

**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*. □