A Conversation with Charles Ray

BY JOSHUA REIMAN

Baled Truck, 2014. Solid stainless steel, 30 x 50 x 118 in.
Over the past 40 years, Charles Ray has produced a majestic array of artistic touchstones within the contemporary sculptural vernacular. His orchestrated relationships between space and objects tempt the senses and baffle perceptual longings. Ray’s sculptures are the result of deeply considered compositions often requiring extraordinary amounts of labor, sometimes years in the making. Ray’s sculptural idioms question our basic ontology. He employs the power of awkward bodily relationships, which result in confrontational moments between work and viewer. He deploys a serious wit and, over the years, has engaged in an enormous amount of material inquiry. For many makers and admirers of contemporary art, Ray is a living legend. His recent sculptures remain conceptually challenging, materially lush, and beyond visually compelling. “Charles Ray: Sculpture 1997–2014” will be on view at the Art Institute of Chicago through October 4, 2015.

Joshua Reiman: What are your terms for a successful sculpture?
Charles Ray: I wish they were my terms. We often think that a work we completed is great, or we agree that another artist’s work has achieved greatness in the contemporary milieu, but in a very short time, art floats away from our critical control. What’s left when we’ve lost our idea about the meaning of a certain work? Ancient art survives a cultural dementia. We no longer have an understanding of exactly why it’s here. After we forget the purpose of an object, its artfulness still remains. Greek figuration is interesting in that we can still see it. The scholar Richard Neer reminds us that a kouros figure was perhaps one of the few smooth objects in a very rough world. Is there an equivalent today? Michelangelo said that a great sculpture must survive being rolled down a hill without its limbs breaking off. If we take this literally, we’re lost. But we can wonder, what’s the hill today? As horrendous an experience as it is to watch ISIS destroy people and our heritage, I believe that the slope Michelangelo talks about is much closer to our accepted cultural conventions. I have noticed escalators in museums. I have noticed architects designing escalators in museums that are perhaps too steep.

JR: You use the body a lot, especially your own body. What does your body tell us about us, or what does it tell us about you in sculptural form?

CR: The body is interesting and complex because, first and foremost, it is us. Rather than an image, one can see the body as a vowel—the mental is the physical and the physical is the mental.
When John Searle was asked to comment on the mind-body problem, he said, “Oh, that’s identical to the stomach-digestion problem.” Throughout my life, I’ve had different perceptions and uses for the body. Self-portraits are often not about the author, while portraits can serve as an armature for the structure of one’s own soul. Plank piece I and Plank piece II (1973) are early examples of works that used my body as a sculptural element. I was a very young man then—a very young and unformed man. Today, advancing in my years, I marvel at how Plank I and II remain out in the world, still working for me. These two photographs have no meaning—or rather their meaning is dynamic. As a young man, I denied any empathetic reading of the work. I insisted that Plank I and II were about a relationship between a wall, a plank, and the junctures and weight of my own body. My friends laughed at me and said, “You idiot, it looks like the aftermath of a car wreck or a Goya print on the horrors of our own physicality.” Years later, a collector bought them, and his wife told a curator friend that her husband had come home one day extremely happy and excited. He told his wife that he bought two beautiful black and white photographs of a cat.

I could only think of those cat posters from the late ‘60s that depicted cats hanging from clotheslines or window frames, with a text that said, “Hang in there baby.” I think the answer to your question really has to do with you or your trajectory of viewing. Look at Oh! Charley, Charley, Charley...; at first glance, you may feel that I, the artist, have revealed all, naked in a gay orgy, set out in a public location. But identity is repeated. It’s like the boy who was fooled by an elf who tied his yellow scarf to the trunk of a tree with a pot of gold buried beneath; the boy makes the elf promise not to remove the scarf while he goes home to get a shovel. The elf keeps his promise, but he ties a yellow scarf to every tree in the forest. With my repeated identity, nothing is revealed. The sexual act remains masturbatory, my fantasies safely locked within my psyche. Perhaps those works that make viewers aware of their own bodies reveal more about the artist than works that depict an image of the artist. I see the body as a place, a structure—the surface of a body being less an image than a manifold for sculptural events to unfold.

JR: Your new work is gorgeous. But I have to ask, why solid stainless steel? In pieces like Young Man and Shoe Tie, is the weight a visual thing for you, or does the solidity achieve a sculptural quality that you believe translates for viewers?

CR: Thanks for the compliment, but if you have to ask about the weight, do you really see the work as gorgeous? In all fairness though, you’re not the first to ask. People ask all the time why they are solid, and I
answer, "Because at least inside I can find some fucking peace and quiet." Not all of my new sculptures are solid, though many are. I see their solidity as a way to launch them into the stream of time. The solid pieces are machined rather than cast, and I'm also interested in the hand of the machine. If it is not the final hand to caress the surface of my work, evidence from its markings are important to the perception of what I'm doing. All of my sculptures, and in particular the figures, are brought into existence by subtle orchestration of a relationship of their parts. After many years of looking at a toe in relationship to a foot, to a hand, to an ear, then a lip, to the rendering of a nipple, and back to the testicle, I wondered aloud to my wife if what I was doing was too subtle. No one could ever see, much less spend time looking for and finding and digesting, these quiet connections of being. My wife agreed that there were areas of the work too subtle to be seen, but then she said, "The meaning is in the subtleties." So, in a roundabout way, the answer to your question is that they're solid not to be heavy, but they're heavy because they're solid. Decroux, the great corporeal mime, said that "all drama is the drama of gravity." JR: Can you talk a bit about failure? I often think that this is where the best lessons come from when making sculpture. What was your ultimate failure in making your work? CR: I suppose one could say that failure comes when the question is answered. Questions engage us. Answers have a nasty tendency to be disproved. Quality is in the question, not the answer. JR: I heard that you are a sailor and that you do a lot of solo trips. Sailing is often thought of as a romantic endeavor, yet it is complicated and demands being present and reacting to events to determine your next move. Can you relate the practice of sailing to how you make objects? CR: I'm a better artist than I am a sailor, but for my entire life, since I was a very young boy, I have been drawn to the beach. I've had a boat almost as long as I could draw. The water is really wonderful because it's so ultimately experiential. Many things have informed my work — what informs your art are the very things that have formed you. I've spent a good deal of my life on the water, but not as much today as I have in the past. It's a pleasure just walking on the beach, thinking about the boundary between land and sea. Art's a different story. One doesn't move onto the shore so easily. There is no marina, no safe harbor. Perhaps the only way to land is being shipwrecked on the rocks. As a young boy, my father taught me that if anything ever happens, always remember to stay with the boat, don't try to swim for.
shore. And now as an older man, my own voice reassures me—if anything ever happens, stay in the studio.

JR: The space around your objects is as important as the dialogue between objects and viewers and between objects and other objects. How refined is your strategy of space (considering kinesthetic dimensions of the viewer's body) when preparing what you are going to make? Do you make each of your works for a specific space or site?

CR: Space is the sculptor’s primary medium. If you remove a knot from the world—not just the knot, but the very space that the knot occupies—you create a new spatial domain. Every spatial domain is related to a different knot at home in our three-dimensional space. If this sounds complicated, that’s because it is. It’s not a literal fact, but it is a mathematical fact. A mathematician sees an object with a hole through it as an object that cannot be shrunken to a point. This is a beautiful definition of a hole: it is also the idea of a primitive sculptural armature. Great sculptures have spatial armatures, they can’t be shrunken to a point, nor can they be removed from the space they occupy. Space is not emptiness. Sculptures don’t sit in space or fill space. They are made from it.

You also asked if I work in a site-specific manner. I have occasionally, but where a work is born may not be where it lives—for instance, a kouro figure that once bedazzled the ancients in the great outdoors is now indoors at the Met, where a guard watches me look at it.

JR: When you look back over the trajectory of your work, have you discovered certain patterns or networks that you didn’t notice before?

CR: Yes, and this is not just with my work, but with all work. Without sounding superficial, I would add that art has good days and bad days. Sometimes I go back to a museum and wonder, “What the hell did I see in this?” But then, rooms that I had hurried through slow me down and stop me in my tracks. Art is dynamic, and it asks for our continual interaction. Ancient art feels so contemporary, simply because we can see it.

JR: In Shelf (1981), your head is painted gray and your body is naked below the shelf, with various objects on top also painted gray—a gas can, a toolbox, and a pot. What do these objects mean to you? Unlike your other works from that time, which nod to Minimalism and your mash-up performance-figurative actions, this one involves recognizable objects. And, in a work like Shelf, is the photograph the final work for you or just documentation?

CR: The objects on the shelf, including my head, have no specific meaning. Perhaps I should say no predetermined meaning. I wanted that work to create a tension between two axes, vertically and horizontally across the shelf, as the viewer struggled to disassociate my head from my body and form a narrative with the objects. The gray paint was an artistic device best left in my youth, but it allowed the head to be read as a discrete object. The

Unpainted Sculpture, 1997. Fiberglass and paint, 50 x 78 x 171 in.
narrative associated with head, toolbox, gas can, and vase was continually being broken by the verticality of the flesh below—figure or live figurative body being inseparable from head.

The meaning of the work became intertwined with the structure of viewing. Verticality and horizontality cannot coexist. The figure continually changes from vulnerable to all-powerful and back to vulnerable. This, of course, is in the viewer’s mind, because I was often thinking mundane thoughts about the completion of my day. I mention this because perhaps the structure of this artifice became apparent more quickly than I would have liked. All artifacts have an artifice, and for me, it’s often a question of how steep or interesting the trip to the artifice becomes.

**JR:** Gray appears again in Unpainted Sculpture. What sculptural presence does this color achieve for you, and how did you come to that conclusion with this work?

**CR:** Unpainted Sculpture is many years later, and its concerns with color and space are very different. The gray in Unpainted Sculpture is, as the title states, unpainted, while the gray in the earlier work is painted. The painted shelf is an active sculptural element. One could say that there are three objects in the sculpture: my body, what’s on the shelf, and the color. In Unpainted Sculpture, the gray is form itself. The sculpture was modeled in a material called gray, thus there was no need to paint it. So, one work uses color as an element, the other as form.

**JR:** Where is Boy with Frog now, and how are you feeling about its removal?

**CR:** Boy with Frog is in Mr. Pinault’s storage. I don’t feel great about its removal and hope that one day the boy will return, as all boys do. I will say that Boy with Frog was born at the Dogana. The location is in its sculptural DNA. As painful as its removal was, I was surprised by how powerful this outdoor sculpture remained when it was brought indoors at the Kunstmuseum Basel last summer.

**JR:** I remember seeing Oh! Charley, Charley, Charley...as an art student back in the early ‘90s and feeling like “this is what an artist is all about, being self-indulgent, doing yourself over and over again by making objects.” Do you see artists today still masturbating or being self-obsessed in the same way, or are you not thinking about that? Art can be a very selfish profession, and this piece really speaks to that selfishness. Was this what you meant?

**CR:** No. I saw it as more generous than selfish. After all, it’s a public sculpture, regardless of the private ownership of its current home institution.

**JR:** Hinoki, which is made of Japanese cypress, is a masterpiece of process—extraction from the site, molds, casting in resin, reassembly, shipping to master carvers in Japan. What did it mean for you to have this piece made by hand?

**CR:** Everything. Though you stated the process, the events of the sculpture’s making did not seem to happen in any particular temporal sequence. Intentionality was the hand that fashioned this work from beginning until the end. In my first engagement with the fallen tree, I did not understand or see that one day it would be involved in Japan. If you sweep up all the aspects of its making, the sequence has a weight rather than a temporal order. Before and after have less to do with past and future than with my ongoing experience of the tree. This works in time—the tree continues to darken,
and it will perhaps split and crack in future years. I don’t mean to say that I’m interested in this process, but I am interested in how the intentionality of its makers creates a seamless world made of thought and matter.

JR: Who are your favorite sculptors, and what did they do that blew your mind?

CR: That changes continuously. At the moment, I’m thinking about Rodin, Degas, and Matisse. There are many reasons to approach these three artists, separately and together. What interests me one year may be meaningful and intense. How we move from wax to bronze in Degas seems complicated and political. But today what blows my mind is how I find a kind of super clay in Matisse’s sculptural work. Bronze is a transformation and a suitable material for the work of these three artists. Without looking at it in a way that’s better, I simply see in Matisse another kind of final material. His bronzes are somehow made less of bronze than a kind of super clay. Aspects of the original coils of clay—pressure of the hand into soft material, a rip in a slab—become all the more clay-like when experiencing Matisse.

JR: You have an important exhibition touring now, “Charles Ray: Sculpture 1997–2014.” What surprised you about your work from this segment of time?

CR: The exhibition opened last year in Basel, and it is also being shown at the Art Institute of Chicago. While it is one catalogue, it is two separate shows. In Basel, the exhibition was installed in a traditional European museum—a sequence of rooms, with one sculpture after another. In Chicago, James Rondeau has taken out all but two structural walls. He has also encouraged me to engage with the public. Two new works not in the Basel exhibition will be installed outdoors. So, what surprises me has not yet happened because the show still exists in the future.

JR: Robert Rauschenberg once said, “I don’t really trust ideas, especially good ones. Rather I put my trust in the materials that confront me, because they put me in touch with the unknown.” What do you think of this statement?

CR: I like it. I’ve met many ideas that I like, but none that have stuck around. Ideas, by their very nature, are fair-weather friends.

Joshua Reiman is an artist living and working in Pittsburgh, where he is a visiting professor of art at Carnegie Mellon University.

Hinoki, 2007. Cypress wood, 68 x 382 x 240 in.