

Richard Neer

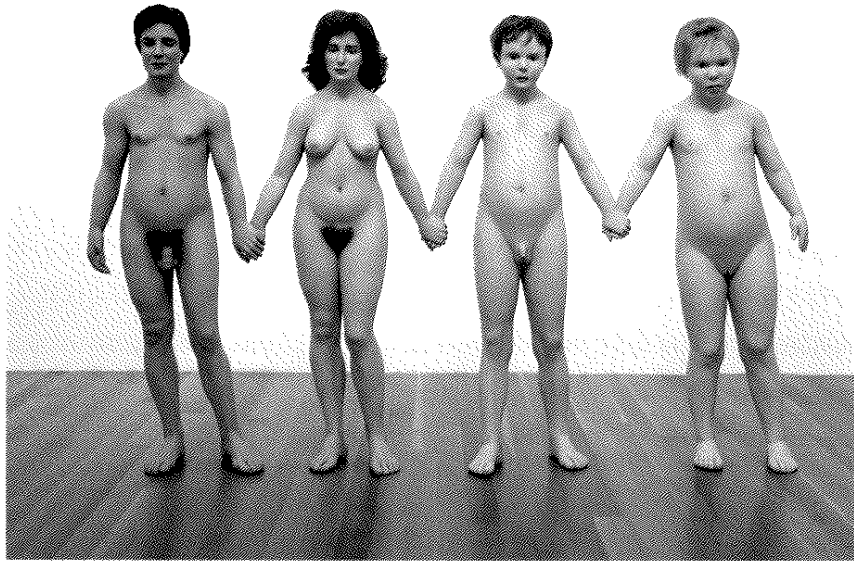
TUMBLING INTO TIME

For a few years back in the nineties, scale seemed to preoccupy Charles Ray. In works like *Fall '91* (1992), *Boy* (1992), *Family Romance* (1993), and *Firetruck* (1993), he enlarged mannequins and toys until they became monstrous, disturbing, or poignant. Many viewers yielded to the temptation to psychologize: *Fall '91* (fig. 16), for instance, came to seem maternal, by what Ray has called “the Freudian big lady/mother equation.”¹ Crudely, physical scale—along with pose, attire, and so on—read as a metaphor for psychological investment, such that the beholder obtained a troubling or uncanny experience from the work. The critical literature on Ray from this period is full of such responses: his art is said to be creepy, disturbing, unsettling, by virtue of its combination of gigantism and polymorphously perverse iconography.²

A good example is *Family Romance* (fig. 17). In a brief commentary that Ray provided to the Museum of Modern Art in New York, he suggested that the size of the boy and girl represented the real power of children relative to their parents.³ This sounds like straightforward symbolism; the title, after all, is Sigmund Freud’s term for the Oedipal drama. The museum’s chief curator of painting and sculpture, Kirk Varnedoe, noted that “The whole idea of family unity brought by the child’s growing up too fast and by the diminishment of the adult make this a disturbing allegory of interchange between the two states of life.”⁴ It seems clear enough: we are in the presence of a psychoanalytic fantasy, such that size connotes importance or significance within an intimate dynamic, almost like a dream. As Ray himself once put it, *Family Romance* is “like your mother.”⁵

Of course, there is more to these works than Freudian romance. Mannequins and other commercial imagery, for instance, route the psychological charge through consumer culture along circuits laid down by Pop Art. Such imagery ensures that the ambivalent feelings or affects that the works engender will be shot through with all the ambiguities of an intimate relation and all the stakes of social critique. This complexity is part of what makes Ray’s sculpture unsettling or disturbing in the first place.

17 Charles Ray,
Romance, 1993.
Mixed media.
Museum of Modern Art,
New York.



With hindsight, however, the limitations of such “psychological” accounts become apparent. Ray’s own commentaries consistently direct attention away from iconography or symbolism and toward what he calls “sculpture”—a term that, predictably, has complex associations in his vocabulary. Ray ended his remarks on *Family Romance* by saying that the central issue was the relative proportion of the interlocking hands (“you can find the meaning of this sculpture where the hands come together”).⁶ Not that Varnedoe was simply wrong: symbolism and allegory may be important to these works; so, too, may the thrill of confronting something disturbing about childhood sexuality. But Ray painstakingly explores the imbrication of any such meanings with complex relations of size, ratio, extension, and emotion—to the point that the distinctions between these terms tend to disappear. As he put it back in 1980: “My work has always used the idea of sculpture being about the relationship of its shapes. However, by generating an image into these shapes, the sculpture acquires psychological implications that destroy the purity of modernism.”⁷ Fifteen years later he would reach a similar point from the opposite direction: “I am interested in subject matter the way I’m interested in scale, or color: it’s one element of many, but I’m not interested in ‘subject matter’ per se.”⁸

One function of iconography, accordingly, is to ensure that the interconnected ways in which each element of a piece relates to all the others, and the piece to its surroundings, carry an affective charge. At least some of these relations are quantifiable, as in scalar ratios: *Fall '91* demonstrates that the difference between a department-store mannequin and a phantasm is a 30 percent enlargement. This may tell us more about math than it does about mannequins.

The result is not quite formalism, if that word implies a distillation of subject matter into ostensibly neutral categories like scale, color, mass, or space. Just the reverse: the challenge is to draw the relevant distinction without idealizing such terms. Seemingly formalistic questions of scale, for instance, turn out to have purchase only in the everyday world of toys, clasped hands, fallen trees, eggs, and car crashes. Ray brings out how feelings of uncanniness, creepiness, disturbingness, of excessive intimacy and archaic fantasy, are the living out of a broader array of relations—like a 30 percent change in scale—and, conversely, how those “abstract” relations are nothing if not lived, even commonplace.

Ray’s own word for this relational determination is “armature”: the support, in an extended sense, of each work. “Everything has an armature, every idea, every object. Once you locate the structure of something, you can start to think about it.”⁹ Armature in this sense can encompass everything from the wooden blocks that support *Hinoki* (2007; cat. 7) to the broader system of reference relations that the work activates. Closely connected is the idea of “embedment”: the work and everything about it are embedded in the world, such that distinctions of inside and out prove unsustainable.¹⁰ Bringing out this determination matters more than the specific content of any particular mood. Ray’s work makes it possible to see—literally to see—how seemingly subjective, even private, experiences of fascination, repulsion, discomfort, and so on, are part of a larger array or system of relationships that is anything but personal. This dialectic is present in all his art.

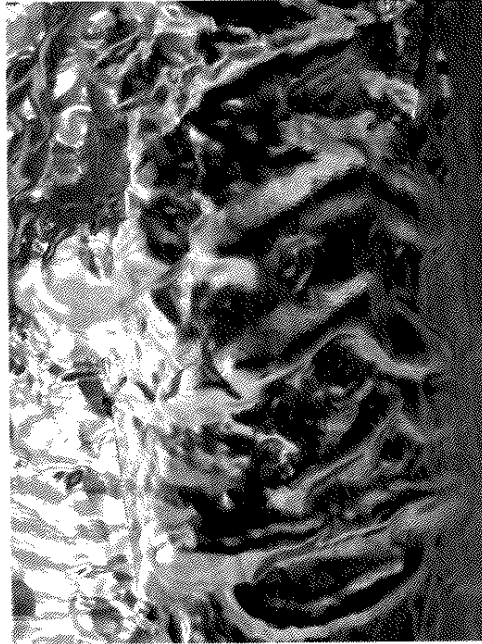
The goal, in other words, is not just to produce disturbing, critical, or satirical imagery or allegories to be decoded. It is also, and by Ray’s own account more importantly, to *disperse* such moods and meanings throughout the broader, four-dimensional setting of the work; not just to provide vicarious thrills, or even critiques, but to make

visible the lineaments of a world that, inevitably, comes to us in ways both overdetermined and underthought. Psychodrama and commodity critique help us to see how such relations are lived and experienced as embedment in, or severance from, the world. They do so by rendering the relations conspicuous through the most painstaking orchestration. The implication is that psychological profundity might itself be a canard, a distraction from “the relationship of shapes,” even as “the purity of modernism” is nonsensical as such.

It follows, however, that a given work will not succeed if “the meaning and the unification” come “from an outside psychology applied to the image of the self,” as opposed to “from actual sculptural orchestration” (emphasis on “actual”).¹¹ “My objection is not to overt psychology in art, it’s to a dependence on aspects that are generated psychologically from the outside. I’m not against sculpture being provocative, but I would like to find a way to make the provocative nature come more from the piece itself.”¹² The latent danger of those works of the early nineties was not an excessively pure notion of abstraction—as though a piece like *Oh! Charley, Charley, Charley . . .* (1992) were just a sexed-up version of Anthony Caro’s abstraction. It was, on the contrary, that the supercharged subject matter was apt to take over and become determinative.¹³

Part of the difficulty was that, for works to pack the requisite wallop, the romances in question had to be accessible to beholders with a minimum of secondary information. Ray drew liberally on stock motifs—Freudian plots, Pop imagery (mannequins, toys)—and Post-Minimalist techniques—serial repetition, remaking (the exact replication of a prototype)—to guide engagement with his work.¹⁴ Pieces like *Firetruck* risked becoming psychodramas, staging conditions of meaningfulness instead of making them visible in and of themselves. Ray has called this “grandstanding, sensationalism,” a vice he associates with surrealism.¹⁵

Ray’s more recent works engage with all these same concerns: embedment and armature, the mutual implication of affective involvement and impersonal arrays, a fascination with mathematics as a concrete practice, childhood development, and psychosexual dynamics. But Ray’s repertoire has become, if anything, richer and more complex.



18 Charles Ray,
Sleeping Woman, 2012 (cat. 14).
Solid stainless steel, detail.

A favored technique, for instance, is to calibrate precise differences in detail and finish between different parts of a sculpture. Smooth, relatively uninflected bodies contrast with meticulously rendered genitalia; boys are more generalized than their Beetles or frogs; most dramatically, *Shoe Tie* (2012; cat. 15) shows Ray himself staring intently at invisible laces, while from another angle his testicles dangle very visibly indeed, a veritable demonstration piece of gravitational force. One's attention sometimes tracks that of the depicted figure—a boy stares at a Beetle and so do we, because there is a lot to see. Crouching alongside *Shoe Tie*, hovering above *The New Beetle* (2006; cat. 4) like a helicopter parent, one might even gain a sense of what it would be like to have or be such a body. Phenomenological role-playing of this sort is not wholly new—there is something of it in *Fall '91*, for instance, which is easy to see from an infantile perspective—but it becomes an overt theme of *Mime* (2014; cats. 16 and 17) and *School Play* (2014; cat. 18). These last stake out an ambiguous zone between onstage and off, sensationalism and reserve; it is part of their humor.

More generally, however, the highly detailed elements draw the eye, producing an effect of nearness that has little to do with absolute distance. The elements in question

are often highly charged (usually genitals, or an object of the figure's intense interest), so that the attention can be conflicted: how much do you want to stare at a vulva, a scrotum, or a frog? In other cases, richly articulate surfaces glitter and flash from afar: the tubes and crumpled metal of *Baled Truck* (2014; cat. 21), for example, or the shoes of *Sleeping Woman* (2012; cat. 14; fig. 18), at once grounded and gleaming. Such differentials of detail and finish are among Ray's most sophisticated means of effecting what he has called "a spatial embedment disconnected from location," that is, of showing how seemingly abstract, absolute metrics like distance or scale merely approximate affectively charged relations of nearness and distance, attraction and repulsion.¹⁶

With great consistency, the newer work routes these long-standing concerns through a profound engagement with the art of the distant past, to the point that it sometimes seems as though historical process has taken the place of psychodrama as a leading theme. But that formulation would be too simple: Ray has always been concerned with historical resources, and psychological realism remains an abiding concern.¹⁷ Better to say that the new work resolves the problems established by the old, and it does so by bringing out complexities that tended to be overpowered in works like *Family Romance* and *Oh! Charley, Charley, Charley . . .* There is plenty of sex and fantasy in *Boy with Frog* (2009; cat. 10), *Shoe Tie*, and *Huck and Jim* (2014; cat. 20), but there is arguably more in the "orchestration" to go along with it.

A good example of this concern with deep historical time is *Future Fragment on a Solid Base* (2011; cat. 12; fig. 19). Here the leg of a child's action figure has been scaled up, remade in aluminum, and set atop a pedestal. Such processes are familiar from Ray's earlier work. In this case, however, the familiar techniques transform the toy into a relic, like a colossal foot of the emperor Constantine in the courtyard of the Musei Capitolini in Rome (illustrated here in Henry Fuseli's drawing, *The Artist Moved to Despair at the Grandeur of Antique Fragments*, 1778-79; fig. 20). *Future Fragment on a Solid Base's* evocation of a missing body (where is the rest of him?) recapitulates its relation to such historical artifacts: the absent body and the absent art-historical prototypes both haunt the experience, to the point that one can almost see them (compare *Phantom Limb* of 1981-85, one of a series of works that dissociated body parts from one another, or *Unpainted Sculpture* of 1997 [cat. 1], which Ray has said was inspired by



19 Charles Ray, *Future Fragment on a Solid Base*, 2011 (cat. 12).
Solid aluminum.

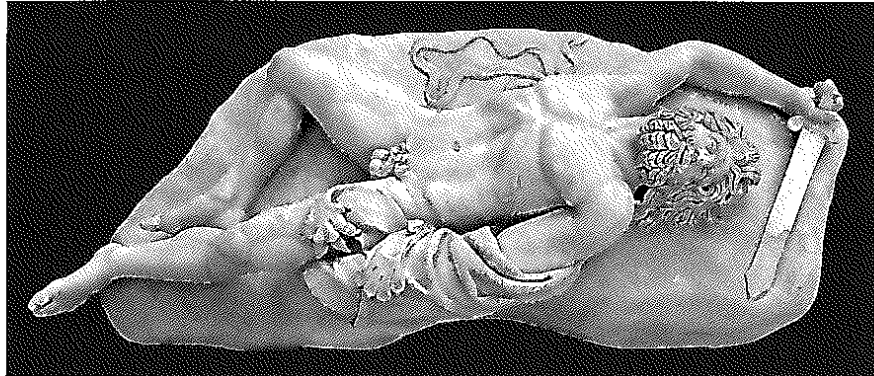


20 Henry Fuseli, *The Artist Moved to Despair at the Grandeur of Antique Fragments*, 1778–79.
Red chalk on sepia wash. Kunsthaus Zürich.

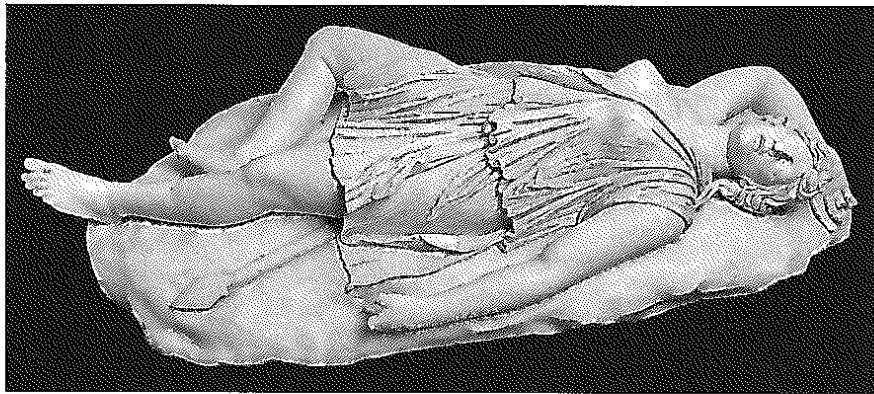
thoughts of ghosts).¹⁸ *Future Fragment on a Solid Base*'s emphatic mass, the way it flexes as though bearing an invisible load, contrasts with such spectral presences, even as it is their literal precondition. As a toy, moreover, the piece monumentalizes the detritus of childhood: it is the relic not just of an absent, cartoon-heroic, hypermasculine plaything, but of exactly that infantile stage of development that has so long preoccupied the artist. The cubic lower half, for its part, can shift in perception from being an exemplary Minimalist work to being a mere pedestal. The family romance, in short, has expanded to encompass deeper, broader histories, with the result that the familiar nexus of Pop iconography and developmental psychology is enriched and depersonalized in equal measure.

The New Beetle and *Mime* are also monuments or fragments, after a fashion. They appear to be free variations on ancient sculptures preserved in Naples, Rome, and Berlin. Thus the mime resembles a dying giant and a dying Amazon (see figs. 21–23), while *The New Beetle* brings to mind some dying Gauls (see figs. 24 and 25) or a

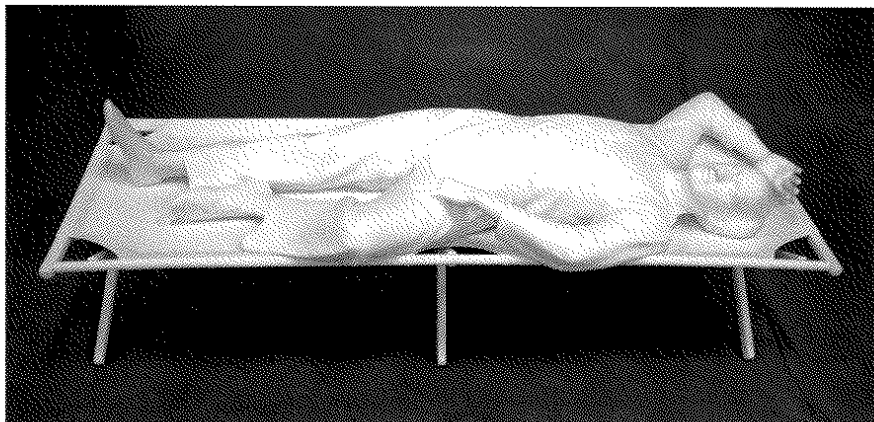
21 Giant from Lesser Attalid Dedication, Roman version of Greek original from the 2nd century BC. Marble. Museo Archeologico, Naples.

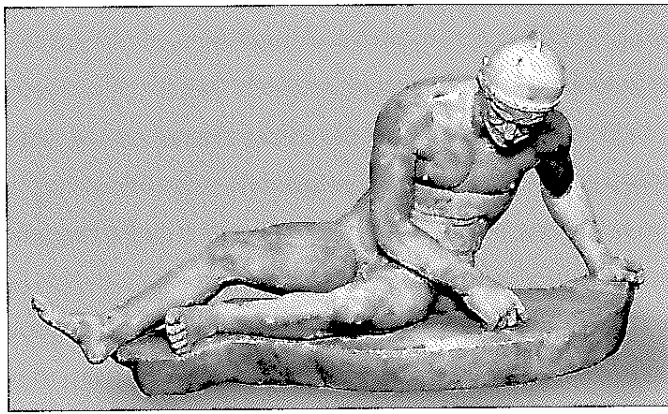


22 Amazon from Lesser Attalid Dedication, Roman version of Greek original from the 2nd century BC. Marble. Museo Archeologico, Naples.

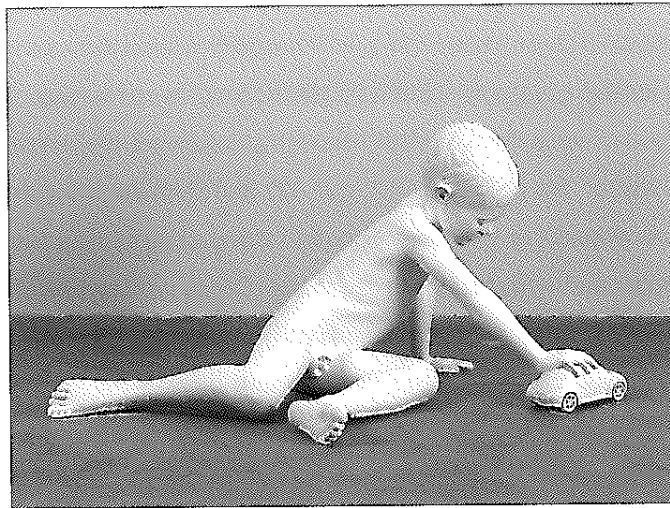


23 Charles Ray, *Mime*, 2014 (cats. 16 and 17). Plaster pattern.





24 Gaul from Lesser Attalid Dedication, Roman version of Greek original from the 2nd century BC. Marble. Museo Archeologico, Naples.



25 Charles Ray, *The New Beetle*, 2006 (cat. 4). Stainless steel, paint.

common type of a girl playing with knucklebones.¹⁹ Most of these ancient statues are Roman versions of Greek originals produced in Pergamon (modern Bergama in north-west Turkey) in the second century BC; unearthed during the Renaissance, they have served as artists' models for centuries.²⁰

In no case has Ray simply replicated a prototype, as in his transformations of toys and mannequins. He has varied the poses, made free with gender, and substituted sleep or absorption for death. The boy in *The New Beetle*, for instance, has a much more graphic contour than any Hellenistic sculpture, his legs pinwheeling over the floor, his arms straight as beams; he seems always to be on the verge of becoming mere pattern. To use the terms of Neoclassical aesthetics, these works are not "copies" (exact or

mechanical replicas) but “imitations” (variations in which difference is as important as similarity). As art historian James S. Ackerman put it, imitation in this sense is “a way of grasping history and the difference of the past from the present, a way of formulating a structure for explaining cultural evolution, a foundation for education, and finally a way of defining the limits and opportunities of invention.”²¹ It is perhaps this last way that proves most important for present purposes.

Simply by virtue of its theme, *Mime* makes a claim on imitation: the very title evokes the Greek word for imitation, *mimesis*. Sculpture’s capacity to mimic a world of appearances—to “imitate everything,” *panto-mime*, to the point of conjuring it out of nothing—is superimposed over the essentially imitative determination of these specific works. But it is no clearer just what this relation signifies than it is obvious whether the mime is actually asleep or just performing a particularly easy routine.

Other works are less specific in their evocation of an art-historical or archaeological past. In the case of *Young Man* (2012; cat. 13) and *Horse and Rider* (2014; cat. 19), the references are generic, in the literal sense that the point of reference seems not to be any specific work but a genre: the Greek nude (Ray has often professed his admiration for the Archaic kouros type of standing youth) or the equestrian monument.²² *Shoe Tie* calls to mind any number of crouching Aphrodites and sandal-binders from antiquity—but Greco-Roman examples contrive to twist their torsos outward to face the beholder, while Ray’s figure is all introversion as he mimes the complex interlace of a knot. Of particular complexity is *School Play*, in which mimesis, theatricality, and classicism all coincide; Ray has said that it makes “an accidental trilogy” with *The New Beetle* and *Boy with Frog* (all share the same model), but it might go just as readily with *Mime* by virtue of its theme of performance.²³ Uniting all four are manifest themes of theatricality, imitation, and the ancient past. Going farther afield, Ray’s shallow reliefs look to ancient orthostates—*Light from the Left* (2007; cat. 9) might be set against the Fifth Dynasty tomb of Ty at Saqqara in Egypt—while both *Hinoki* and *Mime* participate, by virtue of the involvement of the carver Yuboku Mukoyoshi, in a tradition of Buddhist remaking that yields a distinctively Californian, trans-Pacific embedment.

Not much seems to hang on the specific iconographies of these ancient statues; there is no reason to suppose that Ray has any special interest in Pergamon, or that it

matters a great deal whether we see *The New Beetle* as riffing on a Gaul in Naples or a girl in Berlin (I have never asked Ray directly and am not completely sure that the similarities are even fully intended; in some ways I hope they are not). Yet the recent sculptures do have an unmistakable historical penumbra. Each takes place within a series that, while literally invisible, is not virtual for all that: the resemblance between, say, *The New Beetle* and Hellenistic Greek sculpture is perfectly concrete.

The resulting shifts in perception recall the way that the lower half of *Future Fragment on a Solid Base* both is and is not a pedestal. At issue is each work's historical armature, its embedment within a sequence that extends indefinitely into past time as well as present space. That past incorporates Ray's own work and its immediate antecedents in the art of the sixties and so on back to antiquity. If *Family Romance* evoked the seriality of Minimalism—Donald Judd's famous "one thing after another"—then Ray discovers in historical mimesis a mode of repetition that goes beyond such merely implicit open-endedness.²⁴

In this way, the archaeological turn represents an enrichment and significant complication of Ray's basic repertoire. He has, in effect, tempered the psychological with the historical. Moments of intense absorption, as in *The New Beetle*, are also mimicries of historical antecedents. A vast, prior sequence turns out to be the prerequisite of whatever affective or empathic significance Ray's sculpture generates: all the carefully calibrated differentials of attention, all the invitations to imagine having or being another body, all the promise implicit in a scene of juvenile growth, come to seem *fated*, so many functions of historical conditions of possibility.

The future is, in this respect, just as important as the past. Imagery of children and eggs certainly suggests as much, but Ray speaks often of the fate of his works, as in his remarks on *Hinoki*:

When I asked Mr. Mukoyoshi about the wood and how it would behave over time, he told me that the cypress would be fine for four hundred years, then go into crisis; after two hundred years of splitting and cracking, it would slowly decline for another four hundred years. I realized then that the wood, like the original log, had a life of its own, and I was finally able to let my project go and hopefully breathe life into the world that surrounds it.²⁵

This of a work striated by the remarkably conspicuous, evenly spaced grain of the Japanese cypress, each band of which signifies a year of growth in the last century. Of *Sleeping Woman*, *Young Man*, and *Shoe Tie*, Ray has said that they are “very much in the future, in a way. They kind of tumble into time.”²⁶

It follows that Ray’s recent work is not classicizing or historicist in any familiar sense; there is no question of reviving lost styles and ways of life, or retrieving some ideal content alleged to be continuously available across the centuries. Anticipatory and retrospective in equal measure, these works might better be seen as rejoinders within a history that, as Ackerman put it, affords particular “limits and opportunities” in and through an ongoing process of revision and repetition. This suprapersonal armature goes a long way to resolving the potential “sensationalism” of Ray’s earlier work. If the successes of the nineties risked psychologizing the world, the newer ones resolve that problem by historicizing it and, in so doing, depersonalizing it. Like *Future Fragment on a Solid Base*, they are all artifacts of the present.

In a celebrated essay of 1979, the critic Rosalind Krauss used the equestrian type to exemplify all that was settled and self-evident in the Western tradition of sculpture. Equestrian statues, she wrote, “function in relation to the logic of representation and marking,” about which “there is nothing very mysterious.”²⁷ What defined modernism and its sequels, by contrast, was precisely the fact that that old “logic” no longer pertained, hence the impetus to abstraction. Thirty-five years down the line, Ray’s *Horse and Rider* shows that the equestrian type, and hence the relation to the past, might be a bit mysterious after all. Krauss’s deeper point, however, was that a relation between ancient and modern will not depend so much on formal or generic similarity as on the place that “the logic of representation and marking” might hold within a larger form of life. Amazons and Gauls are unimportant in themselves; what matters are the specific limitations and opportunities that any given moment affords. If so, however, then we should probably not speak of “logic” (an ahistorical concept if ever there was one); we need a different metaphor, perhaps “grammar.” Ray’s explorations of ratio and distance and involvement might be seen as so many forays down this path.

To engage seriously with historical antecedents is exactly *not* to regard them as settled in advance, *not* to assume that a given type or epoch is self-evident or obedient to something like logic. To do otherwise, at any rate in the case of Greco-Roman prototypes, would be to accept the rhetoric of classicism: the idea that we can slough away history and commune with the glory that was Greece. For Ray, by contrast, a relation to tradition is like a relation in space: fluid, plastic—part of the medium, one might say. Sculpture can effect or instantiate this relation.

I see great archaic and classic sculptures as contemporary. Working too well to ever have time to retire and get old regardless of a work's destination. I am seeing Time like space fluid and dynamic eroding given issues away as the sculpture, like a dam with a body of time behind it, generates new power as our approaches change and grow and then again erode.²⁸

Seen in this light, Ray's engagement with the classical is not a denial of historical distance but, on the contrary, a way to figure out the possibilities that distance and nearness afford.

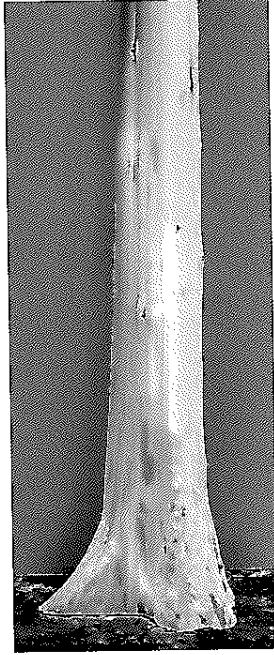
In early Greece, the essential function of a statue was not to imitate appearances but to act as a stand-in or substitute for something absent—be it a god, a dead person, or even a sacrificial gift. A statue was a sign (*sema*), a marker: its conspicuous presence in the here and now marked or commemorated the essential absence and invisibility of the gods and the dead.²⁹ To this end, a simple slab or log—what the Greeks called a “carved thing” or *xoanon*—could serve just as well as a likeness. Certain qualities, however, were deemed particularly effective in establishing an interface between presence and absence. The brilliance of white marble or polished bronze, for instance, could strike the eye from afar, collapsing distance and bringing remote things near (see fig. 26); diaphanous membranes, like fine cloth clinging to limbs, could reveal one thing as if through another, concealing while showing everything; hollow figures could seem to enclose cryptic interiors; looming statues could dominate their surroundings by remaining aloof from them.³⁰ In each case, the distant, the invisible, the remote became emphatically visible and present, even as solid, eye-catching statues seemed somehow removed or severed from their surroundings. “See what is absent,” as the Greek philosopher Parmenides put it, “all the same securely present to the mind.”³¹

26 Kouros, ca. 560 BC.
Marble. Samos Archaeological
Museum, Samos.



Ray surely knows all this; he is an exceptionally acute viewer of ancient art. It is not just that he makes large, aloof, radiant figures or riffs on classical statue types. It is that his work is as robustly, complexly dialectical as any Greek sign. *Hinoki*, for instance, is in many ways a truer response to early Greek sculpture than any Neoclassical confection. When Ray set out to make the piece, he had the Greeks in mind. “It was partly rotted, and there was this magnificent chamber through it—your eye just drifted right through. I thought of *pneuma*, which is the Greek word for breath. The notion hit me almost like a theological event: *pneuma*, or air, could be the armature.”³² *Hinoki* itself consists of oak transformed to cypress; a great trunk enclosing, and thereby creating, a massive void or “magnificent chamber”; seams visible where segments have been clamped together; pregnant spaces where outflung limbs have been set at carefully measured distances from the main body; a quasi-iconic quality, such that the trunk can appear phallic from some angles, anthropomorphic from others, a counterfeit tree from still others; the whole sustained by the interior armature of what Ray calls “*pneuma*.”

Sometimes the similarities are, in their own ways, uncanny. Carving a piece of wood or stone, for example, produces figures by subtraction—by creating absences, so



27 Northern white cedar post with root flare.



28 Kore from Samos, mid 6th century BC. Marble. Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. MA 686.

to speak. Greek sculptors found this thought productive and devised numerous ways to evoke the original block or trunk, so that the absence of what had been removed would remain conspicuous. From the island of Samos come stone maidens of a type that originated in wood; they retain the form of upright trunks even when made of marble, flaring at the base as though rooted (see figs. 27 and 28). Medium, here, becomes metaphor: though the statue is stone, you can see it as wooden, see a trunk in it, even as it marks a goddess in the here and now precisely by revealing her as absent, elsewhere, divine. *Hinoki* or *Future Fragment on a Solid Base* are, as Ray might put it, “working on the same problem.”³³ Like the Greek signs, upright logs of stone, they are exercises in the articulation of constitutive absence, seeing what is not there as “securely present all the same.”

This armature, in fact, supports many of the works in this exhibition. Themes of sleep and performance and mime, conspicuous absences like the missing body in *Future Fragment on a Solid Base*, the knot in *Shoe Tie*, or the dent in the head of *School Play* (fig. 29), combine with radiant finish and extreme weight, emphatic carnality and literal invisibility. Ghosts haunt *Unpainted Sculpture*; an unseen force has compressed

29 Charles Ray,
School Play, 2014 (cat. 18).
Plaster pattern, detail.



Baled Truck. But Ray is no metaphysician: these spectral presences are all functions of the sculptures themselves. Nothing ever smashed that car, nothing ever crushed that truck: whatever may have befallen the prototypes, the sculptures were made that way. Looking at them, one all but automatically infers a dramatic event in the past—a violent impact, the exertion of immense force—but the relation between sculpture and event is part of what is at issue (one might compare Ray’s *Untitled* of 1973, in which a wrecking ball seems to have dented a metal plate; p. 30, fig. 3). Gravity works the same way in *Sleeping Woman*, *The New Beetle*, and *Mime*, which respectively slump toward the ground, lean upon it, and float above it: all making conspicuous a force that rules our lives and determines our basic orientation to the world. *Mime*, in contrast to the first two pieces, is curiously weightless—his cot does not appear to sag—and it may be worth recalling that Greek uses the same word for “image” and “ghost.”

The same armature undergirds Ray’s representation of psychological states and the inner life of things. *The New Beetle* evokes intent concentration and our capacity to animate inert objects such as toys (or sculptures), even as the boy’s uninflected surface, his evident solidity, tends to inhibit identification. Conversely, gleaming metal



30 Charles Ray,
Young Man, 2012 (cat. 13).
Solid stainless steel, detail.

pieces like *Young Man* are so smooth that their skins could have been poured like a viscous liquid, congealing in crevices (see fig. 30). The effect renders even the most exquisitely modeled epidermis independent of whatever bones and sinews might be seen to lie beneath it; the taut layers of cloth on *Sleeping Woman* can look from some angles like a carapace. The very notion of an inner life in these circumstances can come to seem superfluous at best, nonsensical at worst; as Ray once said of himself, “It’s like I don’t have an inside. I just have this outside.”³⁴ *Chicken* (2007; cat. 5) takes this effect to an extreme. It is deliciously smooth and unexpectedly heavy in the hand, while the view through its little porthole hints at the hidden textures of the avian life within: a different way to effect the mutual implication of inner and outer surfaces, what you see and what you know.

Like the psychological romances of the nineties, Ray’s recent works tend to disperse affective involvement into broader armatures. But they do so against a historical horizon, with less-familiar narratives and more-complex technical resources and points of reference. Psychology and romance—exemplified in the child and the egg—remain significant, but as functions of the specific “limits and opportunities” that history

affords. If this strategy avoids surrealistic grandstanding, it has the positive benefit of rendering Ray's latest works totally, systematically meaningful—even where they literally show nothing at all.³⁵ *Shoe Tie* might be said to emblemize this condition as an invisible knot—that is, a surface with a complex mathematical topology that, in Ray's contrivance, is no less “disconnected from location” than the void at the heart of *Hinoki*.³⁶ The tangled interrelation of ratio and affect, historical past and present, precise calibration and individual idiosyncrasy, presence and absence—in short, everything—is itself conjured out of that same absence, securely present all the same.

- 1 Charles Ray, interview by Paul Dickerson, *BOMB*, no. 52 (Summer 1995), pp. 42–47, available online at <http://bombsite.com/issues/52/articles/1867> (accessed November 21, 2013).
- 2 “Mutant forms”: Joanna Drucker, *Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity* (Chicago, 2005), p. 153. “Often unsettling, frequently because of their mind-bending proportions”: Andrew Russeth, “Shoeless Ray,” *Observer Arts*, November 26, 2012, p. B10, available online at <http://galleristny.com/2012/11/charles-ray-at-matthew-marks-gallery-2012/?show=all> (accessed December 20, 2013). “The figure’s blank countenance, its overbearing scale and the work’s title creates an unsettling confrontation”: “No Substitute at Glenstone,” *Here and Elsewhere*, May 29, 2012, <http://hereelsewhere.com/see/no-substitute-at-glenstone/> (accessed November 21, 2013).
- 3 Charles Ray, audio excerpt in written form from *Take Two. Worlds and Views: Contemporary Art from the Collection, September 14, 2005–March 21, 2006*, available online at http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=81284 (accessed November 21, 2013).
- 4 Kirk Varnedoe, audio excerpt in written form from *MoMA2000: Open Ends (1960–2000), September 28, 2000–March 4, 2001*, available online at http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=81284 (accessed November 21, 2013).
- 5 Dickerson 1995 (see note 1).
- 6 Ray, audio excerpt in written form from *Take Two* (see note 3). See also Robert Storr and Charles Ray, “Anxious Spaces,” *Art in America* 86, no. 11 (November 1998), p. 104.
- 7 Charles Ray, “New Work,” *New Orleans Review* (Summer 1980), p. 182.
- 8 Dickerson 1995 (see note 1).
- 9 Rachel Kushner and Charles Ray, “1000 Words: Charles Ray Talks about *Hinoki*,” *Artforum* 46, no. 1 (September 2007), p. 439.
- 10 Ibid. Embedment is a major theme of Michael Fried’s discussion of Ray: Fried, *Four Honest Outlaws: Sala, Ray, Marioni, Gordon* (New Haven, 2011), pp. 91–120. The term seems to derive from Ray’s reading in the mathematics of surfaces, or topology: see Storr and Ray 1998 (see note 6), p. 143. On embedding in topology, see the Manifold Atlas Project hosted by the Max-Planck Institute in Bonn: <http://www.map.mpim-bonn.mpg.de/Embedding> (accessed November 21, 2013).
- 11 Dickerson 1995 (see note 1).
- 12 Storr and Ray 1998 (see note 6), p. 104.
- 13 Cf. Fried 2011 (see note 10), p. 79.
- 14 On remaking, see Tom Morton, “The Shape of Things,” *Frieze*, no. 111 (November/December 2007), pp. 120–27.
- 15 Storr and Ray 1998 (see note 6), p. 143.
- 16 Kushner and Ray 2007 (see note 9), p. 439.
- 17 Ray connects his mannequin works to Greek proportional canons in Storr and Ray 1998 (see note 6), p. 103.
- 18 Storr and Ray 1998 (see note 6), p. 143.
- 19 Not illustrated here is perhaps the most famous of all these statues, the so-called *Dying Gaul* in the Musei Capitolini in Rome; though better known than the Naples example, its resemblance to Ray’s sculpture is slightly less clear. For a fine example of the girl playing knucklebones, see *Girl Playing Knucklebones* (200 AD; Altes Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin), <http://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/asset-viewer/girl-playing-knucklebones/CwHxY9rsQCNCxg?hl=en> (accessed November 21, 2013).
- 20 On these sculptures, see Andrew F. Stewart with Manolis Korres, *Attalos, Athens, and the Akropolis: The Pergamene “Little Barbarians” and Their Roman and Renaissance Legacy* (New York and Cambridge, 2004).
- 21 James S. Ackerman, *Origins, Imitations, Conventions: Representation in the Visual Arts* (Cambridge, MA, 2001), p. 126.
- 22 On kouroi, see, for instance, Charles Ray, *A Four Dimensional Being Writes Poetry on a Field with Sculptures* (New York, 2006).
- 23 Charles Ray, e-mail message to the author, September 2013.
- 24 On archaeological seriation and art of the sixties, see Pamela Lee, *Chronophobia* (Cambridge, MA, 2006), pp. 218–57. For Donald Judd, see “Specific Objects,” *Arts*

- Yearbook 8* (1965), available online at www.juddfoundation.org/_literature_108163/Specific_Objects (accessed December 30, 2013).
- 25 *Log: Charles Ray* (New York, 2010). A similar text can be found at "About This Artwork," Art Institute of Chicago, http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/189207?search_no=1&index=0 (accessed November 21, 2013).
- 26 Quoted in Russeth 2012 (see note 2), p. B10.
- 27 Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *October*, no. 8 (Spring 1979), p. 33.
- 28 Charles Ray, e-mail message to the author, September 2013. Orthography slightly regularized.
- 29 Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Mortals and Immortals: Collected Essays*, translated by Froma Zeitlin (Princeton, 1991).
- 30 For a fuller discussion, see Richard Neer, *The Emergence of the Classical Style in Greek Sculpture* (Chicago, 2010).
- 31 Parmenides, fragment F4 (author's translation). An equally permissible translation would be, "See what is absent to the mind, securely present all the same."
- 32 Kushner and Ray 2007 (see note 9), p. 439. Ray goes on to compare the sculpture to a Greek grave relief of the fifth century BC, now in New York.
- 33 As Ray once said, a propos of Greek carving technique, "What is essential in a work of art is found in the method of its construction." See Ray 2008 (see note 22), n.p.
- 34 Storr and Ray 1998 (see note 6), p. 144.
- 35 I borrow the phrase "totally, systematically meaningful" from Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden: An Expanded Edition* (Chicago, 1992), p. 34.
- 36 Colin Adams, *The Knot Book: An Elementary Introduction to the Mathematical Theory of Knots* (Providence, 2004). The knot is prominent as well in *School Play*.