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 SLEEP—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 TIRE-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.


"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
sculpture in an attempt to renew traditions. "I'm wondering how to pull these things into the twenty-first century," he says.
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 teenager 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 naive 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 fiberglass 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 its 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 outer-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 1968, 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

"Your heart rate's good, but it shouldn't be beating under the floor like that."
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 something 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 striking 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’s interesting 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 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 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 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, 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 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 figuration. (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 fiberglass, and
resembling 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 pruned 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 ghostly 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 "quipulous 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 lifesize. 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 Gasparino-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 bed-sheet 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 insects 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 Dostoevsky 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?”

“What do women want, and how can we co-opt it?”

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