

Charles Ray

Matthew Marks

In his first New York solo show since a 1998 retrospective at the Whitney Museum, Charles Ray offered just three objects: an egg, a boy, and a tractor. Each was perfectly obvious yet sublimely ambiguous. Involving space and time, trust and disbelief, the anxieties of scale, and the implications of psychosexuality, Ray's works sometimes take years to gestate. They reveal their intentions equally gradually.

For the sculpture *Chicken* (2007), a white-painted stainless-steel life-size egg, Ray actually raised chickens in his studio. The piece has a circular portal through which viewers can glimpse the tiny beak and claws of a porcelain chick on the verge of hatching. At 2½ inches long, the work is minuscule. *The New Beetle* (2006), also white stainless steel and life-size, is about as big as a four-year-old boy. In contrast to *Chicken*, which conveys fragility, this work exudes classical purity: a naked child, his small genitalia lined up in an egglike row, concentrates on a toy Volkswagen; his hand grasps the little car as if seizing power.



Charles Ray, *Father Figure*, 2007, machined solid stainless-steel and acrylic polyurethane, 93¾" x 137¼" x 71¼".

The last sculpture, *Father Figure* (2007), is based on a toy tractor that Kiki Smith gave Ray. Enlarged to 18½ tons of solid steel, it consists of a bright green man merging with his bright green tractor—a monumental, rigidly frontal centaur of the industrial era. His foot presses the accelerator. The man may be benevolent, for all we know, but his tractor's huge black wheels are aggressive and inexorable.

It's no accident that the portal into the egg recalls Ray's *Rotating Circle* (1988), which, set in a wall at eye level, spins so quickly that it not only appears perfectly still but seems barely to exist. And the egg certainly has something to do with Ray's *Puzzle Bottle* (1995), a self-portrait trapped in a bottle.

That *Father Figure* is surely related to the life-size fire engine the artist parked outside the 1993 Whitney Biennial is not an accident either, nor is the connection with his famous giant mother figure, also an unnerving image of parental authority.

But why did the artist select the '90s remake of the Beetle, which started life as the "people's car" in Third Reich Germany? Why are the words "empire" and "USA" embossed on the wheels of the colossal toy tractor, which looks more like a relic from the old Soviet Union than anything from farm-belt America? Besides his allusions to the tricky questions of content, the politics of scale, and, as Ray says, "the abstract notion of an intrinsic space," is it really possible that this artist—who has insisted his work is not about the images but the artifices of sculpture—is now looking at the space appropriated by politics? This show may not simply have been about birth, childhood, and masculine power. By intention or serendipity, Charles Ray traces the evolution of empire with these three objects—as surely as Thomas Cole once did. —Kim Levin