

# Sculpture in a Cultural Space

In conversation with Hal Foster, the artist Charles Ray discusses his work's relationship to ancient reliefs, modern sculpture, and other works of art.

**Charles Ray** and **Hal Foster**

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13 min. read

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**Charles Ray: Figure Ground**, on view at The Metropolitan Museum of Art from January 31 to June 5, 2022, is the artist's first institutional solo exhibition in New York in over two decades. Almost three years in the making, it includes sculptures from every period of his career and unites them with performance-related photographs from the 1970s, created while he was a graduate student at the University of Iowa. Key to the exhibition are two new works, *Archangel* (2021) and *Sarah Williams* (2021). The latter, along with the earlier *Huck and Jim* (2014), reference Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), a classic American novel that continues to spark debate today. Describing *Huckleberry Finn* as "our Odyssey," Ray is drawn to the complex entanglements of the protagonists Huck, a poor White boy escaping an abusive father, and Jim, an enslaved Black man en route to the free states. These and other enduring preoccupations—literary, philosophical, cultural—persist in Ray's varied artistic practice.

The form the exhibition takes was developed largely during the COVID-19 pandemic. The process involved extended virtual meetings and remote planning including with the aid of a scaled 3-D model of the exhibition's galleries installed in the artist's Los Angeles studio, complete with miniature maquettes of Ray's works. In spring 2021, Charles Ray and his long-time interlocutor the art historian and critic Hal Foster, Townsend Martin, Class of



**Foster:**

The works in the first room circle around a certain theme, one of beginnings. There are the three egg pieces, and *Huck and Jim* reprises a moment in Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* when they debate the origin of the stars. *Tractor* (2005) stems from a memory of an object you used to play on as a little boy. I know you're resistant to themes, but is there a concern with origin stories here?

**Ray:**

It's not the themes themselves I'm resistant to; I'm resistant to focusing on themes. Themes are like forms—meaning develops from how they are shaped. When you turn the corner from *No* (1992), you see the three small sculptures. What about them? Birth, death. *Handheld bird* (2006) and *Hand holding egg* (2007) were studies for *Chicken* (2007). In *Chicken* everything centered on making the hole in the egg. The chick is complete inside the egg, but I think the sculpture dissolves in and around the hole. The mathematical definition of a hole is an object that can't be shrunk to a point.



Charles Ray (American, b. 1953). *Handheld bird*, 2006. Painted stainless steel, 2 × 4 × 3 (5.1 × 10.2 × 7.6 cm). Matthew Marks Gallery  
Charles Ray (American, b. 1953). *Hand holding egg*, 2007. Porcelain, 3 × 8 × 3 in. (7.6 × 20.3 × 9.5 cm). Matthew Marks Gallery  
Charles Ray (American, b. 1953). *Chicken*, 2007. Painted stainless steel and porcelain, 1 × 2 × 1 (4.4 × 5.7 × 4.4 cm). Glenstone Museum of Art, Potomac, Maryland. Photographs © Charles Ray, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

Originally the hole was sculpted as a natural-looking break in the egg, but the



sculpture was static. It wouldn't dissolve because the break was an image and had a stability that was uninteresting sculpturally. I replaced the break with a portal, a round hole. It's a sculptural element, in a dynamic relationship to both the viewer and the chicken; the hole is the egg, and the sculpture becomes abstract in its dynamic. Those pieces are almost like Mobius strips in their relation to abstraction—they turn and dissolve when you pass through the hole. *Handheld bird* incorporates the viewer as a structural element. Your hand is a base, and you feel the detail as you see it.

**Foster:**

Right away it also introduces the tactility of your sculpture and the relation of sculpture at large to the hand and the body. Next to it is *Huck and Jim*, which is keyed by two gestures above all—Jim with his protective hand over the bending Huck, Huck with his hand scooping frog spawn from the river.

**Ray:**

Originally the Whitney Museum, which commissioned the sculpture, wanted a fountain. I was thinking the water would come out of Huck's hand, flowing from the eggs into a pond. I actually sculpted eggs and everything, but then realized it was a stronger fountain without water.

When I envisioned *Huck and Jim*, I saw it as one beast, orchestrated like a forest of limbs. In the novel, too, Huck and Jim are a compound object. They're one being really. There's an Anthony Caro tabletop sculpture with a straight pipe that extends beyond the edge of its base, a larger diameter elbow pipe, and a door handle that connects the two. It's a beautiful sculpture in part because the handle brings tactility right into it—you want to reach, grab, and hold it.



Anthony Caro (British, 1924–2013). *Table Piece XXII*, 1967. Painted steel, 10 × 31 ½ in. (25.4 × 80 × 68.6 cm). Caro Family Collection. © The Estate of Anthony Caro. All rights reserved, Artimage / DACS 2021. © 2021 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / DACS, London

I mentioned this to the art historian Michael Fried once, and he said, “Don’t think about it that way. The handle is just a spacer between two abstract elements.” Whether he’s right or not, it flipped how I was thinking about the sculpture. When we talked about *Huck and Jim*, Kelly focused on the space between Jim’s hand and Huck’s back—that emptiness defines the sculpture. In fact, she wanted to call the show *The Space Between*. I thought back to that conversation with Fried, and I saw that this space has no meaning. Like Caro’s handle, it could be seen as a spacer connecting two sculptural elements. It’s holding *Huck and Jim* together.

Of course, on the topical level of the sculpture, it’s a charged space. It unifies two males of different ages and different races, but my interest, like the hole in the egg, is in how the structure of this powerful narrative turns abstract.

**Foster:**

The space between is often crucial in your sculpture. It’s rarely null. It’s also very charged in *Boy with frog* (2008).

**Ray:**

When I made *Boy with frog*, I had been thinking about Giacometti and his use of armature. I realized that the armature of *Boy with frog* is the trajectory of his gaze—from his eyes to the frog. The whole sculpture is built around that relationship. Sure, originally clay was put on a steel armature, but that gaze is really the wire that the sculpture is built around in the mind.



Charles Ray (American, b. 1953). *Boy with frog*, 2009. Painted stainless steel, 96 × 29 × 41 in. (243.8 × 74.9 × 104.7 cm). Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Promised gift of Keith L. and Katherine Sachs. © Charles Ray, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

**Foster:**

*Boy with frog* speaks to another origin—when one first confronts the otherness of the world. As with *Tractor*, I wonder whether there's an origin story here for you as a sculptor—that sculpture begins in curiosity as well as in play, in what it is to find a thing, really see it, take it apart, put it back together, and so make another object, another space in the process.



**Ray:**

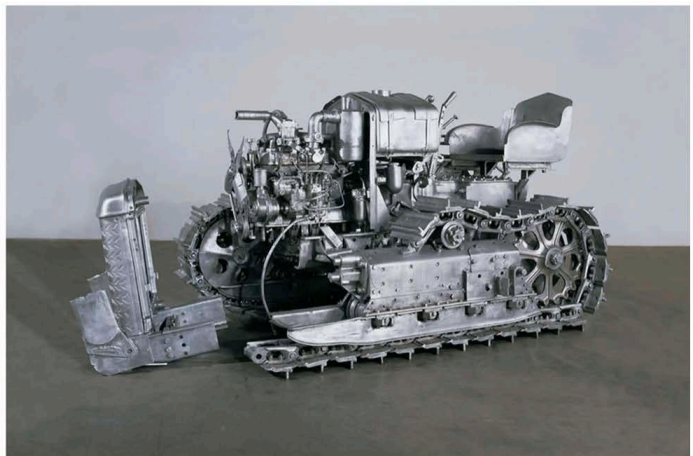
For me, *Tractor* is a transparent object. The engine, the crankcase, all the gears are within it. I was interested in the space of the tractor, in its internal space as well.

**Foster:**

You've called *Tractor* "a philosophical object." Along with tactility, and maybe in opposition to it, that suggests transparency. "Philosophical object" almost has a platonic intonation. That calls up *Table* (1990). What's the relationship of that piece to the others in the first room?

**Ray:**

Space flows through it. The world implodes in it. There's no exterior. That's somewhat similar to the tractor. At first it looks like an old tractor that's been sandblasted—it's that shiny. When you get closer, it looks like I used molds to make it. Then you realize that every bolt is different and every part is handmade. With even more time you realize that it's a complete, topological object, that it has an interior as well. I want you to be able to see into it without literally seeing into it.



Left: Charles Ray (American, b. 1953). *Table*, 1990. Plexiglas and steel, 35 5/8 × 35 5/8 × 52 in. (90.5 × 89.9 × 134 cm). Collection of the artist, courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery. Right: Charles Ray (American, b. 1953). *Tractor*, 2005. Aluminum, 56 5/8 in. x 10 ft. x 61 in. (143.8 × 306.1 x 154.9 cm). Glenstone Museum, Potomac, Maryland. Photographs © Charles Ray, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

**Foster:**

Your earliest works in the show—the two plank pieces—foreground your body almost excessively. You become your own prop piece. What has happened to your bodily engagement with your sculpture over time?

**Ray:**

There's a relationship to Richard Serra's prop pieces in Plank piece I and II (1973), but I also see a connection to Caro. Lucy Lippard's "dematerialization of the art object" was interesting to me at that time in my life too. It's not like I started out doing body art and then the body disappeared. My body enters the later works as well, it's just that you don't see it in the same way. Maybe my presence is also felt in the orchestration of the installations.

**Foster:**

Figuration for you includes embodiment; in some ways it is embodiment. And it involves movement too.

**Ray:**

We are always moving. Even when you're standing still, the space you take up is the space I would have to sculpt to get you to feel like you. If you take that and extend it in time, you have what I mean by "figuration." I see figures as manifolds—manifolds in which events occur. It's really hard to separate us from the world, from our culture. It's really hard to separate them from us, from our projections. It's one and the same in a certain way. We are embedded. In order to really work, a figure has to reflect, has to be, all those things. For me figuration has to move. Not literally—not get up and walk across the room—but be animate somehow.

**Foster:**

I know how important that ancient stele at The Met is for you. You've talked about how the sculptural moment occurs in the space of breath—of *pneuma*, as you say—between the lips of the girl and the beak of the bird.

**Ray:**

Yes, it's beautiful. I aimed for that kind of space with the hole in *Chicken*. It's space but it's solid. You can hold it, and the world implodes through it.



**Marble grave stele of a little girl**, ca. 450–440 B.C. Greek, Classical. Marble, Parian, height: 31 3/4 in. (80.6 cm); width (top): 14 9/16 in. (37 cm); width (base): 15 1/2 × 4 in., 131 lb. (39.4 × 10.2 cm, 59.4 kg). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Fletcher Fund, 1927 (27.45)

**Foster:**

What about other allusions in your work to historical art, implicit and otherwise? There's a long history of figuration that your sculpture carries

forward into our time. For me the way that your work calls on a cultural repertoire of gestures and poses is a strength. Baudelaire called painting “the mnemotechny of the beautiful,” and the art historian Aby Warburg suggested that the image is the medium through which human expressivity is conveyed across time. I think your work connects with those interests.

**Ray:**

I guess I deny it the way I deny subject matter. Maybe I am defensive about those connections because they stabilize an object I’m trying to destabilize.

**Foster:**

Your idea of figuration is to open up a space into which different allusions, meanings, and times can—to use your word—flow.

**Ray:**

Right. I don’t see it as a stable endeavor that has a single philosophical or political stance.

**Foster:**

What about the ensemble of works in the second gallery? How did this room come together?

**Ray:**

Kelly wanted the new piece, *Archangel*, which originally was to be shown in Paris. After the terrorist attack on Charlie Hebdo in 2015—a collision of free speech, artistic intent, misunderstanding, and the sacredness of text . . . I was greatly affected by the shooting and subsequent attacks in Paris and elsewhere. I wanted to make a monument to commemorate these events for all Parisians, and I thought of an angel descending to unstable ground. My subject was Gabriel the archangel, known to all people of the books—the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Qur’an.





Charles Ray (American, b. 1953). *Archangel*, 2021. Cypress, 13 ft. 5 in. x 89 in. x 45 in. (410.2 × 227.3 × 115.6 cm). Collection of the artist, courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery. ©

Charles Ray, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

I love Paris and I was thinking about what kind of monument might work. Eventually, my mind drifted away from monuments, and while the title stuck, I dropped the archangel. When I carved the figure in wood with its outstretched arms it turned into a crucifix. Maybe all this comes from my Catholic childhood; the idea of the archangel stemming from an old religious reader—with an image of the archangel Jophiel guarding the entrance to the Garden, the flaming sword barring us from ever returning.

**Foster:**

There's another piece in the second room that addresses a religious, or ritualistic, moment of immense importance, an aluminum sculpture based on the marble fragments of the **Great Eleusinian Relief** at The Met (ca. 27 B.C.–A.D. 14). The relief is about the cultivation of grain and the beginning of agriculture. Another origin piece?

**Ray:**

Demeter is handing the boy something—maybe the grain—while Persephone is pouring something onto or into his head. The Greeks thought that life was a fluid; once it dried out, you were dead. It's a beautiful object and one of the most interesting pieces at The Met because it's hybrid. I'm interested in hybrid objects.

**Foster:**

It's hybrid because it's a Roman copy of a Greek original?

**Ray:**

In the nineteenth century the Roman copy existed only as ten fragments. To make them more valuable, they were taken to Athens, where a plaster mold of the original was made, and the Roman fragments were inserted into it. You can see the fragments; you can also tell the differences between styles across a four-hundred-year gap in time and culture. When I remade the relief in aluminum, it became a further hybrid object.



Archival photograph from May 1935 showing the **ten marble fragments** from the Roman copy, which appear in dark gray, recently set into a cast of the original Greek relief, which appears in light gray.

**Foster:**

On the one hand, your sculpture is perfect—thought through, deeply felt, expertly engineered and executed. On the other hand, it's complex, hybrid, composite physically. Composite culturally, too, so to speak. And that can

lead—it has led—to controversies. The Met show comes at a time of intensive debates about public monuments and cultural appropriations. Most of the pieces in the show precede these debates, but they also flow through the work now, to use your term. How do you view these questions?

**Ray:**

I could say they aren't mine, but they are in part; I embrace them and reject them at the same time. I think about them a lot. My father once told me that I was a good artist but I needed a great editor. Prohibitions, justified and unjustified, flow through and boil up in every cultural age. Can an artist be prohibited from entering certain cultural structures or narrative realms? An artist certainly can be criticized for subject and structure, but then we enter a complex domain. For me it is best simply to say that the artist is responsible for what he or she makes. I wasn't naive about the power of nude images of *Huck and Jim*, though I did take it from the book where Huck says something like, "We had no need for clothes, no how." I am aware that sexuality is suggested here, and a White boy and a Black man together is charged. But this controversial realm, whatever it is, isn't foundational to the sculpture. You have to move through it.

**Foster:**

You do, or the viewer should, or both?

**Ray:**

Both.

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Marquee: Charles Ray (American, b. 1953). **A copy of ten marble fragments of the Great Eleusinian Relief**, 2017. Aluminum, 91 × 63 × 4 in. (232.4 × 160.7 × 12.1 cm). Collection of Joshua and Filipa Fink, New York. © Charles Ray, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

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