



THE ART WORLD

SHOCKS OF THE SUBLIME

Charles Ray's sculptures.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

“Charles Ray: Figure Ground,” at the Metropolitan Museum, is a succinct retrospective of nineteen works from the more than five-decade-long career of America’s most enthralling contemporary sculptor. Ray is an artistic and philosophical provocateur whose ever-startling creations look back in spirit, if rarely in appearance, to the sublimity of ancient Greek art. Labor-intensive recent works—often figurative pieces that he develops in clay before they are machined from single blocks of aluminum or stainless steel, or carved in solid cypress by Japanese woodworkers under his direction—rivet and bemuse. Take “Mime” (2014), a life-size aluminum representation of an eponymous male

performer lying supine on a cot and, with eyes closed, pretending (one may assume) to be asleep or dead. The work isn’t a description. It’s a thing, splitting a stylistic difference between realism and abstraction. Just to begin comprehending it you must walk around to absorb, from several angles, aspects of its resistantly gleaming, reflective surface.

“Space is the sculptor’s primary medium,” Ray once said. The point is emphasized at the Met by the dispersal of individual pieces in two cavernous rooms. The prevalent emptiness becomes an aesthetic stimulus in itself, as you wander the installation. Each item, sampling Ray’s multifarious subjects and means, scores a dis-

crete shock. “Family Romance” (1993), in painted fibreglass and synthetic hair, depicts a dad, a mom, a young son, and a toddler daughter, lined up with hands joined. All are naked and exactly the same height, scaled to the average stature of a child eight or so years old. The piece is fraught with inexplicable emotion and, once seen, apt to take up permanent residence in your memory.

“Family Romance” stands in for other works, not in the show, with which Ray has returned to the vulnerabilities and fascinations of boyhood—sometimes uncannily Oedipal in implication. “The New Beetle” (2006), in white-painted steel, portrays a nude boy who is transfixed as he plays with a large toy car, likely fancying himself grownup and masterly. Reversing that power dynamic, “Father Figure” (2007) is an intimidatingly colossal derivation, in solid steel painted green, black, and silver, of an antique toy farm tractor with a beefy bloke at the wheel. It weighs eighteen and a half tons.

Ray was born in 1953, in Chicago,

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Ray’s “Reclining Woman” (2018) is among the sculptor’s works on display at the Met, where each piece is a provocation.

to parents who ran a commercial-art school. Studying at the University of Iowa and at Rutgers University, he was inspired by the formalist mode in assembled abstract sculpture which was prominent then, practiced most notably by the British artist Anthony Caro. Around the same time, Ray was alert to emergent trends in post-minimalist performance art. He added the human body to his materials, starting with the one that he occupied. Photographs in the Met show, taken in 1973, find him, hippie-haired, held aloft against a studio wall by a leaning wooden plank from which he passively dangles, bent at his waist or his knees. The effect is at once borderline hilarious and eerily elegant: truly sculptural, albeit temporary.

Ray continued to pursue gamy self-portraiture, always enigmatic, as when he modified a commercial male mannequin by inserting a sculpted set of his own genitals. He designed clothes for other mannequins, which, mostly larger than life, he acquired or fabricated: somewhat terrifyingly imperious businesswomen, for example, or, as in the show, a fatuously beaming boy in cute suspender shorts. (Does this 1992 piece, "Boy," enact mockery or self-mockery? Both, I reckon.) Along the way, Ray veered for a spell into abstracted still-life. The plexiglass top of "Table" (1990) and its visually continuous supported objects in clear acrylic, lacking bottoms, generate a dizzying oneness of space and light.

Early on, Ray could seem a merry misanthrope, with a baited animus that, as I think back, puts me in mind of Voltaire, say: attractive in tone, mordant in payoff. The first work by Ray that I ever encountered, thirty-some years ago, at an out-of-the-way Los Angeles gallery, is not in the show. It looked to be a mid-size minimalist cube painted with glossy black enamel. Don't touch art works? Really, don't. Likely oblivious of the title, "Ink Box" (1986), some miscreant viewers had discovered the hard way that the cube's top was brimful of printer's ink, one of the world's filthiest substances. When I visited the gallery, its white walls were

streaked with the hysterical smears of soiled fingers.

The Met show features another Ray booby trap from that period, "Rotating Circle" (1988), which appears to be a circle drawn on a wall but is the edge of an embedded disk that, motorized, spins imperceptibly at a fantastic speed. Touch that and your fingertip would have cause for complaint. When I first saw the piece, at a Whitney Biennial, I furtively experimented with cellophane from a cigarette pack: *brrrp!*

Many if not most ambitious young creative folk bear the world a grudge for having failed to note their genius from the get-go. Ray's tyro aggressiveness certainly signalled an impatience to make an immediate mark—or dent—in art history. The attitude soon stabilized as a principled boldness, impelling him to do things that were spectacularly hard to pull off and predictable only in triggering surprises.

These have included "Hinoki" (2007), which is modelled on an immense, hollow, drastically rotted oak log, more than thirty feet long, that Ray came across near a rural roadside. Ray has said that it took some ten years of concerted toil to yield a fanatically faithful cypress effigy. Why? More to the point, why not? All art-making is gratuitous. "Hinoki," owned by the Art Institute of Chicago and not present at the Met, essentializes passionate uselessness—something you would have to do only because you had thought of it and then need never do again—for its own daft sake, and, by the by, looks terrific.

Ray has risked controversy in recent years with two monumental stainless-steel renditions of incidents from "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," Mark Twain's classic tale of the pre-Civil War South. The Whitney Museum had commissioned "Huck and Jim" (2014) as a sculpture for its plaza. The figures are nude. The runaway boy bends to scoop something, not represented, from the ground. (The piece was initially conceived as a fountain, with the figures in shallow water and the unseen element a sculpted bunch of frog's eggs.) The adult fugitive slave stands behind him, watchfully gazing into the distance and ex-

tending a hand palm down in a gesture that, hovering above Huck, seems protective. Homoerotic, too? Your call.

"Sarah Williams" (2021) finds Jim clothed and kneeling behind a standing Huck, but only to fashion the boy's expedient disguise as a girl to research home-town opinions of his delinquency. The pose ironizes a trope of master and servant. Jim is in charge. Both works reek of ambiguity, reflecting on a nation that was, as it remains, riddled with racism. Twain's fable of a redemptive bond, at once antic and desperately moving, didn't let either himself or his readers off the hook of that entrenched obscurity. (The contrary, rather.) Nor does Ray when it comes to both himself and the sculptures' viewers.

Fears of protest, perhaps as reactive to Twain's novel as to Ray's emulative audacity, aborted the Whitney's plan for "Huck and Jim." A version of the piece, waterless and white, debuted, indoors, at the Art Institute of Chicago, in 2015. Such, now, is a peril in American art of any racial symbolism, unless managed to authentic ends by certain Black artists. Still a formalist at root, Ray has cruised for a bruising when, however tactfully, he touches on social relevance. I would not have imagined him going too far in that vein, but one work in the show troubles me: "Archangel" (2021), a huge wooden carving identified as Gabriel—revered alike in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim religious lore—appearing to alight from Heaven.

Ray says that he updated the seraph, sensuously handsome and clothed only in rolled-up jeans and flip-flops, in response to terrorist atrocities in France, such as the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre, in 2015. Though beautiful, the result strikes me as well-meaning to a fault—we-are-the-world sentimental, unlike the cryptic embodiments of Huck and Jim. Who is Ray, or any one person, to presume a universally healing mission in tortuously complicated times? I hope that "Archangel" proves to be a passing tour de force among a tremendous artist's disciplined sallies, reliably multivalent in meaning, across aesthetic and thematic frontiers that, but for him, we wouldn't know existed. ♦