

## ARTS IN REVIEW



Installation view of 'Charles Ray: Figure Ground,' left; Mr. Ray's '81 x 83 x 85 = 86 x 83 x 85' (1989), above; and 'Tractor' (2005), below

## ART REVIEW

## A Mercurial Artist's Mini Retrospective

At the Met, a selection of just 19 works invites us to take the measure of Charles Ray's entire career

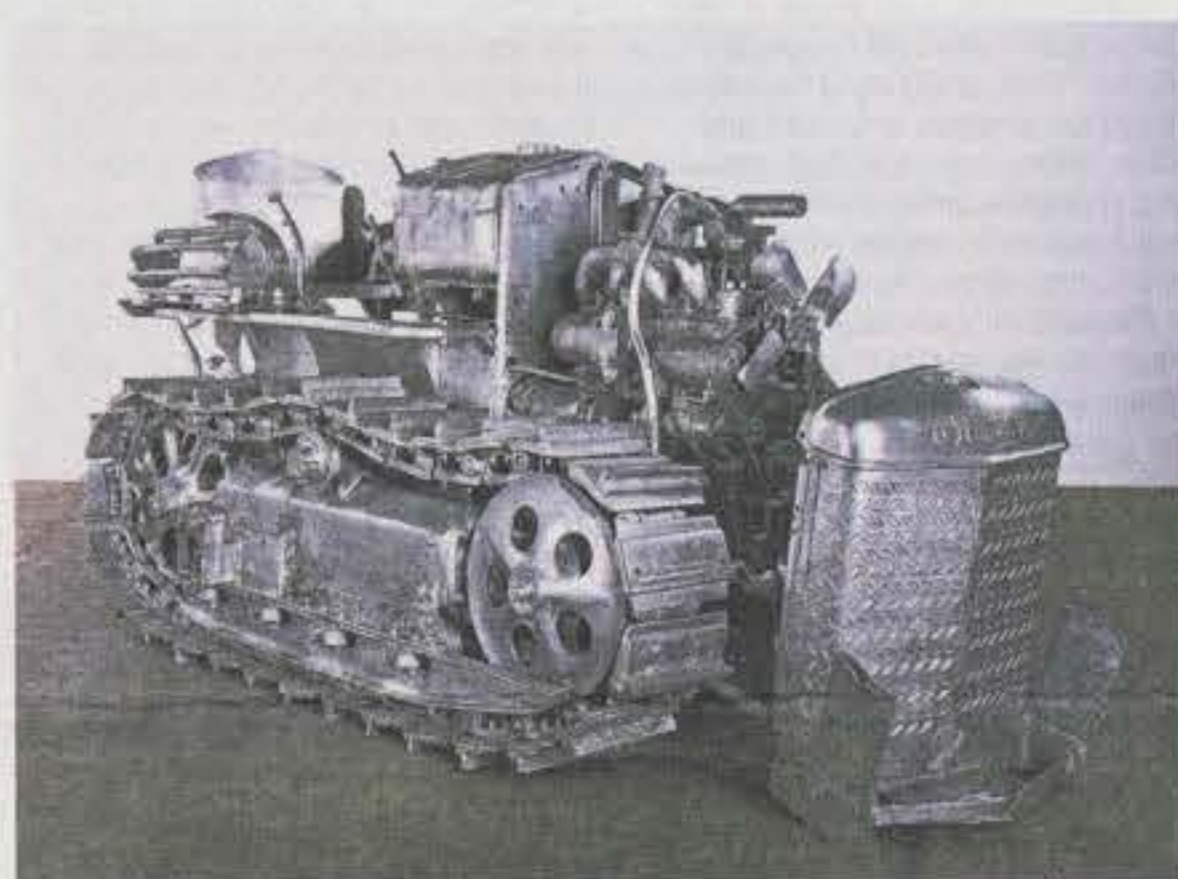
BY RICHARD B. WOODWARD

**C**harles Ray is an artist easy to embrace but slippery to hold close and categorize. Is he a populist? His realistic sculptures of human figures and farm machinery might lead one to think so.

Or is he a neo-traditionalist? The recent references in his art to the standing and relief sculpture of classical Greece and Rome, and to canonic 19th-century American literature, summon up the formerly venerated past without historical indictment—a rarity in today's art world.

Or should the 69-year-old, California-based artist be seen as essentially a provocateur, content to unsettle but not confront his audience, similar to his contemporaries Robert Gober and Jeff Koons?

These questions filled my head while walking through "Charles Ray: Figure Ground" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In this unusual retrospective, neither chronological nor thematic, the curator Kelly Baum and associate curator Brinda Kumar, both in the department of modern and contemporary art, have distilled his life's work down to only 19 objects. Arranged



in two cavernous galleries on the second floor, each knotty piece is presented as a product of his obsessive, capricious mind. (Missing, alas, are his smashed-up metal trucks and automobiles.)

There are examples of his performance art from the 1970s, when he would document his actions in photographs—propping himself against a wall with a board ("Plank piece I and II," 1973) or wrapping himself up like a cocoon in the branches of a

tree ("Untitled," 1973).

Conceptual puzzles abound. "No" (1992) is a photographic self-portrait of his fiberglass-sculpted likeness, while "81 x 83 x 85 = 86 x 83 x 85" (1989) is ostensibly a parody of a Donald Judd metal box. The title gives its exterior measurements on the left side of the equation, its interior on the right. The seeming contradiction between the two is only resolved upon learning that the sculpture is sunk below the

surface of the floor.

"Family Romance" marked a breakthrough for Mr. Ray when it was featured in the 1993 Whitney Biennial. A painted fiberglass sculpture of a naked father, mother, son and daughter holding hands, it's hard to say why it's so disturbing: Is it the nudity of parents with children? The fact that the adults have mature genitals and pubic hair and the kids do not? Or because everyone is the same height (a little over four feet)?

Mr. Ray's sculpture can be monumental or fit in the palm of one's hand. "Chicken" (2007) is one of three tiny white pieces fastidiously crafted out of painted stainless steel and/or porcelain. It depicts an egg with a hole in the shell from which a chick is about to emerge. In a catalog interview, he describes the work as the meeting of "two energies" on the egg's surface—"a chicken coming out and a viewer looking in."

Towering above the entrance to the second gallery is "Archangel" (2021). Carved in Japan out of cypress, and unpainted, it's a statue more than 13 feet tall of a buff, half-naked male youth, with rolled up jeans, flip-flops and a man bun. Although he appears to be balanced precariously on his base—he holds his arms stretched out—the figure

**Is the sculptor a populist? A neo-traditionalist? A provocateur?**

Even though I sometimes leave a show by Mr. Ray wondering if, say, a sculpture of a naked boy holding a frog by its leg plays off an insider art-historical joke that I am too ill-informed to grasp, the head-scratching enigma is seldom annoying.

Maybe that's because he doesn't declaim his meaning or talk down to the viewer. One reason his art may endure is that he never seems quite sure himself about the connotations emanating from his work, and that with each new piece he is still trying to figure out what he wants it to do or say.

**Charles Ray: Figure Ground**  
The Met Fifth Avenue, through June 5

*Mr. Woodward is an arts critic in New York.*

## OPERA REVIEW

## 'Svadba': Recorded Rites

BY HEIDI WALESON

**O**ne of the most interesting creative developments resulting from the Covid-19 shutdown of live performance is the recognition that operas can work as films. Rather than the familiar video representations of staged performances, these projects are conceived for the screen, expanding the visual environments of the stories and even divorcing the physical process of singing from the characters on the screen. Boston Lyric Opera and Opera Philadelphia have pioneered individually in filmed opera; their collaboration on a film of Ana Sokolović's "Svadba" (2011) is now available to subscribers on the digital channels of both companies at operabox.tv and operaphila.tv; on-demand viewing is \$15.

"Svadba" is a good candidate for film treatment. A riveting, 54-minute cappella piece for six female voices and incidental percussion, it is about ritual and community rather than plot: Five women prepare their friend, Milica, for her wedding the next day. Alternately fierce, tender, playful and ecstatic, the friends coalesce around this monumental life transition. Ms. Sokolović's libretto

draws from Serbian poetry and folk tales, but much of the text is an invented, onomatopoeic, syllabic language. Carried by the tight harmonies and complex rhythms of the music, it makes its impact viscerally, rather than committing to literal meaning.

The film, directed by Shura Baryshnikov, takes the idea a few steps further. Six singers recorded their parts in a studio, while five dancers and an actor (Jackie Davis as Lena, here called the Elder) performed on location—a rustic beach house and its environs on Cape Cod. The camera cuts back and forth between the two, which is occasionally disconcerting until you figure out which of the singers is playing the bride (I watched it twice). Four bridesmaids wear diaphanous, sparkly tulle; the fifth, Lena, wears a plain dress with an apron—it's her house. (Costumes are by Lena Borovci.) The attendants gather flowers and grasses for bouquets and beach fruits for jam; they undress and dress the bride; they play games. In Hannah Shepard's screenplay, the natural world is infused into these rites of passage.

Opening the piece up into the stunning landscape adds texture—Ana Novčić was the production designer and Katherine Castro the director of photography—though it also sometimes detracts from the almost claustrophobic intensity and intimacy of the vocal writing. In an early scene, Lena dyes Milica's hair while the other bridesmaids dash outside, take off their dresses, and dance on the beach in their underwear; it seems odd that the six women are not all together. Other scenes cohere better. In one, the



Victoria L. Awkward as Milica with bridesmaids in the Boston Lyric Opera and Opera Philadelphia collaboration

singers recite the Serbian alphabet and layer nursery rhymes as the dancers face off in a playful contest. And in the most magical sequence, the sun sets, and the bride goes out to the beach alone as the ensemble, with a bit of reverberation, sings (in Serbian), "Wet your hair with stars." Here, the physical separation on screen seems right—it is a nocturne and an incantation, fading into the sound of a rain stick, as Milica falls asleep on the beach beside the waves. At dawn, she is awakened, also magically, with the wispy sound of an ocarina, and the final preparations begin.

The film's casting also gives the piece new dimensions. The camera celebrates Victoria L. Awkward's

beautifully complicated Black hair-style, with its multihued extensions, giving Milica's hair-dyeing sequence extra resonance. It also interpolates a cameo appearance by a nonsinging Betrothed—who is a woman (Olivia Moon). There was an all-female production team as well as cast. The folk-based rhythms and harmonies, nonsense syllables, and vocal noises like lip trills and tongue clicks can make "Svadba" seem like a mysterious anthropological ritual from some exotic ethnic group. In the film, the identifiable location and the diverse cast make it feel both contemporary and timeless.

The splendid vocal ensemble, conducted by Daniela Candillari, featured Chabrelle D. Williams, who

brought anticipatory ecstasy to Milica's big solo; Brianna J. Robinson, Maggie Finnegan, Mack Wolz, Hannah Ludwig and Vera Savage created a vibrant, varied tonal palette with wonderfully precise articulation of the syllabic material. In addition to Ms. Awkward and Ms. Davis, the dynamic onscreen performers included dancers Jay Breen, Sarah Pacheco, Sasha Peterson and Emily Jerant-Hendrickson.

*Ms. Waleson writes on opera for the Journal and is the author of "Mad Scenes and Exit Arias: The Death of the New York City Opera and the Future of Opera in America" (Metropolitan).*