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# Charles Ray

# Figure Ground

THE  
MET

Gallery 999

# **Charles Ray**

## **Figure Ground**

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#MetCharlesRay



# No

1992

Chromogenic print in artist's frame

The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, Gift of Lannan Foundation (97.91)

Ray often treats his body and identity as raw materials, deromanticizing the concept of “the artist” in the process. An example of what he has called a “sculptural photograph,” *No* consists of a framed picture of a fiberglass mold of Ray’s head and torso embellished with a wig and clad in his own shirt and glasses. The picture was taken by a professional portrait photographer, and it adopts the gestures standard to the genre, recalling the kinds of stiff, staged images found in homes and break rooms around the United States. Notwithstanding the emphatic negation implied by its title, the work is not all artifice. As Ray has said, “*No* is exactly what it feels like to be me.”

## **Charles Ray**

### **Figure Ground**

For over five decades, Charles Ray (born Chicago, 1953) has experimented with a wide range of methods, including performance, photography, and sculpture, the medium for which he is recognized today. In the process, he has mined the tradition of Western art, mobilized the power of materials, and pioneered major advances in sculptural production, combining the analogue and the digital. Ray's intriguing and occasionally bracing work addresses not only art history, popular culture, and mass media but also identity, mortality, race, and gender in sometimes provocative, often irreverent ways. Throughout, he has remained deeply invested in exploring the fundamental relationships between form and space, figure and ground.

Ray studied at the University of Iowa and Rutgers University, where he was exposed to a variety of artistic approaches, including modernist sculpture, intermedia arts, and process-based performance. In 1981 he moved to Los Angeles, where he continues

to work today. Situated at The Met, whose collection the artist has long studied, *Charles Ray: Figure Ground* unites sculptures from every period of his career with key photographs from the 1970s to explore central aspects of his oeuvre. The works have been intentionally arranged in order to forge subtle connections between objects as well as between objects and viewers. Similar to a scholar's stone, which both prolongs and facilitates the process of discovery, Ray's sculpture poses many trenchant questions but answers none directly.

IN CASE, CLOCKWISE BEGINNING AT LOWER LEFT

## **Chicken**

2007

Painted stainless steel, porcelain

## **Handheld bird**

2006

Painted stainless steel

## **Hand holding egg**

2007

Porcelain

*Chicken*, Glenstone Museum, Potomac, Md.

*Handheld bird* and *Hand holding egg*, Matthew Marks Gallery

These intimately scaled sculptures are closely linked in concept and material. A study for *Chicken* later finished as a complete work, *Handheld bird* is made from durable steel contoured into a solid fetal form. In *Hand holding egg*, which originated as a fragment of an unrealized sculpture, delicate porcelain describes a cracked and empty shell resting on a child's palm. The media combine in *Chicken* to create a porcelain hatchling encased in steel.

Both their size and their potential for tactile engagement connect these pieces to a long history of sculptures that are meant to be turned in a viewer's hand, from Renaissance bronzes to Japanese netsuke. Each is premised on the spatial effects of various points of contact. Space is separated, directed, or linked, be it through the hollow of *Hand holding egg* or through the circular aperture in *Chicken*. The latter is unnaturally round, signaling that subject matter and verisimilitude are of less importance than the structure and the dynamics of the space it creates. *Chicken* may initially invite visual engagement, but it also relies on extra-optical readings of the parts that remain hidden. This reliance on touch is even greater for *Handheld bird*, which, though it must remain inside a vitrine for conservation reasons, is intended to be grasped, activating a subtle interplay between visual and tactile cues.



# Huck and Jim

2014

Stainless steel

Collection of Lisa and Steven Tananbaum

Full of gravitas and portent, *Huck and Jim* interprets a moment in chapter 19 of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, when the protagonists debate the origin of the stars while floating down the Mississippi River on a raft. The figures are about twice life-size and are shown in a state of acute absorption. Youthful and curious, Huck bends forward to scoop an invisible object off the ground. Stoic and self-possessed, Jim stares into the distance, his hand hovering over Huck's back. Twain's characters are often not wearing clothes in the novel. Ray, who has been exploring the nude figure since the 1980s, thought nudity also suited the sculpture, which was originally conceived for a fountain outside the Whitney Museum of American Art. What signals freedom and homosociality in the book introduces the troubling possibility of transgenerational desire in the sculpture, bringing about what Ray has described as a "layered dynamic."

The artist, who sought to capture “a complexity in the relationship between Huck and Jim that is American in the deepest sense,” once compared the sculpture to a “forest of limbs.” Though they do not touch, the figures appear interwoven, an effect produced by their relative positions as well as by the reflective surface of the machined stainless steel.

I needed to embrace not just what I could make, but what America could make and what America was. I returned to the river and to Twain.

—Charles Ray, 2022, on making *Huck and Jim* for the Whitney Museum of American Art

Ray often revisits Mark Twain's 1885 novel *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, considered an American classic. He references it directly in *Huck and Jim* (2014) and *Sarah Williams* (2021) as well as obliquely in *Boy with frog* (2009). The sublimity of the natural world and the violence of racism play central roles in *Huckleberry Finn*. Set in antebellum Missouri and written during the waning years of Reconstruction, the book revolves around a fraternal but asymmetrical relationship between Huck, an impoverished White boy escaping an abusive father, and Jim, an enslaved Black man en route to the free states. Linked by their respective experiences of cruelty and their common desire for independence, Huck and Jim are friends, but by no means equals.

The novel's many ambiguities and complexities, especially its unresolved position on slavery and prejudice, have prompted debate well into the twenty-first century. Author Toni Morrison once declared it both "troubling" and "amazing." For his part, Ray translates the quintessentially American entanglements of Huck and Jim's relationship into monumental sculptures. In both *Huck and Jim* and *Sarah Williams*, the paired figures are formally and optically entwined, just as they are ethically, politically, and structurally interconnected in Twain's book. Each unit—each character—serves as figure to the other's ground, as image to the other's backdrop.

*ACROSS GALLERY*

**81 x 83 x 85 = 86 x 83 x 85**

1989

Aluminum

Pinault Collection

Superficially reminiscent of a minimalist cube from the 1960s, *81 x 83 x 85 = 86 x 83 x 85* is a spatial and conceptual conundrum. The key is in the title, which gives the box's exterior measurements in the first half of the equation and the interior in the second. The equivalence promised by the equal sign is contradicted by the five-centimeter (approximately two-inch) disparity in depth, the result of the sculpture being set into the floor. The equation is therefore mathematically erroneous but factually correct as a description of the object. Here, as elsewhere, the space inside and around the sculpture is as much Ray's material as the aluminum. As the artist once observed, "A sculpture does not simply sit in space or occupy space; it is made of space."

CENTER OF GALLERY

## **Tractor**

2005

Aluminum

Glenstone Museum, Potomac, Md.

Ray's sculptures are often loosely patterned on preexisting ideas and things. Such is the case with *Tractor*, which takes as its point of departure a boyhood memory and, more directly, an abandoned vintage tractor found in the San Fernando Valley, California. In order to sculpt the entire vehicle inside and out, Ray had the original retrieved and disassembled. Studio assistants modeled each part in clay, creating representations that retain evidence of their makers' hands. After molds were taken and waxes created, the elements were cast in aluminum and reassembled to make a complete, topological object that is both relic and reliquary. With its uniformity of color, patina, and material as well as its semireflective surface, *Tractor* asserts its abstract qualities.

# Boy with frog

2009

Painted stainless steel

Philadelphia Museum of Art, Promised gift of Keith L. and Katherine Sachs

This composition is a precise arrangement of forms: a nude young boy, with back arched and tummy thrust forward, tilts his head and gazes blithely at a frog dangling precariously, even cruelly, from his outstretched arm. The sculpture was commissioned by François Pinault for the exterior of the Punta della Dogana, a bustling civic space along the Grand Canal in Venice. The work's riverine associations persist beyond its original location, loosely recalling the tales of Huckleberry Finn that unfold along the shoreline of the Mississippi. With its stance suggesting both outward inquiry and self-absorption, *Boy with frog* also reflects Ray's sculptural engagement with the formative conditions of boyhood, in which a sense of the world may be grasped through curious and sometimes callous play.

## **Plank piece I and II**

1973

Gelatin silver prints

Private collection

While enrolled at the University of Iowa in the early 1970s, Ray focused on the effects of gravity on objects in space, employing heavy construction materials like metal sheets and stone blocks. In 1973 he began to use his own body, subjecting it to many of the same experiments. Documented with the camera, these projects combine elements of sculpture, performance, and photography. *Plank piece I and II*, which nods to both Bruce Nauman's videos and Richard Serra's prop pieces, is the earliest such work. Pinned and wedged against a wall by a plank, the artist's elevated body folds and flops where wood meets flesh. The orchestration of plank, wall, floor, and figure is at once a study of the contrast between malleability and rigidity and a visceral demonstration of the bodily demands of sculpture.



## **Table**

1990

Plexiglas, steel

Collection of the artist, courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

In *Table*, the setup for a painterly still life is transformed into a sculptural meditation on the conditions of space. The work deftly yokes the transparency and permeability of the bottomless vessels with the opacity and solidity of the tabletop in which they are embedded. Overall, it presents as a unified object through which the eye can travel and space can flow unimpeded, at least until arriving at the lid of a cotton jar. This subtle interruption serves as a perceptual short circuit, bringing the deliberate spatial arrangements into focus.

The work follows a series in which Ray used the simple structure of a table as a site for exploring the complex sculptural dynamics of utilitarian objects. While these earlier iterations relied on the juxtaposition of items in a range of materials and occasionally included kinetic elements, here, all excess is expunged, distilling the relationship between forms and space into a liminal composition.

Space is the sculptor's primary medium.

—Charles Ray, 2006

Touch is central to Ray's conceptual and material approaches to sculpture, especially the way he shapes space inside and around his works. "I see sculpture as using space, bending it, modeling it, manipulating it," he has said. Whether in his small-scale pieces or his monumental works for civic sites, touch manifests through carefully calibrated points of contact between figures, objects, and the ground as well as through gaps—rifts, hollows, and other voids.

Ray is also sensitive to the tactile qualities of his material, be it machined steel, carved cypress, fired porcelain, or cast aluminum. The sculptures bear the trace of the many hands that work on them, from the human ones that chisel wood, model clay, or manipulate digital scans to the robotic ones that hew metal.

THROUGH DOORWAY TO NEXT GALLERY

## **Archangel**

2021

Cypress

Collection of the artist, courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

*Archangel* was conceived for an exhibition in Paris. Shocked by terrorist attacks like the one that occurred in the offices of *Charlie Hebdo* in 2015, Ray envisioned the archangel Gabriel, a guardian figure in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, alighting onto unstable ground. This initial inspiration was subsequently filtered through what the artist has called a “tangled heap” of personal and cultural references, including “illustrations from primary-school catechism textbooks.” In the final work, the title is the only direct trace of the original idea.

The sculpture was carved from Japanese cypress (*hinoki*) in Osaka by expert woodworker Yuboku Mukoyoshi and his apprentices using a single block of laminated timber. An adult male figure perches precariously but gracefully atop a simple box. Like much of Ray’s work, *Archangel* crisscrosses the

historical and art historical timeline. While the figure's exposed torso and outstretched arms evoke a Christian crucifixion scene, his rolled-up pants, flip-flops, and man bun identify him with the contemporary moment.

## Untitled

1973

Gelatin silver print, 1989

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Purchase, Robert Shapazian Gift, Samuel J. Wagstaff Jr. Bequest, The Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation Gift through Joyce and Robert Menschel, and Harriette and Noel Levine Gift, 1995 (1995.474)

From the beginning of his career, Ray has been acutely aware of the myriad ways in which the body is implicated in the form and meaning of sculpture. His interest in indexing his own body—whether as organic matter or as structural dimensions—can be traced to works such as *Untitled*, realized while he was a student at the University of Iowa. The photograph documents a performance in which the artist had himself trussed up and tied to a tree for several hours, hovering above passersby. Ray's silhouetted figure appears entangled in the branches and dangerously suspended in midair. Straddling satire and gravity, the work presents as an audacious prank as well as a more disquieting confrontation with a body in extremis.

The pattern is where the sculptor's work occurs.  
—Charles Ray, 2021

In both conception and production, much of Ray's work relies on patterns and patterning. A long-standing term in both sculpture and industrial production, "pattern" refers in Ray's case to the clay, plaster, and fiberglass models that serve as the foundation for sculptures he later casts, carves, and machines. Many of the artist's sculptures are also patterned on preexisting models, some concrete, others abstract—from novels, mannequins, and works of art to ideological formations like childhood and masculinity.

When it comes to source material, Ray looks for patterns that embody the irreducible and "absolute manifestations of a culture," Western and Euro-American culture especially. The readymades he draws upon are always subjected to reinvention, recombination, and metamorphosis. The same holds true for his physical templates, which are part of a laborious process involving refinement over multiple steps, iterations, and materials.

# Mime

2014

Aluminum

Hill Charitable Collection

*Mime* was produced via a circuitous process that began with three-dimensional digital scans of a human model and ended with the machining of commercial-grade aluminum. A male figure—modeled on professional mime Lorin Eric Salm—lies on a cot with his chest slightly inflated, suspended in space and time.

Illusion is fundamental to the art of miming as well as the sculpture itself. Indeed, Ray's work self-consciously addresses the imitative ability of both its subject and its medium. *Mime* also leaves the figure's precise comportment open to interpretation, resulting in a dizzying array of potential readings. The sculpture might represent a mime who is sleeping, a mime who is miming sleep, or a mime who is miming the onset of death. In fact, the figure's raised arm recalls historical sculptures of mortally wounded or deceased warriors.

# Reclining woman

2018

Stainless steel

Collection Glenn and Amanda Fuhrman NY, Courtesy the FLAG Art Foundation

*Reclining woman* emerged at the intersection of multiple incidental encounters, from Ray's routine observation of a tiny tchotchke on his kitchen windowsill to a chance meeting with a personal banker, who struck the artist as a fitting model for a sculpture. Ray was also aware of the ubiquity of the reclining female nude in Western art, a pattern or archetype explored by his modernist forebears Henri Matisse and Henry Moore.

Every element, from squinting eye to curling toe, is rendered in relationship to the others, even as the reflective surface makes some details hard to see. Through carefully calibrated milling and polishing, the fleshly folds and contours of the woman's body are set off by the crisp lines of the cuboidal block upon which it rests, drawing strikingly different effects from the same material.



Intentionality was the hand that fashioned this work from beginning until the end.

—Charles Ray, 2015

Time and form intertwine in Ray's sculptures. All emerged gradually, after long gestation periods and painstaking rounds of drafting, testing, and experimentation with differently scaled patterns in various materials. Every aspect of his sculptures, whether fiberglass, steel, or wood, is precisely articulated through the work of human and robotic hands.

The artist often combines deep study of the philosophical and material conditions that have informed the making of art—from classical statuary to modernist sculpture—with an interest in the technical use and cultural significance of contemporary production methods. In the 1990s he incorporated commercial mannequin-making techniques, while in more recent years he has deployed industrial fabrication processes, such as the machining of aluminum and stainless steel.

# **A copy of ten marble fragments of the Great Eleusinian Relief**

2017

Aluminum

Collection of Joshua and Filipa Fink, New York

Exemplifying Ray's long-standing exploration of art history, this work is patterned on one on view in The Met's galleries of Greek and Roman art made ca. 27 B.C.–A.D. 14. The latter is a copy in its own right, comprised of fragments of a Roman version of an ancient Greek relief that the Museum set into plaster casts of the original in the 1930s. Ray's relief, which retains the breaks and seams of its reference object, is further hybridized, a composite of archaic and contemporary elements made by the hands of humans and machined out of a dazzling material unknown in ancient times.

# Sarah Williams

2021

Stainless steel

Collection of the artist, courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

*Sarah Williams* reinvents a moment from chapter 10 of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, when Jim helps Huck disguise himself as a girl before he sets out to gather information about the search effort underway for them. "Sarah Williams" is the moniker Huck assumes upon arriving in town, making the name a double fiction: a persona adopted by Huck, who is himself an invention of Twain's imagination. With an identity as unstable as its gender, this character is precisely the kind of transgressive, contradictory cultural reference that has long intrigued Ray.

Loosely following the book, the work shows Jim kneeling behind Huck, thread and fishhook in hand, preparing to adjust the hem of his dress. Ray has said that the work transforms "two people" into "one structure," compressing Huck and Jim into a single three-dimensional frame. It was machined out of stainless steel, which dematerializes the surface,

creating pockets of light and shadow that temper verisimilitude with abstraction. The effect is kinetic and changeable, like waves lapping along a sunlit shoreline. The steel also renders the figures' skin color inexact; however, race-based relations of domination and subordination persist in Jim's and Huck's relative positions.

## **Boy**

1992

Painted fiberglass, steel, fabric, glass

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Purchase, with funds from Jeffrey Deitch, Bernardo Nadal-Ginard, and Penny and Mike Winton (92.131a–h)

In the early 1990s Ray created his “sculptures of mannequins.” A mass-produced object designed to stoke consumerism, the mannequin is a representation of an idealized human being that simultaneously reflects and codifies dominant standards of race, gender, sexuality, and beauty. *Boy* is patterned on a store mannequin, complete with its base. The figure has the features, proportions, and clothing of a prepubescent White male but the height of an adult man (Ray specifically), creating an uncanny gap between size and appearance. Equally disconcerting are the figure’s anachronistic clothes, vacant eyes, and simpering smile, which deprive *Boy* of the innocence American society traditionally associates with both childhood and Whiteness.

*TO RIGHT OF GALLERY ENTRANCE*

## **Rotating circle**

1988

Electric motor, disk

The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, Gift of Lannan Foundation (97.86)

After foregrounding his own body in several works made in the 1970s and 1980s, Ray began to create sculptural interventions that bear only the subtlest trace of his presence. The titular circle of this work is scaled to the artist's height and embedded in the wall. It spins in place thanks to an unseen yet audible electric motor, rotating with such speed that it appears stationary, like a line incised into the wall. Holding in tension kineticism and stasis, visuality and aurality, presence and absence, drawing and sculpture, the work is also a slyly if radically abstracted self-portrait. The artist once described it as “a portal into my mind—placid on the outside but spinning furiously on the inside.”

**Please maintain a safe distance from the work.**

# Family romance

1993

Painted fiberglass, hair

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of the Peter Norton Family Foundation, 1993 (281.1993)

Although *Family romance* relies on the technology of mannequin making, Ray considers it one of his earliest sculptures of figures. The title alludes to a 1909 essay by Sigmund Freud on intrafamilial conflict as well as to the slogan “family values,” instrumentalized by President George H. W. Bush in the early 1990s. The sculpture, which Ray has called “an abstraction of a relationship of parts,” parodies the archetype of the heteronormative family. Its four figures with interlocked hands read like a chain of three-dimensional paper dolls. All are the same height, making them either too tall or too short for their age. The overall composition is strict, repetitive, and modular. Logic bests passion, while mechanical reproduction trumps procreation. In its dramatization of artificiality, *Family romance* also decouples the human and the “natural,” disassociating sex, gender, and race from biology.

**For more work by Charles Ray, see the relief  
*Two horses* (2019), on view nearby in Gallery 918.**