

PAUL DICKERSON

CHARLES ray



CHARLES RAY, UNTITLED, 1973, BLACK & WHITE PHOTOGRAPH, 27 X 40", COURTESY FEATURE.

As I was getting off the uptown #6 train I spotted Charles Ray buying subway tokens at the booth. He was looking just like one of his self-portrait sculptures. We were both heading to meet each other at the '95 Whitney Biennial to see his new sculpture and to record a conversation between us over lunch. On the way there, Charles told me how he was still shaken by a near fatal incident that occurred while he was exploring a rocky sea cave near Los Angeles in his Zodiac raft. Heavy waves had tossed his raft up against the caves' jagged walls and it seemed a miracle that he was able to get out in one piece. The experience seemed to color the tone of our conversation regarding his art. We ended up talking for three and a half hours: over lunch, a quick tour through the Metropolitan Museum, a cab ride downtown and ended over coffee.

I have watched Ray gradually establish himself as a powerful force in sculpture since the mid-eighties. His work is usually made up of simple forms with strange perceptual effects: an open cube that sinks below the gallery floor just a little; representational figures that look like mannequins but pack the enigmatic punch of a state trooper; high speed spinning disks that look like stationary circles in a gallery wall or a stream of ink resembling a taught black wire from ceiling to floor. His sculptures and installations greet you like a little old lady, but they can sneak up and mug you. I first noticed his work because it was often included in the spate of irony driven neo-conceptual shows happening in New York during the mid-eighties. It seemed out of place then, since there is nothing cynical or rhetorical to Ray's work. On the contrary it participates in the simulacra that comes from real things. Ray's synthetic images are substantial and cut to the chase of The image culture that seems to reincarnate itself throughout time.

PAUL DICKERSON: I'm interested in your early work, the series of balanced sculptures.

CHARLES RAY: I worked on those in college. The one ton block of marble tied casually onto a tree's trunk so that it denies its weight. And fifteen years later, I made *7 1/2 Ton Cube*, a solid steel cube painted white that looks like it weighs about twenty pounds. Both pieces have the same structure.

PD: The early works that seem to comment on previous sculptors' work, Caro for example, function by literally demonstrating cause and effect, unlike Caro, who composes formally.

CR: I was just naive and young. I was trying to make things work somehow. My training was formal, not technical, and I wasn't very good at complicated structures. I'd never been good at composition. The components in the early work were simply what was needed to hold the thing up. Every visual element also had a structural purpose.

PD: But that literal cause and effect is more curious than most post-minimal work because of its humor.

CR: I had thought of them as structural events. The humor is like a close call story. I didn't tell you the whole cave account. After I got out of the sea cave I brought the Zodiac to a beach. And while I was on the beach huge rocks started falling from the cliff above. So I headed back to the sailboat and then the whole cliff collapsed and fell onto the beach! It was such an event, and the work has that kind of humor — the rush of a close call.

PD: Smithson said, in '68, "High seriousness and high humor are the same thing." Humor can happen empirically; it's in chemistry, nature... Does this humor have anything to do with a level of detachment I find in your work?

CR: I might be running too far afield here, but I took a deeper structure for granted in these pieces. It was a generational thing: Anthony Caro, post minimalism, Donald Judd's early work — I ate all that stuff up. It made sense to me. From Caro I learned to focus on the relationship between parts rather than on an overall shape or profile... There was a simple physical structure to these pieces. They had a simple gestalt, a grasp-ability.

PD: So they were procedural, and generalized.

CR: I don't know if they were generalized or not, but there was a sensation I was looking for that is located somewhere between the genitals and the head. Like that charge you get from chopping down a big tree, seeing it fall. It's juvenile, but it's also sublime.

Lunch at the Carlyle

PD: Earlier, when we were at the Whitney, you said, "I'm not interested in the body." Yet much of your work has included your body and its replication in whole or in parts. What does that have to do with your position in terms of The Subject?

CR: I am interested in subject matter the way I'm interested in scale, or color; it's one element of many, but I'm not interested in "subject matter" per se.

PD: I'm referring to The Subject, as in Lacan. The gaze, desire... In the self-portraits and in *Family Romance*, there are scale changes, replications and representational shifts. There's something in your work that disavows the subject, yet acknowledges or uses it. Lacan suggests that the gaze overrides

perception. I think your work proves that he is wrong, and suggests, as I believe, that they are indistinguishable from each other, even the same thing.

CR: I haven't read Lacan. I want the viewer to form a one-to-one relationship with the work. Some of the early sculptures generated a level of anxiety, like a teetering boulder on the edge of a cliff. You didn't read the work. You looked at it, you felt like it was going to fall on you, so you moved away.

PD: Which is very different than walking up to a "beautiful" sculpture...

CR: And "reading" it, as if this means that. I didn't want the work to be a mediator between the viewer and myself. It wasn't about my experience. I want it to generate different meanings in different viewers. It's like your mother. You have a different relationship to your mother than your friends do. It's like creating your mother. I don't want to create what you think of your mother, I just want to create an event. The work is a verb, the active agent.

PD: Meaning means demonstration... Are you saying that this active participation assumes that all art is mediated by the body?

CR: We count to ten because we have ten fingers. Romans changed at every five because they had a sword in one hand. I always thought it was so stupid that the early digital signals they sent while looking for aliens were on the base ten. That was just assuming they had ten fingers.

Art has to exist in its time to be effective. Defoe understood this so clearly. He wrote Robinson Crusoe in a pedestrian journalistic style that had developed because of the printing press. His forwards are vernacular, they read like, "I found this book up in my uncle's attic and I thought it would be educational to the public to publish it."

PD: The printing press was a Popular metaphor, like the computer is now, acting as a public lexicon that limited what was expressible. That makes me want to ask: What's contemporary about the avant-garde?

CR: You know that sculpture of Caro's, *Early One Morning* (1962), with this easel-type structure on the back of it? It's painted red. From one side it's drawn out to about twenty-two feet. It has a few gestural elements, beams that lock it to the ground, but as you walk around it, it has this sculptural disjunction which flattens space to where it appears to be about an inch thick. Look at this thing, it's in '62, before people even knew what LSD was. He was so contemporary, he was more hallucinogenic than the Beatles. He took space and hallucinogized it. That's what I mean by contemporariness: it was of its time without him thinking ahead, "What can I do to be contemporary?"

PD: What about the sculptures of yours that include your body? Is that you, in *Shelf 1981*?

CR: In *Shelf 1981* I'm standing nude, with my face and neck painted grey and my back to the gallery wall and this grey shelf with objects on it passes seamlessly under my head so that it looks like my head's one of the grey objects. When you first see it, I seem vulnerable and you seem powerful. Then the flesh breaks the illusion and I seem powerful.

PD: There is this thing that happens in your work, it's confrontationally active yet it's completely stat-

ic.

CR: Most of those pieces denied the aspect of event or performance. I thought of my body as a sculptural element creating tension between the body as persona or object. An exception to this was the *Clockpiece* at Rutgers. There was a big clock in the University Hall and I took it down and put up one I made and then I got into it and tried to become a clock. I literally became the works of a clock. I turned the minute and hour hands. I got in there at noon and it was four when I got out, and I thought it was six, so I guess I was two hours fast.

PD: So what about your involvement with scale? What do you think scale is, what does it mean to your work?

CR: Scale is only an element in my work. More importantly, the pieces interrelate, evolve, solutions are found to earlier problems. *Boy* resolves *Fall '91* (Big Lady) and that in turn developed out of *The Male Mannequin* piece... The first, *Self Portrait Mannequin*, is the oddest and best for me.

PD: So there's a structure that is generational, separate from the individual piece. Scale takes the problems out to the level of evolution and etymology.

CR: *Self-Portrait Mannequin* connects up with an earlier work, *Rotating Circle*, where I wanted to fill a structure with so much crazy emotive energy that it would subvert itself and end up appearing to be calm. The circle is embedded in the wall at head height. It spins so fast it appears stationary. I wanted it to be so pure that it would both include and exclude everything. It would be so abstract it would become real or so real it would become abstract. The circle is nine inches in diameter and mounted at head height so it becomes a kind of portal or portrait, like an icon. I was trying to get my expression as close as possible to nothing.

PD: That kind of distilled contradiction can be what it's all about.

CR: *The Self-Portrait Mannequin* was doing the least amount of work to get there. I took a K-mart type mannequin, chopped the head off and had a mannequin company replace it with a cast of my head. Then I dressed it in brand new clothes, the kind I would normally wear.

PD: But it wasn't a hyper-realist, or a handcrafted thing.

CR: No, I genericized the portrait to match the standard of the mannequin. I wasn't interested in the mannequin as an image, the surreal aspect; I hate surrealism.

PD: Juxtaposition. It's a bad word.

CR: Because before you know what you're looking at, you know what you're looking at. You can read surrealism a mile away.

PD: There are pieces, Oppenheim's *Fur-lined Tea Cup*.

CR: Oh, I love *Fur-lined Tea Cup*, I don't think of it as surreal. The dialectic of fur and teacup just explodes.

PD: I never understood your *Boy*.

CR: It's a boy-mannequin scaled up to my height. For me, it was a resolution to *Fall '91* (Big Lady).

PD: How does it resolve the big lady?

CR: When I made *Fall '91*, I didn't want to alter the convention or articulation of the mannequin so I changed it only in the direction of scale. I moved it

CHARLES RAY, *FIRETRUCK*, 1993, MIXED MEDIA, 10 x 50 x 8 FEET. COURTESY FEATURE. PHOTO: NINI GUATTI





up 30%. But the scale change is subservient to the Freudian big lady/mother equation. *Fall '91* doesn't question that. It simply embraces it and rides its wave. But *The Boy* draws its presence and power more directly from its sculptural articulation. He's too big. You mentally push him down but he pops back up. He's sculpturally squirrely. When I went to get the clothes made for him I realized that kids nowadays all wear day-glo stripes and tennis shoes, from four to twenty-four years old. At the enlarged scale I used, he would have looked like a teenager rather than a boy. So I had to take infants' clothes, and scale those up.

PD: So the contrast to the times....

CR: You can't tell; it's like Hitler youth, or fifties nostalgia. But it's so squirrely, you wrestle with your perception of him. He looks very evil, but not; it's a boy; you push him down, he pops up. He's a struggle.

PD: Before you were speaking about being contemporary to be understood, but here's an example where to be contemporary is not to be contemporary, in a sense.

CR: Because of the clothes?

PD: Yes.

CR: I thought of it more as a struggle or perception in the present with roots in the past, like a dinner in a '50's style restaurant.

PD: And what's happening with *Oh! Charley, Charley, Charley*...

CR: I was trying to make a figurative sculpture. I was interested in Rodin's *Burghers of Calais* but I couldn't do the L.A. City Council, it would have no contemporary foundation as a figurative sculpture. What would that be? My subject became the self as a projection of the other. Your lover's just yourself, there is no other out there, it's the other side of Brancusi's *The Kiss*. I love that sculpture, but to become one through a cosmic...

PD: Tautology.

CR: Yeah, and *Oh! Charley*... is the other side of the coin. I spent two years with the composition, literally. I started with wooden dolls, trying to work it out.

PD: And you said *Family Romance* solved that piece, how did that happen?

CR: *Oh! Charley, Charley, Charley* was too literal, too much like, "Oh, it's an orgy, the artist with himself." The unifying force lies outside of the sculpture itself. The equation in *Family Romance* is solved sculpturally by the relationship of parts. Scale shifts find meaning that are generated by the hands. They are the structural link, they are always shifting, so the meaning and the unification comes not from an outside psychology applied to the image of the self, but from actual sculptural orchestration.

Cab ride Downtown

PD: When you say contemporary you are using it in two senses, you are talking about Pop, but also about being clearly present — attending experience — timeliness and timelessness in a sense. You seem to solve these sculptural problems by a logical process similar to balancing an algebraic equation, but logic is just about the furthest thing from what art has been

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called.

CR: I'm not sure I problem solve in a logical way. It's more about trying to create an equation then to solve one. If you come back tomorrow a good sculpture will have a different meaning for you. Someone once asked Oldenburg if his *Umbrella* in Des Moines would stand the test of time, and he said: if it showed up ten years later in a poem or as part of the texture of a life or if it became a place.

PD: What do you think of Oldenburg's whole project? His happenings ended up in his sculpture somehow.

CR: I like some of his work a lot, the soft things. There's a relationship with him to Buster Keaton that is very profound. If you look at the difference between Chaplin and Keaton, Chaplin's topical and political...

PD: His movements are mechanistic.

CR: Whereas Keaton is about animism. The world is only named, but it doesn't make any difference, because the objects have a life of their own, and a direction of their own, and we're really not in control. And Oldenburg's similar. That soft typewriter, how do you explain it over the phone to someone without saying, "typewriter?" Yet it has nothing to do with the object named. I'm not so interested in the aspect of monumentality.

PD: I don't think he is either. I always secretly thought that he was a conceptual artist. It's strange how the issue of abstraction is rarely discussed in relation to his work. I think it's so obvious that he's totally involved in it. The equivalency of representation/ abstraction, image/substance, that whole issue which people don't see in work that's supposed to be representational.

CR: Oldenburg's *Bedroom* of 1963 was really influential to me.

PD: Then you must like H.C. Westermann?

CR: H.C. Westermann is tremendous. Lately I've been thinking a lot about *Imitation Knotty Pine*. It's a wooden box in the shape of a trapezoid but he built it out of clear pine and then inlaid knots from knotty pine.

PD: Westermann assimilates so many categories: folk, found object, high craft, etc. He goes by, "Everything is made, to begin with! You just have to pay attention to what the differences bring." America has this great legacy of folk art, but because of the heavy contribution of modern art, people don't take folk art seriously. All of your work has this specific location of artifice, right between a sculpture that is highly fabricated and a sculpture that has touch, has the artist's hand in the making of it. It's a funny region... Tell me about that attitude.

CR: It's about getting it right, it's a specific object. Each sculpture has its own problems. Each has a separate level of fabrication that brings it to completion.

PD: That problem between pragmatics and the piece...

CR: It has to be made in a particular way, you have to form and shape it and give it birth.

I'm not interested in fabricating an idea.

Sculptures are shaped by both physical and mental processes. The initial bottle for *Puzzle Bottle* was one that I picked out after looking at bottles in stores for two months. Then I did a series of photographic studies. I tried different poses to get an idea, "Should there be a gesture?" Finally, I got the right pose that energized a relationship between the bottle and the figure. I wanted the sculpture to be about the space inside the bottle. I wanted this thing to happen between me and the bottle... I had found this bottle that I really liked, but the neck-hole was only nineteen millimeters, the standard size of any wine bottle. The figure breaks down to twenty-one parts, but to go through a nineteen millimeter hole it would have had to have been close to fifty parts.

So I said, "That's no problem, I'll just have one blown." So, I had a couple blown and the bottoms cut so I could look at the figure inside the bottle, but it looked like a collectible — like a bell jar — the figure was in the room with you. I wanted the figure to be in the space of the bottle. The original standard bottle is made in a mold. The glass was wavy and full of impurities so the sculpture has all these distortions that give it complexity. It worked because the figure is in another dimension. It's in the space of a bottle, it's like the genre of ship models in a bottle. But to get that neck open properly — you have no idea. To get the correct tensions everything had to be worked out...

PD: Is that a form of ambiguity?

CR: No. There's a relationship between the figure and the bottle, it's a form of an equation. Any bigger and you think he's being birthed out of it. Any smaller and he's a genie in a bottle landscape. I wanted an abstract space in the bottle that's dimensional just in terms of scale...

PD: Evolution and development: the learning and fabricating process that goes into each of your pieces... You suggest that those processes end up in the work in a concrete way, that the result of the problem solving and the equations that formed along the way cannot be cheated on. They're self-governing.

CR: Not that everything has a reason, but the right stuff has to be in there, somehow. No fat.

Over coffee at 211

PD: I've never seen anything graphic by you.

CR: I've never been able to draw. I doodle things and make cartoons. I hired a D.C. comic artist to do drawings for a book: I'm in bed and Superman busts through my wall. I'm in my pajamas and he's got me by the neck and he's saying, "Who the fuck is Roy Lichtenstein?"

PD: That's really good. What about Pop? You do seem to have a very intimate relationship with it.

CR: Its influence is so ubiquitous. Once the gate was open there was no shutting it. Not that everything is Pop, but it changed the way we look at things.

PD: Pop isn't what it's described as being. Warhol's work is literally an image problem, it's all about perception before it is about pop culture. Filmic ways of looking at things, camouflaging and packaging. That's why he was into the Brillo boxes, the multiple images, real-time filming of what was going down at the Factory. His curiosity is about the film of seeing.

You said you wanted an abstract piece in the bottle. Why is abstraction interesting to you these days?

CR: I'm interested in it in relation to subject matter.

PD: What's an example of a successful abstract piece of yours?

CR: I've been trying for a few years to make an abstract sculpture. I don't think of the earlier work or the cubes as abstract, they're too literal to be abstract. I was trying to find a crack, a genre, a thread, a contemporary realm, an avenue — something. Modernism is all sewed up. I couldn't find myself sculpturally.

PD: Abstraction is still largely untapped; it's only been around since 1920, like improvisational music. I think it still has a big future. I saw this great Dan Graham show the other day. I always thought his work was about architecture, but when I saw his things in person, in real time, they're totally abstract.

CR: You think at first it's really intellectual, but to me the work is about schizophrenia. I see its schism. It's really personal. Maybe abstraction is the wrong word, maybe non-representational, non-literal, something somewhere else. A lot of contemporary work is about fantasy, not the fantastic. I love Courbet. He's at the beginning of the avant-garde, which to me is a fight for a space, one kind of space or another. That's a simplistic way to put it. You fight for social space, a political space, an art space... But now the avant-garde is hierarchical. If you're hip you understand the avant-garde.

Everybody wants to be hip. But you can leave it out of your art maybe, just to be a little more inclusive.

PD: Yeah, Courbet was plugged into the real world.

CR: There's this great book by a Canadian, Margaret Visser, *Much Depends Upon Dinner*. She takes a common commodity, corn, and implodes the world on it. The whole world's economy is dependent on corn. Corn is in everything: that cheesecake, it's preserving that little flower over there, in the orange juice's thickener. The whole world implodes. I respect that so much. I try to do that in my work.

PD: She is doing the same kind of insane research that this favorite writer of mine does, Wolfgang Schivelbusch. Two great books by him are: *The Disenchanted Night* and *The Railroad Journey*.... *Night* charts the evolution of artificial light from fire and torches, to gas and public argon lights. The theories and strategies behind them. *The Railroad Journey* goes from horsedrawn carriages to their stylistic influence on railroad car design, what made the riders feel safe, unsafe. But in all his books he writes about the perceptual changes that come about with these metamorphoses which aren't linear at all. They leapfrog and backtrack for all sorts of different rationales.

But we're talking about a structural thing really, evolution and development. Schivelbusch goes to the libraries and finds all the missing vernacular links, a kind of formal archaeology of history. I would say that flip between the specific and the more archetypal is in your work, too.

CR: Yeah. It's not so much about trying on purpose to be accessible or pedestrian but if it doesn't work, it doesn't work.



CHARLES RAY, 'PUZZLE BOTTLE,' 1995, PAINTED WOOD IN GLASS BOTTLE, 13 X 4" DIAMETER, COURTESY THE ARTIST.