

# The Anxiety of Realism

Huge toy meets flea-market lady—the unsettling sculpture of Charles Ray and Duane Hanson

**Shudder bug:**  
Duane Hanson's *Man  
With Camera* (1991)



**Charles Ray**

*Matthew Marks Gallery  
522 West 22nd Street  
Through January 19*

**Duane Hanson**

*Van de Weghe Fine Art  
521 West 23rd Street  
Through December 15*

## BY CHRISTIAN VIVEROS-FAUNÉ

**O**n a recent walk through Chelsea, I remembered a Steven Wright joke: "I've been doing a lot of abstract painting lately, extremely abstract. No brush, no paint, no canvas—I just think about it."

Not a reaction to seeing rafts of abstract canvases, but rather a response to experiencing two exhibitions of realistic sculpture confectioned as antidotes to volumetric abstraction, the crack stuck with me as I took in the meticulously unsettling work of two foundational artists: Charles Ray and Duane Hanson. Their sculptures, for all their surface similarities, could hardly be more dissimilar.

Direct forebears of present purveyors of cast figures like Maurizio Cattelan, Tony Matelli, and Ron Mueck, Ray and Hanson are currently enjoying their first New York outings in nearly a decade. Their last Gotham exhibitions were, oddly enough, mid-career retrospectives held just months apart at the Whitney Museum in 1998: another instance of how the works of these two artists are—like the two Hoppers, Edward and Dennis—the same, but very, very different.

Ray, whose exhibition at Matthew Marks features three new sculptures, has long been the darling of the art mob, and for good reason. A onetime imitator of Anthony Caro (who himself had a long-awaited show in Chelsea this month), Ray once considered the Briton's welded-steel constructions the Platonic ideal of abstract sculpture. He did, that is, until Pop's embrace of consumer culture freed him to experiment with certain subliminally low urges. What followed was a perverse brand of psychological realism expressed via (among other seminal works) anatomically correct mannequins, a self-portrait in a bottle, and—in a sculptural tour de force—a group of life-sized

replicas of the artist engaged in a daisy chain of self-abuse, which Ray drolly titled *Oh Charley, Charley, Charley . . .*

Following these and other explorations of the anxiety of verisimilitude, Ray's current sculptures feature finely calibrated shifts in scale and detail that turn every bit as creepy as his past works. One sculpture, *The New Beetle*, depicts a naked four-year-old scooting along a toy car whose details are considerably sharper than those of his own face. A two-and-half-inch-long sculpture of a hatching egg—which Ray titled *Chicken* for the purposes of invoking the chicken-and-egg conundrum—presents a tiny version of emerging life frozen in place by metal, white paint, and porce-

lain. Ray's third new work, by contrast, presents the scale mismatch that gives the exhibition its bizarre pull. A familiar plastic toy of a farmer and his tractor rendered in 18 and a half tons of machined steel, *Father Figure* raises a dime-store commonplace to hair-raising heights. A category shift from child's play to *Seed of Chucky*, Ray's sculpture succeeds in exactly the degree to which he endows an otherwise harmless stock idea with disturbing volume, heft, and resolution.

Duane Hanson, for his part, also fled the orthodoxies of abstraction, in his case not to plumb pervy Freudian recesses, but instead to depict what Baudelaire—in a far more innocent age—called “the heroism of modern life.” “My art is not about fooling people,” Hanson once told an interviewer. “It’s the attitudes I’m after—fatigue, a bit of frustration, rejection. To me there is a kind of beauty in all this.”

Hanson, who passed away in 1996 at the age of 71, also labored long and hard at the smithy of modern sculpture until “pop art made realism legitimate again.” The current exhibition at Van de Weghe Fine Art is essentially a museum-scale show of figures whose prototypes we know well from the mall, but which, for all their familiarity, still pack a strangely dysfunctional punch. There’s the sad old man from the retirement village, the balding hobbyist with a camera, the flea-market lady with her waist gone to pot—all rendered in detail so hyperrealistic that it’s difficult to tell them apart from the actual, breathing, joke-playing gallery guard.

Very much unlike Ray’s vaguely threatening homunculi, Hanson’s fiberglass and metal sculptures depict sad, lonely victims of the Rockwellian American dream, pure products of America gone slack at the belt and soft in the head after lifetimes spent consuming TV sitcoms, Wal-Mart gizmos, and blooming onions. One such sculpture, *Queenie II*—one of the few that Hanson personalized with a proper name—presents a character both timeless and contemporary. The figure

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seems, in fact, to have stepped out of Barbara Ehrenreich’s book *Nickel and Dimed*: A depiction of an African-American cleaning woman complete with turquoise uniform, bulky cleaning gear, and demeaning name tag, Hanson’s sculpture is a 20-year-old portrait of the “working poor” made years before the term came into use.

The same but different, indeed.