

# The electrifying lightness of two new sculptural masterpieces

Delcy Morelos and Charles Ray trigger weighty thoughts and sheer delight in Chelsea galleries.

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Review by [Sebastian Smee](#)

NEW YORK — When aesthetic electricity strikes, you feel it in your body. When it strikes twice, it becomes a problem of the mind, too: You're forced to make sense of the coincidence.

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Exactly this happened to me as I recently scoured the galleries in Chelsea, Manhattan's art district.

I'm still tingling.

Strike No. 1 came at the Dia Art Foundation's Chelsea venue, where I encountered — for the second time in several months — Delcy Morelos's "El abrazo," or "The Embrace." "The Embrace" is heavy, in fact and imagination, as every good hugger knows it should be. Made from earth and clay, it fills an enormous, hangar-like space. But weirdly, at least in the mind, it's also light.

Strike No. 2 came down the street at Matthew Marks's gallery, where the acclaimed sculptor Charles Ray is showing, among two other works, "Everyone takes off their pants at least once a day," a nine-foot-tall sculpture of a woman undressing. Made from handmade paper, the sculpture feels incredibly, shiveringly light — as fugitive and insubstantial as winking harbor lights. But it's also big — larger than life-size. And the woman's pose — she is shown tipping forward — makes us acutely conscious of the bodily weight. (When do we feel heavier than when taking off pants, first one lumbering leg, then the other?)

In quick succession, then, on 22nd Street between 10th and 11th Avenues, I saw one work that is heavy in fact but light in the imagination and another that's light in fact, heavy in the mind. What to make of them both?

"El abrazo" is a massive, ziggurat-like structure. Its walls hover about a foot off the ground. They soar, at a slight angle, up toward a large skylight. They're made from soil, clay and coir (fiber from the outer husks of coconut) that

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Morelos is from Tierralta, Colombia. She's in her late 50s, and her two installations in New York (the other, in an adjacent room, is called "Cielo terrenal," or "Earthly Heaven") mark her U.S. debut. She's also the subject of a solo show at the Pulitzer Arts Foundation in St. Louis.

You can't see "El abrazo" all at once. You grasp its shape only after circumambulating it. On one side, Morelos has made the walls recede at an acute angle, creating a narrowing corridor into which you can walk until the walls seem to contain and touch you — to embrace you. Elsewhere, it's as if these exterior earthen walls are pushing the rectilinear shell of the building outward.

To many, the work will recall Walter De Maria's "The New York Earth Room," a deposit of 250 cubic yards of earth that, under the direction of the Dia Art Foundation, has been on long-term view inside an apartment on Wooster Street in Manhattan since 1977. It may also rhyme in the mind with Richard Serra's giant "walk-in" steel sculptures or James Turrell's light-harnessing architectural environments.

It's notable that you're allowed — encouraged even — to touch "El abrazo," to return the installation's embrace. Leaning into its subtle slope, applying the pressure of your hands, you can feel its friable texture and sharp ridges, the parts of it that cling together and those that cleave, calve and crumble.

The scale of the thing makes it feel massive, inexorable, but the smell of the spices and the delicacy of the straw both add to the effect of something that, despite its tonnage, is fragile, almost ephemeral. Seeing "El abrazo" in Manhattan, overwhelmed by a riot of right angles and the stupendous weight of towering architecture with deep-down foundations, Morelos's earthy, biological intervention feels like the antidote you didn't know you needed. To me, it feels like a masterpiece.

As does Ray's "Everyone takes off their pants at least once a day." From across the nearly empty gallery, the sculpted woman appears to have been carved from marble. (In the same gallery, nearer the entrance, two seeming cadavers on heavy slabs have, in fact, been carved from marble: The work, also by Ray, is called "Two dead guys.") So it's a surprise when you see she is actually made from handmade paper.

The paper, at close range, is seductively pulpy and textured. But you're acutely aware that, were you to lean against her, she would instantly collapse (as, of course, people often do when their legs get tangled in their jeans!).

The woman's face is eyeless and indistinct, like the smoothed-out sculptures of Medardo Rosso or the unfinished-looking figures that Rodin had his studio assistants carve from marble after clay models. (Ray also uses contracted fabricators.)

Her pose harks back to Jean-Antoine Houdon's 1783 "La Frileuse," a sculpture of a woman wrapped in a shawl, naked from the waist down, and hunched against the cold — an allegory of winter. Ray's woman also evokes Degas's more modern, indecorous, off-kilter visions of women getting out of the bath, drying themselves, or tying ballet slippers.

I've struggled before with Ray's frictionless, conceptually overloaded sculptures. But this work has real genius. It occupies space like a ghostly enigma. It's not simply an impossible thing made real. It's more like a thing that was on the way to becoming real, but still existed more in the mind than in the flesh, and then abruptly achieved reality before it was quite ready. As you look (and it's really hard to look away!), there's a silent slippage between two modes — palpably real and merely imagined — with the result that several walls partitioning parts of your brain simply give way.

***Delcy Morelos's "El abrazo" ("The Embrace") Through July 20 at Dia Chelsea, 537 W. 22nd St., New York. [diaart.org](http://diaart.org).***

***Charles Ray's "Everyone takes off their pants at least once a day" Through June 29 at Matthew Marks Gallery, 522 W. 22nd St., New York. [matthewmarks.com](http://matthewmarks.com).***

### What readers are saying

The comments reflect a mix of skepticism and curiosity about the sculptures discussed in the article. Some commenters question the artistic merit and originality of the works, comparing them unfavorably to classical masterpieces and expressing concerns about their structural... [Show more](#)

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