

For three decades now **CHARLES RAY** has been considered one of the foremost American sculptors. His works question empirical truths, while occupying physical and conceptual space. 7 1/2 Ton Cube, a 91-centimeter white cube of solid steel, looks easily portable but it actually measures the weight of gravity; Firetruck, a toy truck the size of a real one, posits a child's memory against reality; Unpainted Sculpture, a fiberglass copy of a wrecked car in which a person died is like a modern-day Pieta; Log, the 10-meter-long hollow trunk Ray cut up and cast in fiberglass, and then sent off to be carved in Japanese cypress by master woodcarver Yuboku Mukoyoshi, is hyperrealistic. Ray's pieces are magisterial in their making, and unforgettable as **sculptural gestures**. This is a rare interview with an artist whose energies are drawn so profoundly from the natural world and human history.

interview and portrait by **ALEX ISRAEL**

Artwork images courtesy of the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery, New York



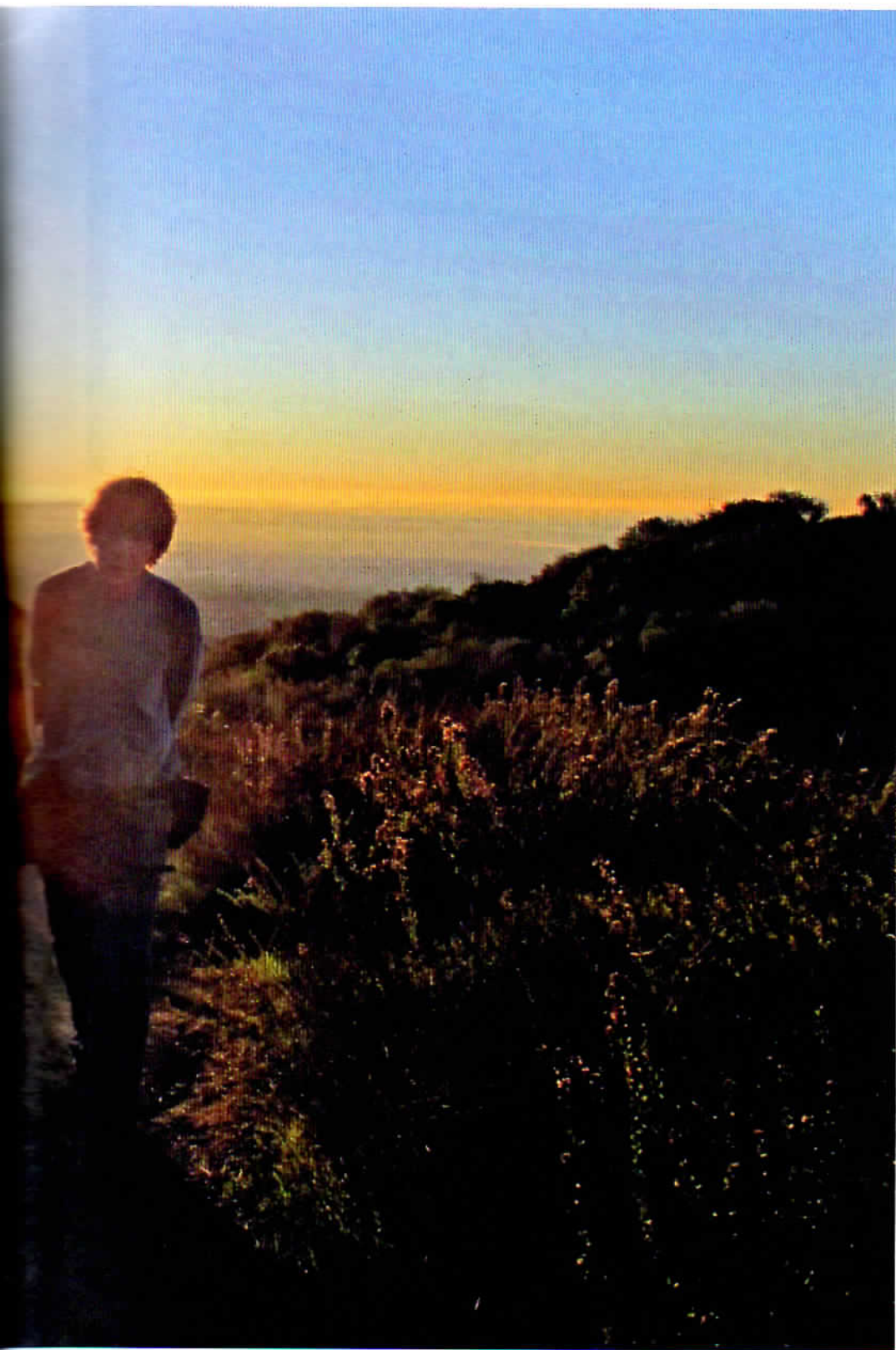
It's 5:45 A.M. At Charles Ray's request, I'm making my way toward the cabin at the entrance of Temescal Canyon Park. Moments later Charley — as he prefers to be called — arrives in his silver Prius. He takes me to the beginning of the looping five-mile trail he climbs every morning. The trail begins in the woods and it's still moonlit this early in the day. Feelings of wonder and fear lie at every turn. As we work our way uphill our eyes adjust as night slowly turns to day. The gold California light leaks over the mountaintops and silences

the hooting owls. The expansive view reveals Los Angeles and the Pacific Ocean.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Tell me about your connection to nature.*

CHARLES RAY — It's wonderful to be here early in the morning. We couldn't do this hike just anywhere, because in most other places it gets too cold. We're on the edge of a system of parks called The Big Wild. It's quite amazing. We're in the middle of LA and we can hear owls. Two months ago a mountain

lion wandered into the Pacific Palisades in the middle of the night. A bobcat came into my yard last year. The birds, the whales at sea, seeing the sunrise on the ocean — it's all so expansive. I'm not a nature nut. It's not my life, but this beats a home gym. I hike the same trail loop day after day. We could talk about it as being exercise, but there are other aspects of the hike: the subtlety of the different smells, and the slow temporal quality of the seasons changing in Southern California. There's a moment in April when this whole place is in



flowers. The wildflowers are out for about two weeks and then in the summer it's all brown. The trail connects me to my childhood. Down here in the woods, it's like being a kid. It's scary in the dark — the different sounds of the owls, the footfalls of the animals in the brush, and the shadows. Then, as you climb, you become aware of the dawn, the city, and the universe.

ALEX ISRAEL — *You've spoken about certain works you've made that came out of your childhood experiences, like Boy [1992], referring to a time you had to wear a sailor suit, or Firetruck [1993], when you brought a toy firemen's truck to a party and felt embarrassed about being too old to be playing with a toy truck. Does much of your work come from specific memories or experiences?*

CHARLES RAY — A lot does, I think. It doesn't happen in a moment where I'm thinking about *this* story or *that* party. The work is suddenly conceived, but those things come out later, as I'm working on, or thinking about, the piece.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Are your daily hikes a way to re-experience childhood?*

CHARLES RAY — No, not intentionally. But inevitably I do just that, because the experience is like childhood — like the fear of being eaten up by animals in the dark woods.

ALEX ISRAEL — *You're scaring me!*

CHARLES RAY — It could actually happen higher up because it's further from the road. But that childhood-like experience of fear, the intensity of a relationship to the woods, is stronger down here in the dark. It makes no sense, but as you climb everything becomes more apollonian. Your mind drifts out of the shadows and the light trickles in from behind the mountains, and you start seeing the city, the moon going down, and the ocean.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Your drawings of flowers have a childlike quality.*

CHARLES RAY — Doing them, and responding to my mistakes — the aesthetic process of *working directly* — is what happens with the flower drawings. They're something I do at home at night, and if I make a mistake I simply do something to correct it. If I fall asleep and my hand goes whoosh, the next day I have to fix it. It sounds superficial, and maybe it is, but for me it's about the activity of doing them. There's a kind of immediacy that I experienced when I was a kid, sliding things around, thinking about them.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Do you make an effort to observe kids to reconnect with these ideas?*

CHARLES RAY — No. I wouldn't want to be young again, not for anything. There's a real beauty in not reliving things, but to



Firetruck, 1993, painted aluminum, fiberglass, and plexiglass, 12 x 8 x 46 1/2 feet, photo by Ari Mintz

loop back through childhood, and have your eyes momentarily opened as they were in childhood.

ALEX ISRAEL — *You make this hike every day, and I've gathered from our exchanges that your days follow a kind of pattern when the hike is over: you visit the studio, go sailing, visit your fabricator's workshop, or teach, and then you spend time with your wife, Sylvia. Has it always been a kind of routine?*

CHARLES RAY — I think so.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Is this symptomatic of how you were raised, of attending a military academy high school?*

CHARLES RAY — Yeah, I'm very disciplined. Even if I'm late, I can't leave the house without making the bed.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Where did you study art?*

CHARLES RAY — I went to The University of Iowa. I studied sculpture primarily.

ALEX ISRAEL — *You studied with the British sculptor Anthony Caro. Did his work impact your own?*

CHARLES RAY — I was in the right place at the right time, and I became the artist I am because of it. The experience was a perfect fit for me — it made some sort of beautiful sense. I could express myself intellectually through this particular activity. At that moment in time I totally understood it and pulled it into myself. I don't see a break from Caro's in my work — it's as if I just got over that way of making sculpture and moved further. My work just developed from that.

ALEX ISRAEL — *There's a Caro sculpture on the cover of your retrospective catalogue, and again on the cover of a catalogue for a group exhibition you curated in 2006.*

CHARLES RAY — That work, Caro's *Early One Morning*, is very interesting to experience in real life — what happens when you walk around it. It's from 1962 and it's very prophetic. It was very much born out of a moment in time, and it's very alive. It accords space as you walk around it: those 30 feet just compress.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Does this occur because from one angle it's entirely foreshortened?*

CHARLES RAY — Yes, it's foreshortened because of its easel component, but the sensation occurs for many different reasons. It's not the sculpture that's breathing — the whole room is compressing and expanding. Here's a good example of my relationship to Caro: *The Big Lady, Fall '91*. It works like an accordion too, but in a different way. I'm not interested in *The Big Lady* as an image, as a big Barbie doll, and that's why it's still such

a difficult work to show. She really has to look like a mannequin in a department store, but it's seemingly impossible to explain that to people, including the collector who owns the piece. You need a window dresser or a display expert to deal with the piece every three or four days, to fix the hair, straighten everything up, get the wrinkles out of the clothes, and clean it all up. She gets all disheveled. It has to be perfect. It's because the work is hallucinatory. It's like the burning bush. You walk up to it and you shrink — or it grows. That kind of spatial fluidity is what happens with it. I didn't necessarily start off thinking, "How do I make a contemporary *Early One Morning*?" It doesn't work that way. These things are simply carried around in me, through my artwork, and from being in the studio and working. They kind of stream out intuitively, arriving in the present. I'm constantly editing. *The Big Lady* was originally a male figure with a big hand. These things edited themselves out, and sort of tumbled and rolled along, like Caro's eyebeams: moving around the studio floor until they locked together aesthetically.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Is it about searching for the moment when everything comes together, trial after trial?*

CHARLES RAY — Yes. I'm trying to make a piece. I'm trying to end up somewhere. But trial after trial implies being in a lab, like trying to come up with a new pill. For me, the activity that's going on has its own beauty. It becomes a way of life, rolling along with this thing.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Knowing when to stop must be difficult.*

CHARLES RAY — Stopping can be both difficult and a relief. That moment of stopping — what constitutes a finished piece — that has really changed for me over the years. Maybe *The Big Lady* was in my head when it stopped. "Okay, I'll try it this way and commit and move forward, hire a mannequin sculptress, go shopping for the clothes, and find a tailor to make them."

ALEX ISRAEL — *I read about how you showed The Big Lady, Fall '91 in Helter Skelter, the show curated by Paul Schimmel at LA MOCA in 1992. Viewers saw it in the distance, and then approached it, experiencing this accordion-like scale-shift as they got closer to it.*

CHARLES RAY — That was the only time it was shown correctly. Since then, every time it's been shown you end up right on top of it. You have this experience solely of *The Big Lady*, not of the abstractness of the thing moving, shifting in space.

ALEX ISRAEL — *How much space does it need?*

CHARLES RAY — That's something I used to think I could tell people. But I can't, because it's about the eye. It's about sensitivity to the space. It's about the quality of how the thing gets embedded in the space.

ALEX ISRAEL — *You've lived, worked, and taught in Los Angeles for 30 years. Do you feel a relationship with the other LA artists?*

CHARLES RAY — Maybe in aspects of my work I see a tie-in, but I also see things going another way. In a certain sense, I've tried to get people to stop making that connection, because it isn't what drives me forward. I guess any artist would say something like that.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Do you find inspiration here in the city?*

CHARLES RAY — Yeah, but I find it more generally in America.

ALEX ISRAEL — *What is it specifically about America that inspires you?*

CHARLES RAY — When I say America, I guess I mean the West. LA is American and suburban and it has the ocean. I'm drawn to water.

ALEX ISRAEL — *You seem to take full advantage of being in LA, in terms of your leisure activity.*

CHARLES RAY — LA has been a great place to lose myself and get away. I've sailed almost every day for the last ten years. **How I live, taking advantage of**

being outdoors,

getting up early, going to bed early,

thinking about things, the openness of space

— all those things

have influenced my work.

So yes, one could tie that to LA. I'm just not so much tied to the scene.

I see myself more as a sculptor than as an LA artist.

I've made sculpture in Europe and I find it more difficult, because of language issues, and issues of just getting around and getting things I need. I'm really comfortable in LA, because I live here and I know where to go and how to find things. In terms of fabrication it's really helpful to be here, so close to my fabricators, and to work one-on-one, rather than by telephone.

ALEX ISRAEL — *You've also said that the real medium of your work is space.*

CHARLES RAY — I meant space in a very general way — as the sculptor's primary tool. For instance, the mannequins came out of being in a lot of shopping malls and thinking about contemporary figuration via the mannequin. I could've been in New Jersey or



Untitled, 2003, ink on paper, 26 x 40 inches, photography courtesy of Art Institute of Chicago

Chicago. The real driving force of my work is formal constructivism.

ALEX ISRAEL — *In terms of American popular culture, what do you look at? Do you watch television?*

CHARLES RAY — No.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Do you go to the movies?*

CHARLES RAY — Not very much. I fall asleep in them.

ALEX ISRAEL — *What about music?*

CHARLES RAY — My wife Sylvia listens. I've never listened to music. I listen to more now because of Sylvia's interest in it.

ALEX ISRAEL — *What have you been reading lately?*

CHARLES RAY — A lot about Native Americans — the Comanche, in particular — America's western expansion, the Comanche Barrier, and the Great Plains.

ALEX ISRAEL — *What sparked your interest?*

CHARLES RAY — A book called *Comanche Moon*,

which is about the last Comanche chief, whose name I can't pronounce. It's a long beautiful Indian name. His brother's name was Peanuts. Take Crazy Horse. He was Sioux, but the Sioux hated the word Sioux. They preferred the many other names of their sub-tribes, such as the Lakota. The man we now know as Crazy Horse — who fought at Little Big Horn when he was 26 or 27 — got his name from his father, who was a highly respected chief of the Lakota. He gave his son his own name, Crazy Horse, and took on the name Worm for himself.

ALEX ISRAEL — *That's humbling.*

CHARLES RAY — Well, we have one idea of a worm and maybe they had another. I thought that was quite interesting.

ALEX ISRAEL — *How has your interest in Native American culture developed?*

CHARLES RAY — I wish I could articulate it. It feels connected to things I'm thinking about. It's fun to read older historians and compare their views to how we look at things now.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Are you researching for work or just reading for pleasure?*

CHARLES RAY — Research and pleasure are the same thing for me.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Hiking this loop has got me thinking about looping, and about the related phenomenon of spinning in your work, like Spinning Spot [1987], Rotating Circle [1988], and Revolution Counter-Revolution [1990]. Frances Stark, the artist who stars in your work, Fashions [1996], is consistently spinning in the film. Then there's the items positioned on the table in Tabletop [1988]. Even the boy in The New Beetle [2006] seems to be frozen mid-spin. I'm curious to know why spinning is such a recurring theme in your work?*

CHARLES RAY — Spinning is like energy that disappears. It might have something to do with simple physics. When I made the rotating floor and wall pieces I was reading a lot about physics.

ALEX ISRAEL — *But when you spin, physically, it makes you sick. Is that a related effect?*

CHARLES RAY — You're thinking about



the whirligig or carnival aspect of spinning. Spinning is hypnotic. It grabs your attention. Even when you're little you like to look at rotation. Kids love tornadoes and whirlpools. When you're a kid you can stare at a fan forever.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Or at a mobile spinning above a crib.*

CHARLES RAY — Mobiles are very hypnotic. It's wonderful to think that Alexander Calder invented the mobile. He didn't just use it — he *invented* it! That's an achievement. Such a simple thing. People have been hanging things from hooks since the beginning of time. When I was doing the discs people talked about them as a commodity fetish: taking a phenomenon and solidifying it.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Yes, the phenomenon of spinning.*

CHARLES RAY — Philosophers have long thought about the nature of things, beginning with Plato's cave. Kitchen philosophers talk about salt and pepper shakers. The whipped cream in your glass is talked about in chaos

theory. Spinning has an authority that really holds you.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Like if you walk into a room and someone is spinning, you're going to look at that person.*

CHARLES RAY — Or at an object turning. Sometimes I think about how, when people meet, they can say one thing while thinking another. We can't access each other's minds — and some people are terrifying. Spinning was also about that for me: it was mental. That's why *Rotating Circle* took the form of a disc set at the height of my head — it became more of a portrait. I guess one way to look at it is as an equivalent to mental intensity that is felt but can't always be let out.

ALEX ISRAEL — *So spinning is an abstract way of signifying intense mental activity.*

CHARLES RAY — Yeah, but that sounds wrong, doesn't it?

ALEX ISRAEL — *You don't like it when things are translated into quips or phrases, do you?*

CHARLES RAY — I really don't. That's why I make sculptures. I express myself through the sculptures — and I talk about them, as well. I'm not against talking about them. Maybe it's like a pre-literate's fear of names. Like Ishi, which means *man* [the last survivor of the Yana group of California Native Americans]. He never told his true name, his Indian name, to white people.

ALEX ISRAEL — *How are you thinking about your recent figurative sculptures?*

CHARLES RAY — In my mind, the new figurative work I've been making is relational. If you see the figure as a manifold of sculptural events unfolding, you can see the relationship to Anthony Caro.

ALEX ISRAEL — *How are these sculptural events to be understood?*

CHARLES RAY — In a sculptural sense — in a way of thinking unique to sculpture. The sculptural sense is what makes a pure idea so *here*. What's often lost to us is the votive quality of a sculpture. We're lost

to the urge to celebrate, whatever that is. It's why the sculpture of a young man, a Kouros from the fifth century B.C. in Greece, can still work today. A lot of contemporary artwork has such qualities. That's what makes them powerful: the sculptural sense. I don't mean that it works because it's pretty. I mean that it's still a machine producing meaning: a meaning machine. I want to make a meaning machine, and the only way I can do that — since I can't do it through writing or talking or giving lectures — is sculpturally. I see the potential for sculptures. Sometimes I use pre-existing meanings. Things are of their time. But as a sculptor, I ask myself things like, does *Oh! Charley, Charley, Charley...* [1992] depend too much on...

ALEX ISRAEL — *Virtual time?*

CHARLES RAY — Yes, on virtual reality, on kinky sex. Or is something else going on in it sculpturally that creates another meaning? That's actually what I'm trying to say, and what I'm after.

ALEX ISRAEL — *It's like you're trying to create a machine.*

CHARLES RAY — One that I can potentially create, sculpturally. Sculptures are like people, in that you see them more fully over time. Some of the things that you knew at the beginning, that worked, may end up not being important in the end. Or the things that you liked, which oftentimes are trite, may drive you away later. It's all very tricky. But the more one becomes aware of one's sculptural vocabulary, the more evident the danger of losing the urgency of one's direction becomes. I'm not trying to deny the subject, because the subject is important. Do you think a subject can have urgency?

ALEX ISRAEL — *I think a subject has the potential to be urgent. But it's difficult to equate subject with urgency. Firemen's trucks won't always be urgent, because maybe there won't be firemen's trucks in 150 years.*

CHARLES RAY — I'm sure that there won't be. But one doesn't make art for the future. I don't, anyway. Meaning is generated in the present.

ALEX ISRAEL — *But like you said, the Kouros keeps generating meaning thousands of years later. Don't you hope that your work will, too?*

CHARLES RAY — Yes, but art isn't about immortality or the future. The Kouros was generating the same meaning when it was made. It was just made so well.

ALEX ISRAEL — *But you suggested that when it was made it had a votive meaning, which may have had something to do with its subject matter, a young male.*

CHARLES RAY — Well, maybe there won't be dogs made of balloons in a hundred years, either, but the beauty of Jeff Koons' *Balloon Dog* is that you could take a sledgehammer to one leg, crack it, ding it up, and it would still work — the thing is so sculptural,

ALEX ISRAEL — *As an abstract object?*

CHARLES RAY — Yeah, but there's a soul in its form.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Do you think a naked figure can be an urgent form?*

CHARLES RAY — In itself, no. For me, starting from the figure, clothed or naked, just feels very, I won't say urgent, but that I like it at the moment because it's really basic. I don't have to go too far to find a form to start working from. For me, it's not ultimately about revealing the naked figure or some feeling about it. You asked me what I meant by events unfolding upon the figure. Well, *Boy with Frog* [2009], for example, has within it three forms of representation.

ALEX ISRAEL — *I haven't seen it in person. Do you mean the way the form is rendered? Some parts being smoothed out or stylized, and other parts being highly detailed?*

CHARLES RAY — Yeah, there are three forms of representation used on the sculpture: a natural effect, a much more stylized effect, and a super-realistic effect, which isn't necessarily naturalistic. How those effects interact and intersect is one aspect of the work. Then it's how you move through the sculpture and process it. It's not just an image.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Are you saying it's about the experience of letting your eyes roll from one form of representation to the next?*

CHARLES RAY — How long does it take your eye to get from a toe to the frog? I'm sure a lot of people see it solely as an image of a boy and a frog, and then they try to kiss the frog. You can see it different ways, but there is a strong image there.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Very strong. That's what's so interesting. But seeing the piece in person is completely different from seeing it on the Internet or in books.*

CHARLES RAY — The meaning isn't just a boy with a frog. Anyone could have done that. You could ask someone to make it.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Why is it white?*

CHARLES RAY — That's a really good question. I knew that the paint would have to be fairly consistent so that the actual relationships I talked about before could come out, and they come out strongest in white. When I see a classical Greek sculpture that was once

painted, I always imagine a restorer thinking about what color he should use to repaint it — and then just leaving it alone.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Would you say that white sculptures have a timeless quality?*

CHARLES RAY — That's one reason I'm not into white. Maybe a better way to put it is that I didn't know how to paint it. The intersection with classical sculpture — I don't know if that's problematic for me or not.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Why do you say that Boy with Frog has within it three forms of representation?*

CHARLES RAY — **Look at his face — it's out of focus. It looks like an old weathered sculpture.**

The feet and certain other aspects are very natural looking. The frog is hyper-real. And there are really specific sculptural reasons for all of those choices. That's where my energy lies, not in the simplistic image of a boy with a frog.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Why include the frog, then?*

CHARLES RAY — François Pinault commissioned the work three weeks before I found out that I had to have an operation on my heart. Frogs are the first animal kids cut open and look inside in science class. It also comes from chapter nineteen of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. It's such a beautiful passage. Huck and Jim are on the river one night, looking up at the stars. Twain describes the river and the spatial quality around them. Jim and Huck are discussing whether the stars were made or just were. Huck thinks they just were. Jim says they were made. Huck thinks about it and says something like, "I once saw a frog laying eggs, so I reckon they could've been made." Have you ever seen a frog laying eggs? It's like a billion eggs coming out the back of it.

ALEX ISRAEL — *They leave a trail?*

CHARLES RAY — Yeah, they leave a trail that looks like the Milky Way. It's really beautiful. And the boy holding the frog in my sculpture is looking at the other. A frog is the first thing that I ever blew up when I was an adolescent.

ALEX ISRAEL — *The first thing you ever blew up?*

CHARLES RAY — Yeah, killed.

ALEX ISRAEL — *You killed a frog?*

CHARLES RAY — Sure. It's your other. It's something kids pick up. The boy in the sculpture is coming to grips with this

thing that isn't him. Which is the struggle: to actually stop and look at things that aren't you. It's really hard.

ALEX ISRAEL — *But he's also looking at something that is him, because, as you said, a frog is one of the first things you cut open. By doing that you relate it to your body, your own biology to that of the frog.*

CHARLES RAY — Yeah, that's a good point.

ALEX ISRAEL — *But, is all this kind of beside the point of a sculpture?*

CHARLES RAY — No, not at all. But that's when I sound like I'm contradicting myself.

ALEX ISRAEL — *So they're just two things working in tandem, the sculptural and the imagistic?*

CHARLES RAY — In the end, I can't separate them. Honestly, how can they be separated? I wait, and after time passes I hope the sculpture still does something, like you said about the firemen's truck going away.

ALEX ISRAEL — *When frogs are extinct.*

CHARLES RAY — I hope that someday, when there's no more *Huckleberry Finn*, and when frogs are extinct, and when François Pinault is long gone, there will also be no more biology classes, and that the thing, *Boy with Frog*, will somehow still work.

END

