A Sculpture Gnaws, and Spectators Feel It

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every aspect of the piece.

Just the noonies on "Mountain Lion" have occupied his mind for a year — he doesn’t "encourage" them, he said, but it often can’t be helped. "Sculpture and scenes are like beavers and broken noses. They go hand in hand."

The five new pieces in the show represent a large portion of the work he has completed since his 2014-15 retrospective, which may help explain why they cost between $2 million and $8 million each. For a major artist, Mr. Ray produces very little. "I work very slowly," he said.

Mr. Ray had completed a sterling silver version with a rich gleam that made it hard to look away from. Next to it was a stainless steel version that required more polishing. "The plant is like video, with all the realism and information, and the silver is like cinema, it’s warm and emotional," said Mr. Ray, 64, who is known to all as Carle. Some 40 people have had a hand at some point in the several-year process making the work. It began with having a real moun-

tain lion in his studio, gnawing at a steak that was nailed to a piece of wood.

The piece was inspired by the sculptor’s long walks in the hills above Los Angeles, where the wild cats prowl, and also by a Greek marble sculpture, "Lion Attacking a Horse," that Mr. Ray saw at the J. Paul Getty Museum.

But ask what it's about, and you'll get a sideways answer. "One could say I've spent a great deal of time making very little of my subject matter," Mr. Ray said with a wide smile.

James Rouse, the president and director of the Art Institute of Chicago and organizer of Mr. Ray's retrospective there, said that the artist creates "vehicles that pick you up somewhere and drop you off somewhere else."

"They're not narrative," he added. "He's making figurative sculptures relevant in the present tense, but connecting it to a long continuum of art history.

Another way it's sculpture density packed with references, which is why the critic Hal Foster called him "Brazilian for art historians."

The public has at times had a different reaction, as has institutions that faced controversy, particularly with his nude.

Mr. Ray is perhaps best known for "Roy With Frog" (2010), commissioned by the luxury goods tycoon François Pinault for the plaza in front of the Piazza della Du-

gana, his museum in Venice, but later removed. The nude sculpture was believed by many, but offensive to others — though it is a degree of provocativeness carrying the work into a room and grabbing people's attention," Mr. Ray said.

From the start, the art world has esti-
mated his work: "He has a complete understan-
ding of the world between conceptual ideas and the world of form, and the way they are integrated," said the artist Laura Owens, who first met Mr. Ray some 20 years ago when he hired her for her first teaching job, at L.C.L.A., where he ran the sculpture program.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art's classical collection, in particular a Greek kouros, of a naked young man — has long been a source of inspiration, particularly for Mr. Rays "Aluminum Girl" (2001), the first in his series of white-painted metal figures.

It is on view at the Met Breuer in the exhibition "Like Life: Sculpture, Color and the Body (1100 to Now)."

Sheena Wagstaff, the chairwoman of the modern and contemporary department at the Met and co-organizer of "Like Life," said, "The first time I ever visited him in L.A., he was reading Pity's That's net your normal studio visit.

On the day of the foundation visit, Mr. Ray was digging into the details of his sculptures like a Renaissance carver, though his assistants make the actual marks. He pointed to various areas on the finely hatched belly of the dog — in this piece, the canine's spine vulnerability gives the piece his signature strangeness.

"There are marks from a clay tool, some are natural, but others are like a Japanese comic book, or like a Lichtenstein," he said. "They are not randomly applied on there — and that's what took a long time."

At lunch in an Irish pub after his foundation visit, Mr. Ray told one of his signature goofy stories about how he sent a sculpture to a collector and I sent 12 empty crates along with it. I said the 12 empty crates is the space that goes around it." He added, "He was totally broken out."

It was a joke, or maybe more of a wish, since he advocates lots of air around his sculptures. For the Matthew Marks show, Mr. Ray spread three works in one building and, in an adjacent space next door, installed just two more.

You could say that Mr. Ray leaves room for the uncanny wherever he goes.