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# The Met's New Charles Ray Retrospective Outfits Tomorrow's Monuments In Flip-Flops And Man Buns

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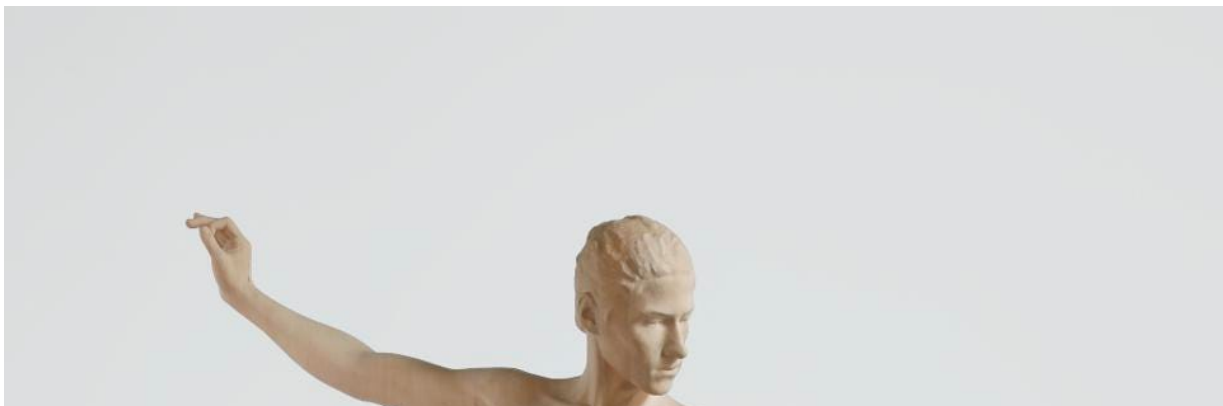
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Arriving in Paris several days after terrorists attacked the editorial offices of *Charlie Hebdo*, Charles Ray had a vision of the archangel Gabriel alighting to assuage a people in mourning. Provoked by the journal's publication of a cartoon mocking the prophet Muhammed, the deadly assault shattered the illusion that France was a nation of tolerance.

Since Gabriel is present in the Old and New Testaments and the Qur'an, Ray reckoned that the archangel could address everyone. As a contemporary sculptor versed in tradition, Ray gave form to his image by sculpting a young man in flip-flops.





Archangel, 2021. Cypress. 13 ft. 5 1/2 in. × 89 1/2 in. × 45 1/2 in. Collection of the artist, ... [+] TAKERU KORODA

Currently on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, standing on an integral pedestal that puts flip-flops at eye level, *Archangel* bears no trace of the context that inspired it. Ray has even eliminated the sword wielded by his model in reference to the biblical archetype. In the seven years he took to realize his version of Gabriel in hand-carved cypress, all but the essential has been chiseled away to express a moment of heavenly visitation.

Ray has summoned the universal. Those flip-flops, as well as Gabriel's rolled-up jeans and man bun, separate the universal from the generic.

As a centerpiece of the Met's new [Charles Ray retrospective](#), *Archangel* serves also as an unofficial standard-bearer for the artist. Although other works are made out of materials ranging from fiberglass to stainless steel, and subjects range from commercial culture to high literature, much of Ray's work is animated by a commingling of sweeping generality and intense specificity, a jarring combination of features that resolves into a kind of timeless immediacy through extreme attention to detail.

Fiberglass was the medium that first established Ray as a major contemporary artist. Back in 1990, Ray worked with a commercial mannequin fabricator to create an uncanny self-portrait. The mannequin has Ray's facial features, and sports one of his favorite outfits. It looks just like him – or looks exactly as he would look if he were made of painted fiberglass.

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The work is intellectually beguiling because Ray dignifies the mannequin as an art form, introducing uniqueness to an object that is supposed to stand in for the average male consumer. The irony is deepened by the fact that the figure resembles him partially on account of the clothing, which is modeled on the mannequin in a way that might be done to persuade someone like him to buy it. His identity is fully contemporary, mired in the culture that outfits people with mass-produced personalities.

Ray's preoccupation with mannequins extended well beyond his *Self-Portrait* of 1990 (and subsequent self-portraits meticulously replicating his genitals). One of the most striking examples in the retrospective is based on midcentury store window fixtures. *Boy* is boyish in every way – at least according to mainstream representations of American boyhood in the 1950s – except that he has the height of a full-grown man.

Created in 1992, the work might easily be interpreted as a statement about projection of grown-up expectations on children, but is more impressive if viewed as a hybrid form combining of mannequin and monument. What Ray achieves with *Boy* – which he began to explore with his *Self-Portrait* – is the transformation of the incidental into the epic by giving it unexpected presence.

*Self-Portrait* is a sculptural work by a conceptual artist. *Boy* is a conceptually provocative work by a sculptor.

In subsequent years, Ray hasn't fully abandoned his conceptual roots, but has allowed the root concept of *Boy* to grow into a methodology for making figurative sculpture in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and a way of addressing the challenge faced by 21<sup>st</sup> century sculptors seeking to stand the test of time without ignoring the fleeting qualities of the ever-briefer here-and-now. Ray has recognized that a sculpture is most present if the sculptor is fully present, instantiating enduring themes with observed details.



Reclining Woman, 2018. Stainless steel. 59 3/4 x 83 x 44 in. Collection Glenn and Amanda Fuhrman NY, ... [+] SEAN LOGUE

Ray's stainless steel *Reclining Woman* is one of the clearest examples of this approach. The pose is classical. The model's distended belly and breasts are specific enough to be identifiable. The material is industrial. The treatment artisanal.

As with *Archangel*, the initial effect is disorienting. But what seems at first to be extreme juxtaposition consolidates into a visual experience that renews the promise of figurative sculpture in our own day and age. =

Ray's sculpture ascends beyond mere tolerance. Any beach bum can be a heavenly being. Everyone is monumental.

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