

## Classical allusions given a contemporary twist

A survey of Charles Ray's work illustrates the gradual shift back to figurative sculpture

By Laurie Rojas. From *Art Basel* daily edition  
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Charles Ray's *Sleeping Woman*, 2012. Photo: courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

Contemporary art suffered a major blow when Charles Ray's sculpture *Boy With Frog*, 2009, was removed from Punta della Dogana in Venice. When the city council failed to renew the permit for the site-specific sculpture, which was commissioned by François Pinault, major art-world figures including the curator Francesco Bonami and the critic Jerry Saltz were outraged—but to no avail. The tip of the island, where the Grand Canal meets the Giudecca, is now adorned by a 19th-century lamp-post. Ironically, Ray's 8ft-tall, stark-white, naturalistic sculpture could have been misconstrued as one of the Classical works that the city council prefers.

Making its first museum appearance, *Boy With Frog* is one of 15 works featured in "Charles Ray: Sculpture 1997-2014", a two-venue exhibition organised by the Kunstmuseum Basel and the Museum für Gegenwartskunst. Most of the works in the show are large-scale and will be shown in their own rooms, says Bernhard Mendes Bürgi, the director of the Kunstmuseum Basel. He has co-organised the exhibition with James Rondeau from the Art Institute of Chicago, where the show will travel next year.

### Leading sculptor

Ray, who was born in Chicago and is now based in Los Angeles, is regarded by some as one of the leading sculptors of the past 20 years. His work comes out of a rich background of high-Modernist sculpture—he cites Anthony Caro and David Smith as his early influences. But in the past few decades, he has emerged as one of a handful of artists, along with Jeff Koons and Katharina Fritsch, whose work marks a shift back to figurative sculpture after decades of abstraction. "Charles Ray is working on a new three-dimensional figuration," Bürgi says, "and the show is about the recent developments in his art."

The first piece, *Unpainted Sculpture*, 1997, which is on loan from the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, exemplifies this change. For this work, the artist bought a wrecked Pontiac Grand Am (around 1991), dismantled it and cast it piece by piece in fibreglass. He then reassembled the car in a painstaking process that took him around two years to complete. Even though there is no human figure present, it evokes the aftermath of a lethal car accident. The result is a "Classical memento mori", Bürgi says. "You have the allusion to *Death and Disaster* by Andy Warhol, but it is not so much a story about death as it is about sculptural questions at a formal level, about materials and weight."

*Aluminum Girl*, 2003, is Ray's first strictly figurative sculpture. The standing nude makes reference to Classical sculpture, much like *Boy With Frog*, but in this case, the work is lifesize and modelled from life (it is based on the artist Jennifer Pastor). The work appears to be a marble sculpture made using traditional techniques, but closer inspection reveals an accuracy only made possible by cutting-edge technology. The interplay between naturalism and idealism, detail and abstraction, tradition and innovation—key elements of Ray's work—becomes apparent. The art critic and art historian Michael Fried says in the catalogue: "The sculpture as a whole is a seamless blend of mechanical reproduction and the most considered and refined sort of artistic intervention."



Two more recent sculptures, *Sleeping Woman*, 2012, and *Mime*, 2014, are shown side by side. The former shows a bulky, homeless woman lying on a bench, dressed in trainers, sweatpants and a jacket. Art-historical references to sleeping Venuses spring to mind, but for Ray, the inspiration came from the shape of a woman's body that he encountered on a walk in Santa Monica. "Instantly I saw a sculpture, machined from solid metal," Ray said. Despite the seemingly uncomfortable pose—the woman's jacket exposes her lower back and reveals her lace underwear—she is in deep sleep. For Ray, "her sleep had weight". *Mime*, on the other hand, depicts a lighter, more delicate kind of sleep. The shiny aluminium sculpture shows a man lying on a camp bed, presumably miming sleep.

Of Ray's recent works, Bürgi says: "You can see that he is thinking about the very long tradition of figurative sculpture, and somehow, he brings a new approach and a new experience of the world today."

*"Charles Ray: Sculpture 1997-2014", Kunstmuseum Basel and Museum für Gegenwartskunst, until 28 September*