Charles Ray in Basel: guest review by Patrik Alvarez

As previewed on the green apfel, the Museum for Contemporary Art is currently showing an exhibit by American sculptor Charles Ray. Guest blogger Patrik Alvarez reviewed the exhibition for apfel readers.

The Kunstmuseum Basel, in collaboration with Museum für Gegenwartskunst, is currently showing a relevant exhibition of the works of US artist Charles Ray (Skulpturen 1997 – 2014, through 28 September 2014). The exhibit focuses the artist’s sculptural oeuvre from the last decade.

Relevant why? For whom? Because of the caliber of the artist or the show’s location? I would like to say both. Charles Ray (1953), born in Chicago and living in Los Angeles, is one of the most interesting established living artists on the contemporary sculptural scene. His biography is long enough to tell us the international resonance of his work. At least one of his sculptures here in the exhibition (Boy with Frog, 2009) was until recently displayed at the Biennale Venezia on the Punta della Dogana. But coming back to us: what could be relevant for us and our understanding?

If we consider the prevalence of abstraction in sculptural practice in the contemporary art scene, we can see in that practice an emerging affirmation. This is an affirmation of a lack of virtue in proportion, descriptive ability and not least a sense of beauty. These are all aesthetic tools we used to know and implement in order to appreciate and judge sculpture in the past. In the midst of this stratification of the abstraction, Ray has remained faithful to a more classical form of artistic research: the subject of the human figure.

Charles Ray
Boy with Frog, 2009
Edelstahl, bemalt, 244 x 75 x 105 cm
Ed. 1/1 + AP, Pinault Collection
© Charles Ray, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery
Foto: Charles Ray

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In these works from the last one and a half decades the recall of and confrontation with the past is very noticeable, specifically in the references to ancient Greco-Roman sculpture. But if in the early centuries sculpture was an art to celebrate human beauty and stories of divinity, then in Ray’s oeuvre the medium of sculpture is another way to try to understand a human sense of life. In his will to take distance from the contemporary abstraction of the media, Ray keeps the viewer on a tangible level of the vision that drives us to ponder on the fact of being. And because human life finds its limits in death, the artist shows us through the perfection of detail not only how much beauty can be seen in the human body, but at the same time how alienated human beings can be. Combining the disproportionate size effect with the verisimilitude of his subjects and bringing them into an optical isolation together, he points out a critical aspect of the quality of our life. It is as if he would argue with us about how we consider and appreciate life in its simple or rough form.

Looking at Sleeping Woman (2012), the figure of a homeless woman fast asleep on “her bench” of a town street, there is in the simplicity of the piece something surprising that makes reality seem so beautiful and so terrifying at the same time. Maybe it is in that sense of fragility that is Ray’s greatest achievement in his sculptures. His power of representation can be observed in such works as Unpainted Sculpture (1997): a

Charles Ray
Sleeping Woman, 2012
Massiver Edelstahl, 90 x 113 x 127 cm
Ed. 1/2 + AP, Glenstone
© Charles Ray, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery
Foto: Joshua White

Charles Ray
Unpainted Sculpture, 1997
Fiberglas, bemalt, 152 x 198 x 434 cm
Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis
crushed car so amazing well done in each detail and so strong in its figurative representation of a such an unhappy event.

Because sculpture, more than painting, takes consideration of the space, the room, and architectural environment, each work in the exhibition has to fulfill its space on its own. In a parallel consideration it can be said that every human being fulfills a space by himself – physical and temporal – and even if we are living in an era of social networking the great issues we face today are loneliness and psychological distress. If the magnificence of these works and the isolation of their display the artist offers a call to reflection. We can reflect on the body in space as if it would be human life itself trying to redefine its proportion and value. Rather than a confrontation Ray is inviting us to take a position in the room, physical and psychological, a position made up of beauty, irony and contradiction. By doing this we can consider those phenomena that make human life so unique, lovely and terrifying.

In this view of the exhibit Ray’s show in Basel is not only something delighting to our eyes but something full of the presence that allows sculpture to speak out and reach those who are captive.

By Patrik Alvarez

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