wanted to re-create. It was partly rotted, and there was this magnificent chamber through it—your eye just drifted right through. I thought of *pneuma*, which is the Greek word for breath. The notion hit me almost like a theological event: *Pneuma*, or air, could be the armature, pushing back against all this other pressure—the UV light and wind and rain and bugs—that was compressing the log down into the earth. I thought, I'll make a pneumatic structure. But it quickly became apparent that it was far too complicated a job, and I was back to square one with this notion of breath or life. The point was not a materials shift, like in *Ink Box* [1986], which displaced the expected solid surface of a metal cube with ink. I liked the idea of wood-carvers, of all

these different people's hands. While the sculpture is my vision, I was using others' individual decision making with the idea that all these people working on it, looking at it, all the different chisel marks, marks left over from my chain saw, somehow the trajectory of all the visions would have a collective effect. You can see those traces as you travel around the sculpture—it's almost like music, these swirls of intentionality. That's what gives it its life.

I thought it would feel more real if the carvers carved the inside with the same intention with which they carved the outside. Even though the inner chamber is mysterious and you can't see every part of it, the inside and outside are one trajectory of vision, of people summoning the tree's topology. What kept compelling me to look at the fallen tree after first discovering it was this intrinsic space of its interior. The sculpture is in our gravitational field, and yet the interior is free of it—it's only your mind that goes in there. It's a kind of topological completeness.

I've looked at the tree and wondered, Could one be as engaged if this whole process were an abstraction? The tree, the crashed car, the big lady [*Fall '91*, 1992]—for me, these works are not images. They're fundamentally sculptural, and that's where my interest lies. And yet it's true that the big lady, for instance, pushes a Freudian wave—that's not sculptural, it's cultural. I wonder, How to make the work more sculptural? Asking could the tree be abstract is a way of dealing with the artifice of what we've come to know about it. Everything has an artifice. The question is how interesting is the way down to finding it. I'm using these images, things from my life, from the world, as a way to think. I'm not

thinking about mannequins, or fire trucks, or trees. I'm thinking about sculpture. I have to wonder what it would be like to be free of these external images. But I don't know if it's possible for me, and they do bring a richness.

The abstract notion of an intrinsic space is what allows me to look at both ancient and contemporary sculpture as working on the same problem. The air underneath *Hinoki* is its location embedment, its embedment in the room, while the air inside it offers a kind of space that's much harder to define, a spatial embedment disconnected from location. People talk about architecture, placement in a room, but I think the artfulness of a work is how it's spatially embedded, its geometry. From there, other things, like its poetics, sprinkle out. There are some great David Smiths whose spatial embedment makes you feel that if you were to turn them, the whole world would turn with them. Maybe the tree is like that. I've become really interested in reliefs, like this Greek stela of a young girl you can see at the Met. She has a bird in her hand that she's about to kiss. I find it so touching, and so fundamentally sculptural—this bird and girl and kiss and breath. Everything is in relief, and the only space that flows through and around is between her mouth and the bird in her hand. The space is abstract—it's not our space—and yet it's so real. When I see things like that, how they've been able to take this narrative and produce such a fundamentally sculptural move that the meaning of the relief no longer matters, I worry less about abstraction. That relief in the Met was born alive. The breath is still there. It's so *modern*. □

SEPTEMBER 2007 439



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## ARTFORUM





# Charles Ray: *In the No*

Lane Relyea

Hey kids, look what's showing at the museum! Hard-edge science projects, fun-house Minimalism, a visual jungle gym pulled straight from the pages of *Highlights for Children*: a poured bath that hangs vertically on the wall like a painting, a see-through table set with see-through plates and glasses, a big black box so completely filled with matching black ink that it looks like a solid cube—there's even a merry-go-round, only its wooden horses stand in one place while the rest of the carousel spins. Put on your thinking caps, or better yet your crash helmets. These freckle-faced optical illusions educate as well as entertain, imparting sugar-coated kernels of wisdom about pure form and perceptual mechanics, about structure, weight, volume, gravity. In short, they're a learning experience—except for one problem. The impression they make is overwhelmingly vivid, so

much so that they feel a little too mind-expanding, too intense, to be about learning alone. Enough so, in fact, that our easily grasped understanding of this stuff seems just as quickly to slither away. Gee whiz—are we getting ideas or losing our heads?

"Yes," silently invites our mild-mannered instructor, Prof. Charles Ray, shown exhaling his approval in a typically illuminating/stupefying object lesson from 1990, a very plain and at the same time literally warped photographic self-portrait that hangs flush against an equally warped, equally plain white wall. Read Ray's puckered lips—is he grading us or seducing us? A mental gymnast who ends every routine with a pratfall, Ray insists on overly fleshing out his ideas, endowing his sculptures' seemingly timeless, immutable forms with a sense of corporeal touchiness and unpredictability. The student bodies Ray sculpts twitch with pent-up energies, unquenchable thirsts—his *33 X 35 X 32 = 33 X 35 X 34*, 1989, looks from the outside like another normal aluminum box à la Donald Judd, yet on the inside drops through the floor like a shallow elevator shaft. Ray depicts the life of the mind as a slapstick comedy, a high-speed adventure; he's Mr. Science in Wonderland, a nerdy, bookish piper luring

viewers through the lab-room looking glass.

Ray's enthusiasm for clean, primary shapes and quotidian objects would seem at first to place his concerns arm-in-arm with those of traditional sculpture, with its campaign to liberate coherent thought from inchoate material, to pull order from chaos. But Ray's embodied icons actually backpedal from intelligibility, becoming mired in sloppy turf wars between opposing terms—generic versus specific, permanent versus transient, what goes without saying versus the unspeakable. These struggles both constitute each work's identity and plunge it into crisis. Ray's objects teeter on the threshold between sense and nonsense, their sharp definitions twisted by contradiction, their legibility stretched like a translucent skin over unthinkable, undifferentiated mess. The thought of serving a meal on the transparent dining-room set in *Table*, 1990, conjures images of incredible spill, manic confusion.

Ray recasts figures of speech as action figures, nouns as verbs. Better yet, he pictures them as authority figures, semantic equivalents of dirty kitchen-mops and lead-caked erasers, idealizations that police deviation and excess, coercing scattered stimuli and wild impulses into a rule-bound system of clear, distinct names and separate categories. (In both *Ink Box*, 1986, and the ceiling-to-floor stream of ink entitled *Ink Line*, 1987, determinate meaning battles indeterminate form, holding in check a potential avalanche of automatic writ-



Charles Ray, *Oh! Charley, Charley, Charley...*, 1992, mixed media, 6 x 15 x 15'. Installation view.

SEPTEMBER 1992 63





## Ray's sculptures pull us into a time warp, a hair-raising

ness by which Minimalism wrested visual art from high Modernism's hard-core eyeballing, but beyond that to the corrupt object choices of Dada and Surrealism. (Marcel Duchamp is the preferred poster boy here, saluted in Gober's urinals and Lachowicz's chessboards as well as in Ray's spinning spots and tableware, not to mention the rotating sycamore in his *Turning Tree*, 1992, all variations on Duchamp's *Precision Optics* of 1920.) Consolidating '20s readymades with '60s unitary forms, these younger artists aim to prove the contingency of perception not only on the passage of time and the peculiarities of place but on ideological commotion as well—for them, seeing is confirming or resisting a set of institutionalized beliefs. Ray, though, is the least interested of the pack in picking out cultural bar codes with which to imprison his work (unlike, say, Lachowicz, with her lipstick re-treads of Carl Andre's floor tiles, art that tells us exactly what to re-think). Ray's sculptures never quite seem up for hip party chatter; they're too manic-depressive, appearing one moment as a faceless crowd of static certainties, then emerging in urgent, hyperactive

ness" of Minimalist sculpture, its "emphasis on duration," that Ray's work most recalls, the sense of security we derive from his generic forms only setting us up for the impending onslaught of experience unfolding. But the narratives Ray's art forecasts don't elapse in the clean, measured cadences that Minimalism engineered, the steady, clocklike beating of objective time, the monotone of level-headed analysis. These are not deliberative bodies. On the contrary, Ray's objects waver under the influence of impulsive desire, the pressures of libidinal investment. The scenarios they project surge and retract with the visceral charge of hallucinations and fantasies, their stories written in the huffing, sweaty body English of wet dreams and horror shows. Ray, his lab coat shredded and stained, conducts his research not in a clinic but in a subconscious mine-field, at a location where the psychosomatic intersects with the psychosemantic.

This then is Ray's odd spin on Minimalist reduction. If his quest is to locate structures so self-evident that, as Frank Stella once tautologized, "what you see is what you see," he far overshoots his mark. His simple tangibles heat up as they get pared down, as if they were undergoing a rigorous process of desublimation, causing layers of cultural regulation and societal taboo to peel away, revealing beneath their acceptable forms unacceptable motivations. For Ray, seeing is regressing. In a sense, he's turned inside out the anticipatory feelings induced by Minimalism, alerting us to events

ing, a stampede of Rorschach blots.) Hidden away in the shadows cast by these seemingly autonomous abstractions there swarm filthy secrets, inadmissible truths—the unconscious desires that repression engenders, the chaos that order promotes.

Ray's double major in hypnotic phenomenology and trap-door structuralism of course angles him into a currently popular stance of distant reflection on the bygone glory-days of Minimalism. It's a vantage he shares with the likes of Robert Gober, Liz Larner, Rachel Lachowicz, and others whose work harks back not only to the body conscious-

codependency with their audience.

In this respect, Ray's work indeed seems governed by the dictum of a lab-coat-clad Robert Morris from 1966, lecturing us about the difference between "the known constant and the experienced variable," between objects we take for granted and things we can't foresee. As did Morris then, Ray means his sculptures to heighten our awareness of the here and now; they exist in the volatility of the moment, confronting us as open-ended discursive events rather than stone-cold conclusions. It's what Michael Fried chillingly observed as the "endless-



## rollercoaster ride down the blind curves of memory lane.

that await not only in the near future but in the suppressed past—his sculptures pull us into a time warp, a hair-raising rollercoaster ride down the blind curves of memory lane. Hop aboard his *Revolution Counter-Revolution*, from 1990: here a brightly painted carousel seems to beckon squadrons of horse-bound children to march rank and file into the self-contained runaround of the social order. Only Ray has shifted this allegory of enculturation into reverse by placing the entire merry-go-round on a backward-spinning turntable, so that the galloping cavalry is made to stop dead in its tracks, as if distracted from its mission by the tug of persisting doubts, forsaken pleasures. Turning the procession on its head, Ray masterminds a rat-race spinout, a whirlpool of disorientation and digression.

This backward glance Ray casts at childhood is bracingly free of fuzzy nostalgia: for him, to feel young again is to be jolted by raw, unsanctioned affect, to be engulfed by deep-seated, irrepressible emotion and profound displacement. A tremulous sense of disruption and dispossession pours over every one of his sculptures like a cold sweat. Ray knows well how to animate his not-so-still lifes with a sense of the uncanny, leading viewers to perceive beneath the familiarity of his objects the appearance of something dreaded yet alluring—a taboo attachment, a repressed attraction—now suddenly erupting with a power equal to that of its prohibition. (The fact that his work feels inhabited, like the portraits in horror-movie castles with eyes that move, is in part a legacy from his activities during the early '80s, when he would place himself inside or under Minimalistic steel boxes.) Highlights for children indeed: Ray's artworks are playpens in which infantile pleasure-seeking is isolated and tamed, restructurings of the open field of need and gratification into established channels, reasonable limits. The primal childhood flashbacks they evoke are of that first, most far-reaching education in which polymorphous perversity is abruptly domesticated: his dining-room

sets suggest the curbing of mess through table manners, his goo-filled cubes conjure diapering and toilet training. Hence it's possible to diagnose Ray's sculptures as being anal twice over, appearing one moment incredibly fastidious and stingy, the next like launching pads for a food fight, a shit storm in the offing.

A similar superimposition of retention and release, containment and spill, is welded together in Ray's *Bath*, from 1989. A modest portrait of one of life's simplest pleasures, this tub is nevertheless hard to imagine relaxing in, not so much because it hangs awkwardly tilted up vertically on its end, suspended some three feet from the floor, but rather because, in that position, it suddenly assumes affinities to a standing mother's womb. Here Ray takes us back to the beginning, to square one, but it turns out to be double-sided: this bath runs hot and cold, appearing by turns as an isolation tank and a bubbling stew, inviting visions of both an idealized body—scrubbed clean, affirmed as separate and distinct, the purity and sanctity of its borders reverently upheld—and an impure one, its borders mutable and dissolving, a body intermingled with its environment, losing itself in everything, a body that's not a self.

In a couple of his recent mannequin sculptures, Ray makes his own sense of self and its relation to his body the explicit—indeed, sexually explicit—content of his work. Here the artist bares all, presenting himself in the startling pink, yet the naked truth he uncovers appears as scattered as a reflection in a broken mirror, an infinite regress of mistaken identities. Ray's interest in mannequins seems to lie in their central-casting abstraction; it's as if, by portraying himself as a cold plaster dummy, he

were trying to shoehorn his bodily experience into a shop-window version of the Platonic ideal (punning on essentialism, the mannequins' fused fingers suggest a return to our species' deep-sea origins). As an object of identification, though, each statue reflects less a coherent self-image than the desire for it—a desire for closure that can never be adequately met, a desire perpetuated by its own impossibility. The closest Ray gets to successfully sublimating his physical existence into the cultural image of macho perfection is in *Male Mannequin*, 1990, where a blue-eyed clothing-store paragon,



Opposite, left: Charles Ray, *Self-Portrait*, 1990, mixed media, 75 x 26 x 20". Opposite, right: Charles Ray, *Ink Box*, 1986, mixed media, 3 x 3 x 3". This page: Charles Ray, *Male Mannequin*, 1990, mannequin and fiberglass, 73 1/2 x 15 x 14". Edition of three.





standing in self-possessed contrapposto, is disrobed to reveal a cast replica of Ray's own genitals appended to its crotch. Once again, phallic authority rears its ugly head, only Ray's particular pound of flesh appears exceedingly, abnormally ugly; in harsh contrast to the rest of the dummy's hyperconventional handling, it's sculpted and discolored in obsessive detail, mapped meticulously like some frontier discovery, suggesting a culturally unrecognized eroticism, an object of "unhealthy" fascination. As is typical with Ray's conceptual spin art, his male role-model is both centered and decentered by its pubic hub, which provides the source of its meaning at the same time that it marks a deviation, erupting like a huge zit on the figure's otherwise pearl-smooth, idealized surface.

Ray's use of mannequins to reformulate Morris' theory of "the known constant and experienced variable" in terms of ego integration and ego loss hits its crescendo in *Oh! Charley, Charley, Charley . . .*, 1992. In this masturbatory Möbius strip, the artist casts himself as the eight participants in an all-Ray

Above: Charles Ray, *Turning Tree*, 1992, mixed media, 25' high. Photo: Anthony Cunha. Right: Charles Ray, *No*, 1992, color photograph, 38 x 30". Edition of four.

sex orgy, a schizophrenic circle jerk in which the languages of esthetic theory and *Blueboy* magazine are blithely transposed, its intricate weaving of insertions and absorptions, excitations and exhaustions, resulting in a compositional tour de force. Yet the composition is itself schizo. Like a porn remake of the raising of the American flag at Iwo Jima, the piece appears on the one hand classically ordered, its many individual parts subordinated within one coherent whole. On the other hand, though, its arrangement of bodies recalls the indeterminacy of Minimalist sculpture, in which identical units are repeated in seemingly endless succession (or, as Judd might say in this context, "one Ray after another"). And corresponding to each of these schemes is a different vision of the sex portrayed: in the former, sex serves to heroicize the self, with the male climax wrapping things up, acting like a camera flash that freezes the self in a moment of supreme personal accomplishment; in the latter, sex shatters the self with overstimulation, displacing it and its object in an endless channeling of excess sexual energy, a figure eight of desire, infinite foreplay.

Playfulness, the arousal of expectations sans the knowledge of what exactly to expect, is indeed Good Time Charley's leitmotiv, his work's disorganizing principle. And by making it seem like child's play, Ray only raises the stakes. With deceiving simplicity, he presents in his art a diagram of the established order of things, yet he opens up within that order an apprehension of those decisive childhood moments that structure it. Moreover, he makes those moments appear indecisive, incomplete. Ray's sculptures prompt remembrances of repressions past, but they also evoke a field of possibilities passed up. Such possibilities reverberate like undying echoes when Ray rings in the new season with *Fall '91*, 1991. Here an eight-foot-tall female mannequin stands before us, decked out in a brightly colored power suit, looking like an Amazonian cover girl (she has, as counterpart Melanie Griffith boasts in the movie *Working Girl*, "a mind for business and a bod for sin"). She's a hypertrophic vision of the Other, a whole lotta woman, a monumental punch-clock for true-blue Male Desire. Yet Ray's preview of the latest in

women's fashion is also a review of long-forbidden cravings our culture deems its mortal threat. As do all Ray's works, *Fall '91* telegraphs a counterclockwise story—in this case, the towering woman, her clothes, her entire world grow ever larger, as we the audience dwindle in size. We find ourselves looking up to this giantess as we once looked up to our teachers and parents. With Oedipus Ray serving as our psychic tour guide, we travel far enough backward in time to recognize this expanding fig-



ure, in all her ambivalence, as representing our once fluid, immediate connection to a profoundly gooey, nurturing maternal universe, as well as that connection's interruption by the paternal "no," through which sexual difference is assigned and with it social power or the lack thereof. Caught in the drama and anxiety of that moment, that stand-off between goo-goo and no-no, it's impossible not to consider taking one further step back, crossing over to the far side of the "no," to contemplate the rampantly weird experiences held captive there. Reread Ray's lips—go ahead, just say yes. □

Lane Relyea is a writer who lives in Los Angeles.