

Charles Ray

Centre Pompidou, Paris 16 February – 20 June

Bourse de Commerce – Pinault Collection, Paris 16 February – 6 June

‘Charles Ray is one of the few artists of his generation who has had a lasting impact on recent art history,’ declares the literature for this double-headed exhibition dedicated to the American sculptor. It’s a bold claim, and not a particularly convincing one: born in 1953 in Chicago, Ray has been linked to a loose grouping of artists who emerged as contenders in 1980s New York. By comparison to some of his contemporaries – Paul McCarthy, Matthew Barney, Robert Gober and Cindy Sherman, all of whose work featured alongside Ray’s in Jeffrey Deitch’s landmark 1992 group show *Post Human* – he could be considered a relative minnow in terms of influence.

Nevertheless, Ray emerges well from this loose career overview. What distinguishes his art from the efforts of his touchstones and fellow travellers is a certain warmth, a willingness to make the spectator aware that he wants them to be in on the joke. Consider his student effort *Plank Piece* (1973), presented as a series of photographs depicting the artist himself mimicking the titular plank. ‘I simply let go of distance and allowed my body to enter my sculptural configurations,’ he explains in the wall text. Any visitors to the Pompidou familiar with Bruce Nauman’s single-channel video *Walk with Contrapposto* (1968) will instantly draw comparisons between the two pieces. Yet by contrast to the older artist’s alienating effort

in sculptural performance, Ray’s work seems wilfully goofy.

This lightness of touch manifests in his contributions to the captions at the Centre Pompidou: ‘It’s not a bad sculpture of a woman, it’s a great sculpture of a mannequin!’, he writes of an effigy of an outsized department store dummy from his *Fall ’91* series (1992), arguably the most obviously emblematic sequence in his repertoire; ‘If a ghost were to tie his shoe, he wouldn’t need a shoe’, reads the folksy origin story for *Shoe Tie* (2012), a sculpture of a naked youth bending over to mime the eponymous act.

Often enough, Ray confronts the viewer with a kind of puzzle, challenging us to identify the qualities that make a sculpture a sculpture. Perhaps the most striking instance of this is *Yes* (1990): ‘I took a dose of LSD and when I was hallucinating and the room was breathing I had a portrait photographer take my picture’, Ray explains. Said portrait hangs on the wall of a purpose-built room within the exhibition. It takes a while for the eyes to adjust: both the wall and the frame of the photograph have been customised to follow a convex curve, mirroring something of the artist’s psychedelically abetted perception of space. Its companion piece, *No* (1992), plays a similar game: what initially appears to be a conventional photograph of the artist reveals itself as a portrait of an eerily lifelike sculptural mannequin.

Over at the Bourse, a more conventional and rather less interesting display, mostly composed of more recent works, is scattered through the institution’s galleries. Several sculptures riff on Italian religious statuary, while others play further games with the conventions of the medium. *Horse and Rider* (2014) gives us an equestrian statue on a plinth on which rests a dejected-looking likeness of the artist, his head bowed in defiance of the form’s triumphal connotations; *Burger* (2020) is a Thinker for the age of instant gratification, a scaled-up effigy of a man deep in contemplation as he tucks into a cheeseburger. *Return to the One* (2020), meanwhile, has the artist as he now looks – skinny as hell, clad in polo shirt and jeans – in a pose that suggests waiting. Here again, Ray offers a formal curveball: because it is fashioned from paper, he reasons, this work is not a sculpture but a drawing.

You could get tired of this kind of thing. Elder statesman he might be, but Ray still comes across as the eternal eight-year-old, playing the role of conjurer to his parents’ increasingly exasperated dinner party guests – nothing is what it purports to be, how clever of you, Charley! – and one could well leave the show longing for a bit of Naumanesque chilliness. Yet while oddball charm has never been a prerequisite for creating great art, Ray projects it in spades. There are worse ways to win a critic over. *Digby Warde-Aldam*



Shoe Tie, 2012, stainless steel, 73 × 74 × 60 cm
Photo: Bertrand Prévost. Courtesy Centre Pompidou, Paris