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Charles Ray, *The New Beetle*,  
 2006, stainless steel, paint,  
 21 x 34 1/2 x 28 1/2".









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 1/8" x 6' 6" x 14' 2 1/8". Charles Ray, *Tractor* (detail), 2005, aluminum, 62 1/4 x 109 1/2 x 53 1/8".



## 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.

ANDREI POP IS A POSTDOCTORAL FELLOW AT THE UNIVERSITY OF BASEL.