

Antiquity cast with a modern sheen

Classical figures boldly resound in an exceptional show in Chicago of Charles Ray's sculptures.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT
ART CRITIC

CHICAGO — Artists often turn to older art as a guidepost in developing new work. And why not? All art has a contemporary dimension, since it's chattering away today as surely as the day it was made, even if that was centuries ago. Listening to past art is simply a sensible thing to do.

Sometimes, though, the places in which an artist chooses to look are surprising.

For well over a dozen years, Los Angeles-based sculptor Charles Ray has been looking closely at the art of antiquity. Carved reliefs from ancient Mesopotamia, mythical beings from [See Ray, F7]



Art Institute of Chicago

CHARLES RAY'S "Sleeping Woman" is a stainless-steel nod to the reclining sculptures of old.

ART

Modern eye on the classical

[Ray, from F1] Periclean Athens and Hellenistic Greece and heroic figures from Imperial Rome now usefully resound in the work of one of today's most significant artists.

Classical education as a primary engine of modern knowledge, a faith born of the Age of Enlightenment, collapsed long ago. Since the widespread replacement of liberal arts and sciences with practical and professional training, antiquity has seemed ever more remote as a source of artistic inspiration.

Yet it's everywhere in "Charles Ray: Sculpture, 1997-2014," the exceptional survey on view at the Art Institute of Chicago through Oct. 4.

Amazons, Egypt's Akhenaten and Nefertiti, Ninevah's Ashurbanipal, sleeping Eros, the marble Kritios Boy, Aphrodite, the equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius on Rome's Capitoline Hill — ancient precedents hum within the artistic DNA of Ray's distinctive recent work.

He's not a copyist — not in the least. These sculptures and reliefs are not appropriation art. Instead, Ray has been absorbing the lessons of antiquity to infuse contemporary figurative sculpture with an imaginative inner life.

One astounding result is "Huck and Jim," a monumental new work based on Mark Twain's literary masterpiece. Grappling with America's struggle for a civilized society is a subject as relevant today as it was when Twain's book was published 130 years ago. Ray's sculpture, having its public debut here, is an extraordinary achievement.

Spare yet potent

The exhibition is presented in a spare and lovely installation in the museum's Modern Wing. It was organized by Bernhard Mendes Bürgi, director at the Kunstmuseum Basel, where it was seen last year, and Art Institute curator James Ronda. Lucky Chicago, where Ray was born in 1953, is its only American venue.

The show features just 19 sculptures from the past 17 years. Those numbers indicate the slow, steady care Ray lavishes on his production. Each work can require years to complete.

Take "Aluminum Girl," a 5-foot-tall standing nude fabricated from ductile metal and painted a matte, light-absorbent white. (Think chicken's egg.) This contemporary Aphrodite, completed in 2003 and his first in the classicizing genre, took shape over the course of six years.

Ray started it while deep into the production of "Unpainted Sculpture," one of several tour de force works. A smashed-up, 1991 Pontiac Grand Am was refabricated from scratch, fragment by twisted fragment. The actual wrecked car, which the artist found in a salvage yard, had been demolished in a fatal accident.

Ray made scores of molds representing each wrecked piece from the interior, exterior, engine compartment and trunk. A fiberglass model was cast from each mold.

Then, since the process resulted in parts slightly larger than the original, they had to be slightly altered so they could be fitted back together into a coherent whole. The finished object, not quite a doppelgänger but an uncanny approximation of life, rests lightly on the ground.

The finished car-wreck sculpture was smoothly spray-painted a light gray, unifying the voluptuous form and tamping down its expressionistic fervor. (Surfaces are critical in Ray's work, whether metal, wood or fiberglass, painted or unpainted.) As you move around it, the noncolor yields a fleeting shadow-play.

Someone unknown to us died violently in the crash that lurks in the sculpture's back story. But a sculpture is itself a bodily thing, even if the body is dead and gone. Ghosts lurk in this machine.

Solidly ethereal

"Unpainted Sculpture" is Ray's "Laocoön." That ancient, Hellenistic-style sculpture was dug up in Rome in 1506. (Michelangelo helped with restoration of its vivid, expressionistic forms.) As serpents strangle an agonized priest and his writhing sons, a bravura paradox emerges: Ideal beauty is embedded in a sculptural ensemble of suffering and death.

Magnificent decay is a central theme in "Hinoki," the artist's 32-foot-long sculptural twin of a massive, fallen oak tree. Ray, his studio crew and Japanese craftsmen spent years casting it in silicone and fiberglass and then carving out a look-alike from blocks of cypress.

In classical antiquity, cypress was a symbol of mourning. A wood sculpture that portrays decomposing wood will itself decompose over a span of centuries. "Hinoki" performs an excruciatingly slow-motion dance of cyclical life and death.



"HUCK AND JIM," making its public debut at Art Institute of Chicago, is an astounding achievement for L.A.-based Charles Ray.



"UNPAINTED SCULPTURE" re-creates a demolished Pontiac Grand Am that Ray happened upon in a salvage yard.

"Sleeping Woman" is Ray's nod to the recumbent sculptures of antiquity, which also inspired Brancusi's "Sleeping Muse." The vulnerability of a corpulent homeless woman asleep on a bench, head lightly resting on a bed roll, is remarkably conveyed in solid, machined stainless steel. Gravity pulls down on its visually buoyant form, which seems miraculously poised to drift on a gust of air.

An ethereal condition of suspended animation is transformed into something dense and tangible. Carefully burnished surfaces range between finely detailed and loosely abstract, sometimes shiny but mostly matte. Surfaces of liquid light draw the luminous energy of the space around her into the hefty sculpture's forbidding mass.

She's in a deep, dead sleep. If, on a fundamental level, traditional sculpture represents dormant consciousness, then "Sleeping Woman" is an entire genre's brilliant incarnation.

Last year Ray finished "School Play," a compact sculpture that traces his work's classical arc. A pre-teen boy is in costume to perform a Roman-themed theatrical production. Wrapped in a bedsheet toga and wearing beach sandals and a T-shirt tunic, he grasps an elaborate toy sword in his right hand.

Visually, the figure is encased within a snug vertical column.

Space is as tightly wound around him as his toga, weight evenly distributed on both feet. But Ray has made the solid, stainless-steel boy 6 feet tall — the size of an adult. The child becomes father of the man, a boy disconcertingly caught betwixt and between.

Lively interplay

The tensions between childhood and maturity constitute a recurrent theme in Ray's art. It's the core of "Huck and Jim," the breathtaking new work based on Mark Twain's "amazing, troubling book," as novelist Toni Morrison once described "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn."

Ray's two beautifully modulated figures are 150% life size. They're large enough to suggest the monumental place held in the American psyche by Twain's deceptively simple novel about a white boy and a runaway black slave fleeing down the Mississippi River, yet small enough to relate to a viewer's own body.

Both figures are unclothed. (The sculpture was designed for an outdoor plaza in front of the new Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, but the plan unsurprisingly fell apart over institutional nervousness about the nudity.) The 28-year-old man and the 14-year-old boy are shown in keeping with the steamy river narrative — "We was always naked, day and night, whenever the mosquitoes



"HORSE AND RIDER" is a self-portrait of the artist quite unlike the heroic equestrian sculptures throughout history.

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Go online to see a photo gallery with more sculptures from the Charles Ray exhibition.

would let us," Huck says — enhancing a sense of sculptural candor.

Jim stands tall, head slightly turned as if in watchful vigilance. Huck bends over, curious and making a scooping motion near the floor. A lively interplay of limbs, sturdy or limp, in the sculpture's lower half contrasts with the focused stillness above.

Ray explains in the show's fine catalog that the composition derives from a book passage about the origin of the night sky's twinkling stars. They've always been there, Huck assumes; Jim says no, they were laid there by the moon.

Huck allows that Jim's poetic possibility could be true, since he's seen a single frog lay thousands of eggs. That explains what he's scooping up from below.

Yet knowing this cosmic narrative isn't necessary to be moved by the sculpture. The transfixing moment comes in the open palm of Jim's right hand, which hovers just inches above vulnerable Huck's bent back. It's a gesture of reserved protectiveness just shy of human touch.

Twain's book is a knotty chronicle of childhood alienation, sometimes sober, sometimes comic. That little gap between Jim's hand and Huck's back electrifies Ray's sculpture — a space of disconnect between child and adult, black and white, worldly exploration and homey sanctuary, even the artist's hand and art's prohibition against touch. The gap may or may not ever close.

For all of their classical regard, Ray's sculptures don't look backward. His work is not Neo-Classical.

Nor does it clamor for a "return to order" in our time of chaotic upheaval, like the one in the grim wake of the First World War that marked the 1920s Neo-Classical Modernism of Picasso, De Chirico and the New Objectivity movement. The 21st century may be spinning off its axis, but Ray's refined aura is absent starry-eyed idealization.

Instead, a humanitarian resolve distinguishes his work. When Ray quietly depicts himself as a jeans- and loafer-clad rider on horseback in a full-scale equestrian sculpture now installed in the museum's garden, he's neither Bellerophon astride Pegasus nor some imperial general coercing awe. He's just a shrewd and intuitive artist with an animal determination to feel his way through.

christopher.knight@latimes.com