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New Talent: Artists to Watch + Opacity Now + Recasting the Past



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Pyrokinesis (detail), 2021

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Ambiguity Embodied

Charles Ray's interrogatory sculptures have secured him a place in the postwar art pantheon.

by Wade Saunders and Anne Rochette

THERE'S HAVING A MOMENT, AND THEN there's having a near-apotheosis. American sculptor Charles Ray (b. 1953) currently boasts sprawling exhibitions in four museums on two continents, as well as works in the 2022 Whitney Biennial in New York. Taken together, the shows provide an extraordinary opportunity to assess five decades of work by an artist who is given to maverick responses to his own formal and conceptual challenges. "I don't think *about* sculpture," Ray has said, "I think sculpturally."

From the beginning, the artist has explored representation, be it of human bodies, animals, toys, vehicles, domestic

furnishings, or other subjects. His works embody questions. Is a perfectly constructed cube a cube, or a representation of a cube? How can a sculpture lock into its place, so that the floor and surrounding space become part of the work? Can we perceive density, and if so, how does it affect us? How reliable is our sense of scale, and what happens when it's violated?

Ray addresses such concerns with humor, playing almost perversely with formal and thematic incongruities. (What if young children were as big as their parents, as in *Family Romance*, 1993, with its wry Freudian resonances?) Yet his undertakings are always

serious and often time-consuming – he completed only four sculptures between 1995 and 2005, and his oeuvre totals around one hundred works.

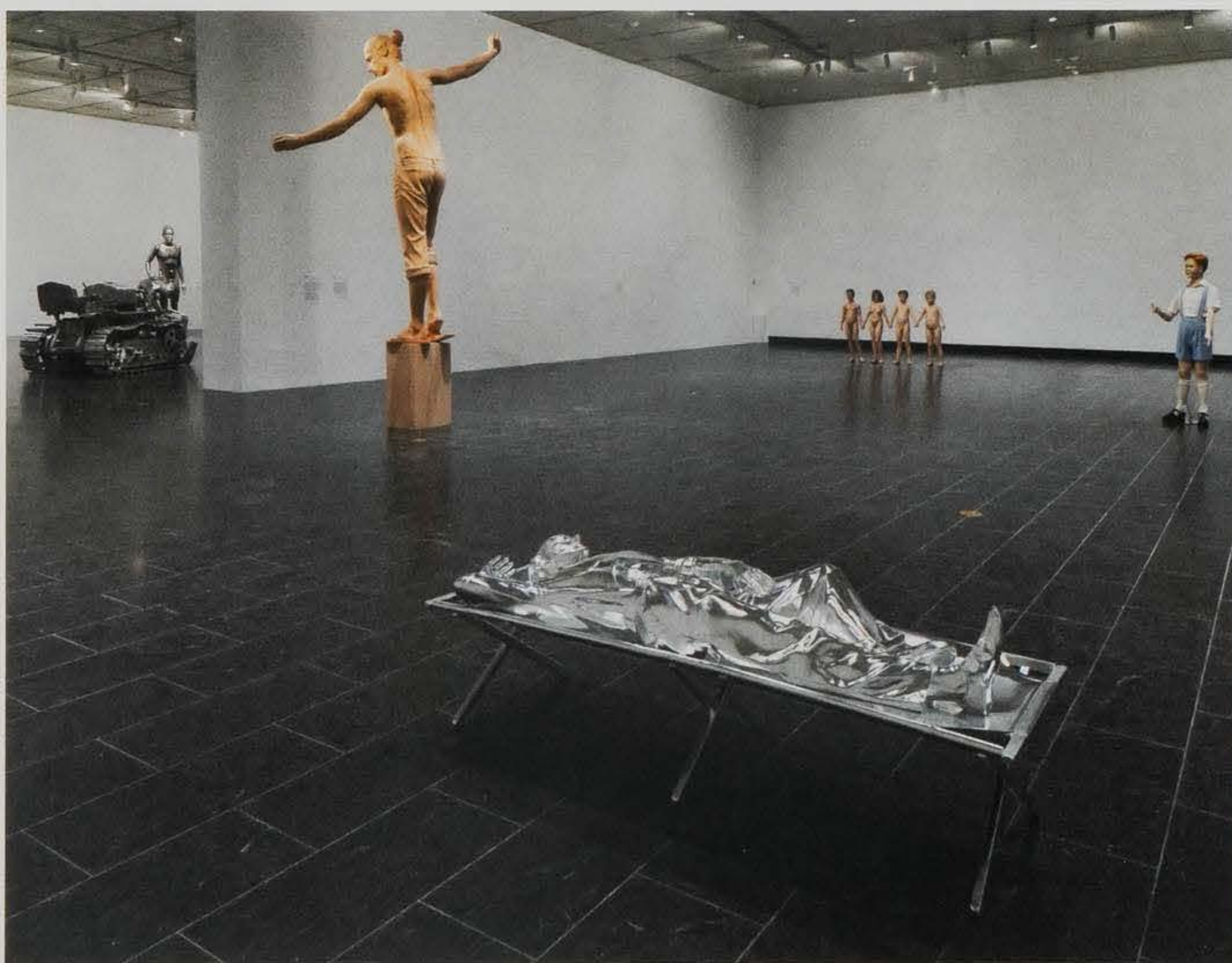
The artist, who was deeply involved with selection and installation for the four surveys currently on view, chose to mix works from throughout his career, and each exhibition offers a clear sense of how figuration came to dominate his practice. The implicit links he establishes between disparate pieces let us see them afresh.

"Charles Ray: Figure Ground" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York comprises nineteen pieces, including three photographic editions documenting early works. "Charles Ray," a dual-venue survey at the Centre Pompidou and the Bourse de Commerce–Pinault Collection in Paris, offers thirty-eight pieces (ten of which are also at the Met; eight in identical, two in slightly differing versions). The Bourse selection includes a number of recent works not previously shown, while the Pompidou offers a compact retrospective. "Charles Ray: Third Installation" – the last chapter of a Ray series initiated in 2018 by the private Glenstone museum, in Potomac, Maryland – presents three sculptures. Together, the shows display more than half the artist's existing works.

ONE OF FIVE SIBLINGS WHOSE PARENTS RAN a commercial art school, Ray was raised near Chicago. He earned a BFA from the University of Iowa in 1975 and an MFA from Rutgers University in 1979. Two years later, he began teaching at UCLA, where he is now an emeritus professor. Los Angeles gave Ray access to industrial know-how crucial to his artistic endeavor, which depends on exacting fabrication.

The city also offers great sailing, his passion since childhood. Ray has raced competitively, favors extreme boats, and currently owns a 60-foot craft he can sail single-handed. Repairing and designing boats increased his skill set, and he says that sailing feeds his creativity. He references his passion in *Puzzle Bottle* (1995, shown at the Pompidou), a corked bottle containing not a note from a stranded sailor but a small wooden figure of the artist himself.

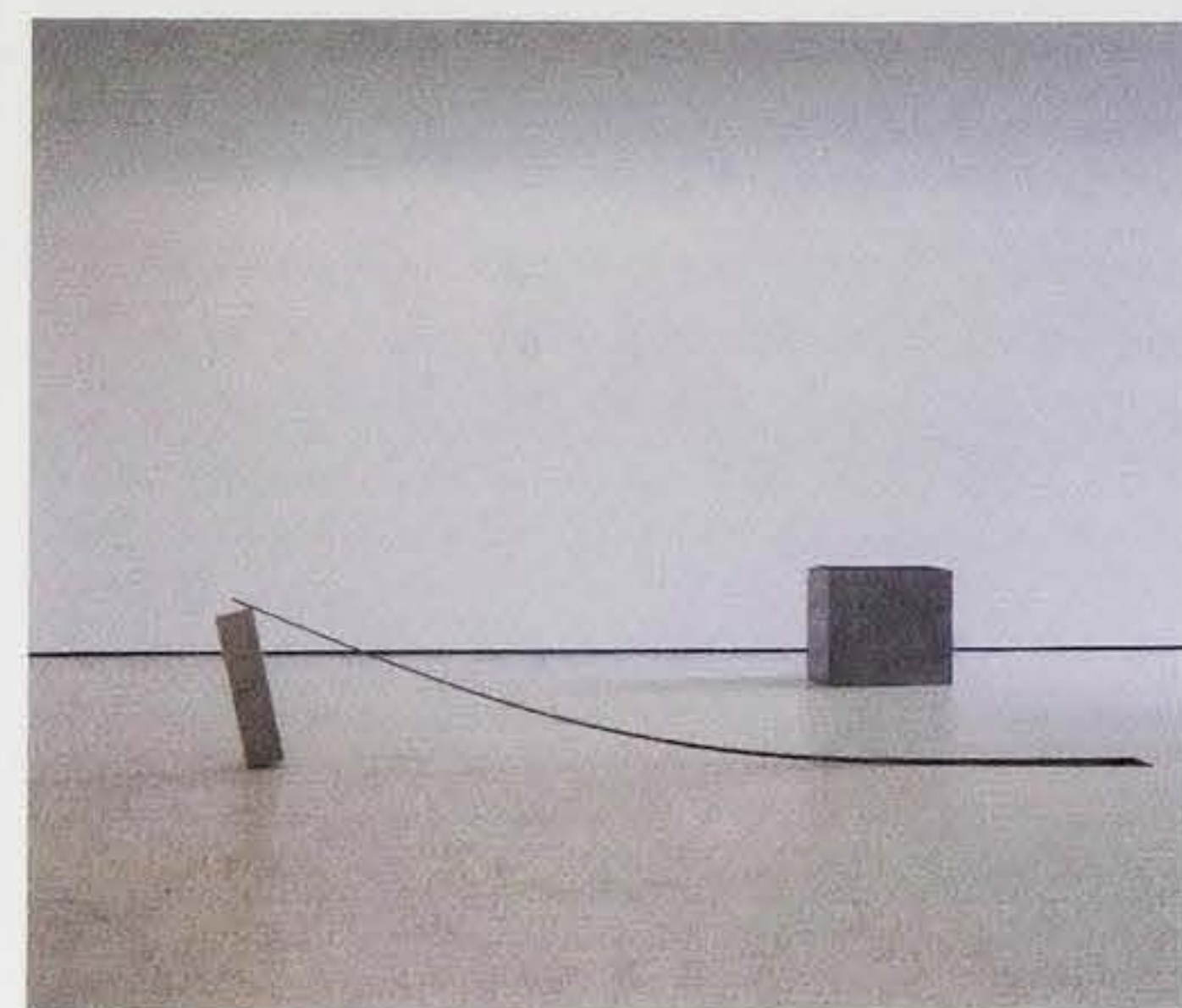
While the Minimalists and Post-Minimalists were centered in New York, Ray, Paul McCarthy, Chris Burden, and Mike Kelley settled in LA and shaped the sculpture of their generation. McCarthy, Burden, and Nancy Rubins were Ray's colleagues at UCLA over decades, and many of their former graduate students have become important. Along with Kelley, the four were among the participants in "Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in



View of the exhibition "Charles Ray: Figure Ground," 2022, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Return to the one, 2020, handmade paper, 59½ by 63 by 55½ inches.



Above left, *Untitled*, 1971, steel and concrete, and right, *32 x 33 x 35 = 34 x 33 x 35*, 1989, aluminum.

computer-controlled milling machines in his fabrications. Working with oil-based clay, crews of assistants do much of Ray's modeling, which may account for the absence of touch traditionally associated with creating figurative sculpture.

Ray's works may be cast in fiberglass, steel, aluminum, bronze, porcelain, plaster, cement, or paper; carved in wood or stone; or digitally milled from blocks of stainless steel, aluminum, or sterling silver (a material he first used in *Silver*, 2015, a life-size, 440-pound portrait of a dog named Silver). The artist's choices drive his meaning: in the case of silver, the material's fraught history and monetary value affect our perception.

Surface is the sheath between a sculpture and its surrounding space, and Ray creates skins that frustrate apprehension. The glistening surface of the 36-inch cube *Ink Box* (1986) embodies 200 gallons of newspaper ink, a trap for fingers. While Ray's massive machined pieces, such as the at once sensuous and shiny *Reclining Woman* (2018, Met), have clear silhouettes, their shimmering polished skin captivates the eye, slowing down discernment of their volume and surface details.

RAY'S LAYOUTS FOR THE FOUR CURRENT

survey shows answer to differing contexts and constraints. He played with scale in the presentations, as he does in his figurative works, which are variously scaled down, life-size, or scaled up. His "thinking sculpturally" considers the placement of each work and the flow of space among the sculptures and through the exhibition. At Glenstone, we first see that all three works involve blocklike forms, and then notice the unique way that each activates the space around it. In *Return to the one* (2020, Glenstone and Bourse), cast in nine pounds of white paper pulp, a self-portrait figure perches on a large rectangular plinth, legs dangling. *Untitled* (1971) features

the 1990s," organized by chief curator Paul Schimmel at the Museum of Contemporary Art in 1992. The widely reviewed show put the LA artists and the curator on the national map.

Sculptures generally cost more to make than paintings: materials are expensive, and pieces can be large and labor intensive. Ray started with no resources and built his career slowly, undertaking increasingly elaborate projects as his financial means grew: since 2000, he has been a favorite of French mogul François Pinault and, by 2008, also of US billionaire couple Mitchell and Emily Rales, the founders of Glenstone. The collections of these modern Medicis each include more than twenty of Ray's works, and their loans

underpin the current exhibitions. Ray's productivity has burgeoned since he joined the powerful Matthew Marks Gallery in New York: he produced thirty-eight works between 2010 and 2021. Although able to make sculptures that few other artists could afford to produce, he consistently creates works that are aesthetically and psychologically compelling, not gaudy displays of capital.

From the beginning, Ray has been a quick study. He finds elegant solutions to technical problems, constantly learning during the complex, often years-long execution of his works and quickly adapting cutting-edge technology to his needs. Since 2005, he has used sophisticated scanners and

a tilted vertical concrete block propping up several sagging steel rods. Finally, $32 \times 33 \times 35 = 34 \times 33 \times 35$ (1989, Glenstone and Met) is an aluminum box whose interior is deeper than its sides are high – due to a 2-inch depth of gallery floor having been excavated beneath the open-top form.

At the Met, Ray's works are arranged not chronologically or thematically but formally, creating interplays of scale and gaze among the many figures. Among them towers the 13½-foot-tall *Archangel* (2021). Impeccably carved (from Ray's same-size pattern) in laminated cypress by sculptor Yuboku Mukoyoshi at his atelier in Osaka, Japan, it depicts a lithe young man wearing rolled-up pants and flip-flops, balancing atop a pedestal, arms outspread.

Many lenders to the Pompidou show required their works to be physically inaccessible. Ray responded by constructing two large, low-walled, square-columned enclosures that visitors can circumambulate, and a third where they get a limited view of three pieces – a cot on which a figure lies, a table, and a bottle. Only five sculptures are approachable. In one enclosure, Ray suggests narrative linkages among four works. There's a rumpled death car rendered in gray-painted fiberglass – *Unpainted Sculpture* (1997) – and nearby on the floor lies *Clothes Pile* (2020), a finely detailed aluminum casting of rumpled clothes, painted white. Two figures face away from each other: the



Self-portrait, 1990, painted fiberglass, clothing, glasses, synthetic hair, glass, and metal, 75 by 26 by 20 inches.



View of Ray's exhibition at the Bourse de Commerce, Paris, showing (left) *Unbaled Truck*, 2021, 1948 Chevy truck, and right, *Return to the one*, 2020, handmade paper.

monumental recumbent nude depicted in *Portrait of the Artist's Mother* (2021) pleasures herself with her left hand, while *Self-Portrait* (1990) depicts a young Ray in sailing attire, looking poised to walk off.

The photographic diptych, *Plank Piece I–II* (1973, Met and Pompidou), was issued in an edition of seven in 1989 to document two student works by Ray. In one image, the

twenty-year-old artist is pinned against a wall by a thick eight-foot plank. The upper end of the slanting plank catches Ray's stomach. His torso slumps over the board's end, arms and legs hanging like a rag doll's. In the other shot, Ray hangs upside down, arms extended, face to the wall, with the board's end jammed into the crook of his knees. Both positions look painful.



Above, *Plank Piece I-II*, 1973, two black-and-white photographs, 39½ by 27 inches each.

These ephemeral actions cheekily allude to Richard Serra's *Prop* (1968), a cylinder of rolled lead sheeting pressing a five-foot-square lead sheet to the wall. Ray's reply is physically lighter but psychologically heavier, and almost all that's to come in the artist's oeuvre is present here: ambition, the body as subject, dark humor, activated space, riffs on sculptural history.

BETWEEN 1977 AND 1985, RAY COMPLETED nineteen pieces that are well documented in photographs but listed as "destroyed" in the "Catalog of Works, 1971–2021" in the



Hinoki, 2007, cypress wood, approx. 5½ by 32 by 20 feet.

joint Pompidou and Bourse catalogue. Seventeen were what Ray calls "performed sculptures" that included the artist's naked body with constructed elements, often in steel. Shots of *In Memory of Sadat* (1981) show two rectangular steel blocks abutted end-to-end to form a "coffin," from one of which emerges the artist's left forearm and hand, from the other, his left lower leg.

Ray has written that he no longer wanted to embody the works and that no one else could take his place, so they ceased to exist. The tension between sculpture and the artist's body was conceptually compelling and physically taxing, for performer and viewer alike. Few artists have walked away from such powerful work.

The first two pieces Ray made when he returned to sculpture were tables bearing objects, and they imply human presence. *How a Table Works* (1986, Pompidou) is a 46-inch-long schematic rendering of a table, top and corners missing. Eight segments of black-painted square tubing delineate tabletop and legs, connected by fourteen L-shaped rods. The "tabletop" supports a metal box, a thermos, a plastic cup, a terracotta pot holding a synthetic plant, and a solvent can. The objects' aligned bottoms evoke the absent tabletop. Space flows through the work, yet is captive within the vessels on it.

Monumental and sublime, *Hinoki* (2007, Pompidou) had never left the Chicago Art Institute until now. The nearly 2¼-ton piece is an excruciatingly faithful image of a 30-foot section of a fallen oak, hollowed out by rot and time. The actual cut-up trunk was molded inside and out by a team of assistants in Los Angeles, then cast in fiberglass to create a multipart pattern that was shipped to Japan. There, Mukoyoshi

reproduced the tree in laminated cypress (*hinoki* in Japanese), enshrining this ruin for a millennium. The carvers' exceptional skills translate "woodness" – the work's subject and material – to visual and haptic perfection. *Hinoki*'s warmth stands out in Ray's chilly oeuvre.

Mime (2014) exists in two versions, with a machine-carved, aluminum version at the Met and a carved cypress rendering at the Pompidou. A lean man, his soft-soled shoes calling to mind a circus performer, lies stretched on his back on a cot, eyes closed, perhaps in reverie. At the Met, the polished, undulating surface catches light as one moves around it, making the form evanescent. The piece, like its subject, feels a bit distant, withdrawn. Mukoyoshi's rendition of *Mime* at the Pompidou has a pristine, satiny surface, and the power of great European *gisants*. Its gentle curves swell from what could be the shallow inhalation of sleep, or a last breath.

Portrait of the Artist's Mother, a young, toned, naked, masturbating woman, is cast in nineteen-plus pounds of white paper pulp. Large bright flowers, simplistically painted in gouache, light up the figure and muddle our perception of her volumes. Her head has an abundant mane; her wide face, with fully defined eyes, is dreamy; her body is frontal and defiant, her shameless autoeroticism invigorating.

At the Bourse, Ray set up a triangle of three sculptures in the immense rotunda. *Return to the one* connects with *The New Beetle* (2006), a white-painted stainless steel cast depicting a naked gracile boy sitting on the concrete floor playing with a toy Volkswagen. The ruin of a 1948 Chevy pickup, *Unbaled Truck* (2021), completes this singular play of space, time, and



Left, *Concrete Dwarf*, 2021, cement, and right, *Doubting Thomas*, 2021, painted carbon fiber.



Horse and Rider, 2014, stainless steel, approx. 9 by 3 by 9 feet.

psychology: the kid in his own bubble, playing with his car; the aging artist and the old truck, conveying mileage.

The Chevy pickup gave rise to two diverging works. To produce the 25,000-pound *Baled Truck* (2014), Ray scanned a brick-shaped compressed truck, rubber tires, tubing, and all. He eliminated unwanted details, then had the digital file milled in solid stainless steel. The result remains close to its source volumetrically, while greatly distanced by its permanence, materials fetish, reflective surface, and cost. *Unbaled Truck* is the same crushed and flattened vehicle painstakingly levered, hammered, and shaped over untold hours by skilled workers, restoring its original rounded forms.

The resurrected truck, with its battered, painterly surfaces, is physically substantial yet ghostlike, its torn-metal volume permeable to sight and space. These fraternal twin works impress more as grandiloquent feats than as sculptures. Means don't necessarily create meaning, or, as Sol LeWitt wrote, banal ideas cannot be rescued by beautiful execution.

The 10-ton solid-stainless-steel *Horse and Rider* (2014) stands quietly on the cobblestones before the Bourse's neoclassical entrance. The Western-saddled horse is resolutely passive, its four legs vertical; the rider, a self-portrait of Ray, is vacant-faced, round-shouldered, slightly paunchy, sockless in Docksiders. He grasps absent reins with

his raised right hand. He's going nowhere, unlike the artist. At odds with equestrian monuments set atop high bases to celebrate martial heroes, this statue is out of place and approachable, a selfie favorite for passersby.

One of the thirteen sculptures that circle the Bourse's ring-shaped third floor, *Concrete Dwarf* (2021) depicts a small male in T-shirt, jeans, and sneakers lying prone atop a pedestal. The fine-grained, light-absorbing concrete, a new material for the artist, gives the piece a muted density. Here, Ray shows how skilled he's become at conveying the personhood of his subjects. The dwarf might be resting, but his midsection appears pressed down as from a fall. Looking closely, one sees slivers of space between the base and his lower legs and feet, beneath his head, and under his right hand, whose fingers float down past the base's edge as steel scraps do in Anthony Caro's great steel "Table Pieces" of the 1960s and '70s—signature works from an artist who once deeply fascinated the young Ray. The figure's ambiguous tenderness draws us in.

At moments, Ray's everything-is-possible reach falls short. His 11½-foot-tall *Study after Algardi* (2021, Bourse) is a roughly five-fold enlargement of *Cristo vivo* (ca. 1650), a compelling bronze sculpture of a crucified-yet-alive Christ, sans cross, by Italian artist Alessandro Algardi. Cast in white paper pulp, the monumental Baroque body of Ray's *Study*, flying fabric knotted around

its loins, feels out of place and out of time in a modern-day temple of commerce and art. Here, the artist's habit of positioning his subject between literal representation and pure abstraction is overwhelmed by Christian iconography.

Canonization is a fraught issue these days, but Ray's multi-institutional retrospective certainly invites consideration of his aesthetic accomplishments. The sculptor is to be admired for his attuned perception of space and ceaseless plays with scale, his melding of ideas and their material embodiments, his slippery and provocative subject matter, and his creative longevity. For half a century, Ray has remained true to the course he set as a young artist at the start of his adventurous career. ●

ANNE ROCHETTE and WADE SAUNDERS
are Paris-based sculptors who write on art.

ON THE CALENDAR

"Charles Ray: Figure Ground," at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, through June 5; "Charles Ray," at the Bourse de Commerce-Pinault Collection, Paris, through June 6; "Charles Ray," at the Centre Pompidou, Paris, through June 20; "Charles Ray: Third Installation," at Glenstone, Potomac, Md., through December; **works by Ray in the Whitney Biennial**, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Apr. 6–Sept. 5.