

Charles Ray at the Metropolitan Museum of Art

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Charles Ray (b. 1953) – undoubtedly one of the most conceptually and visually breathtaking sculptors alive today – is enjoying something of cultural moment at present, with four exhibitions on two continents, including “Charles Ray: Figure Ground” at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Throughout his career, Ray has been engaged in a sustained dialogue with the entire history of sculpture, going as far back as ancient Greece; and at the same time, he is immersed in a conversation with America, with its art, and literature, as well as its (homo)social and racial tensions.

Bringing together sculptures from every stage of Ray’s career, “Figure Ground” comprises some 19 works, including three photographic editions documenting early work from 1973. Ray has been making art, fashioning sculptures, for roughly fifty years: and in that time has he has produced some 100 works. Ray’s oeuvre reverses the Marxian dictum that quantity is quality: in Ray’s case, quality is quantity.

“Chicken” (2007), “Hand holding egg” (2007), and “Handheld bird” (2006) are three pieces that are materially and conceptually linked together – the first being the smallest and undoubtedly one of the most extraordinary pieces of the exhibition. The latter two came about tangentially and in the process of creating “Chicken.” In “Hand holding egg” we find a porcelain rendering of a child’s hand gently cupping an egg that has clearly been evacuated, or as Ray puts it, “the beast is long gone.” An irregularly shaped opening at the top clearly reveals the empty darkness inside. “Handheld bird” is a complete white painted stainless steel avian fetus which is in fact intended to be held by the viewer – a delightful proposition unfortunately rendered impracticable in the context of during a public exhibition.

“Chicken” combines both media: the eggshell is stainless steel, while the chick (complete

within its shell) is porcelain. A perfectly round hole, in sharp contrast to the cracked opening of hand holding egg, reveals only very little of the animal inside, yet it is wholly there. The choice to create a clearly artificially round opening is a resonant one – it becomes a kind of window: a window into time, the flesh, the hidden, a two-way portal that has been created by leaving a space uncreated.



Chicken (2007) (Source: [Charles Ray](#))

At first glance “Tractor” (2005) and “Chicken” could not be more different, materially, and otherwise. To begin with, the full-sized “Tractor” (an astoundingly ambitious sculpture) is massive; it is also in a state of disrepair: its front fender has dislodged and collapsed on the ground; its tread or continuous track has been severed almost as if it had succumbed to an anti-tank mine. Apparently, “Tractor” has its original impetus in being a child and playing with and on such a machine. Is it then a derelict object of childhood memory that is being reproduced? Or is it the memories of childhood itself that are fragile and liable to decay and fade? Or is Ray consulting the limits of human ingenuity in the face of time and the elements?

Yet for all their differences, “Tractor” and “Chicken” share something significant in common: both are complete within themselves. Although their internal structures are for the most part hidden from us, those structures are nevertheless there. The perfectly round opening in the case of “Chicken” reveals little enough of the creature inside (a talon, the tip of a wing perhaps) but the entire bird is there. Similarly, with “Tractor”: all the parts of the machine are there, albeit sealed off from view. When the time came to do the covering, Ray was immediately met with stunned disbelief since of course no one would be able to see inside: Ray’s response was that if left unsealed the audience would not do anything but look inside – the sculpture would be gone.

I am reminded of Kurasawa who famously included items in his sets – in drawers and cabinets of the hospital in the film *Red Beard* (1966) for example – which would never be seen by the viewer. In Kurasawa's case it is verisimilitude that is the aim and justification for the inclusion of things that do not enter the viewer's experience. If the actors feel that they are not on a set but in an actual hospital, then their performances will presumably be that much better. But verisimilitude as such is not what is driving Ray: the tractor he originally found has been aesthetically transformed, remade entirely from aluminum. Ray calls it "a tractor in heaven." If that is so, then it is a tractor not in the heaven of some idyllic afterlife, but the heaven of Plato's Forms, as it were. He is not offering us a real, or better a found tractor, nor is it the representation of a tractor, rather it is something that breaches the divide between these two, the real and the copy – a gulf which defines the central problem for Plato's dualistic metaphysics. Ray is doing what artists and philosophers have sought to do for over two millennia (indeed, at least since Aristotle) namely to bring the eternal Forms down to earth; to bridge the gap, and pluck the Forms from their heaven outside time and space; to materialize them, to sensualize the purely intelligible, and embody the eternal.

"Archangel" is perhaps the single most monumental work of the show, standing at 13.5 feet tall. The over twice life-sized figure stands atop a wooden block (with which it is continuous), his arms outstretched in a pose somewhat reminiscent of the crucifixion, though he may with greater justification be surfing. In short, this is not Christ. The figure, carved from cypress by Japanese woodworkers, is wearing rolled up jeans and flip flops, his hair done up in a top-knot, giving him a contemporary look, as if we could have seen him today on the beach or in the park. He is not Christ, but the title does suggest a kind of supernatural being, and the figure seems to be reveling in a state very nearly that of apotheosis.



Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) serves as the impetus for several of Ray's large-scale sculptures. "Huck and Jim" (2014) feature the boy and runaway slave, nearly twice life-size, as they contemplate where the stars come from. Both figures are completely nude which is not inconsistent with Twain's novel. Huck leans over collecting something near the ground though we do not see what it is (in fact, it appears he was originally intended to be scooping water). Jim stands tall beside him, with his right hand hovered just above Huck's lower back.

Ray speaks of Huck and Jim as a singular being as it were – they are what the philosopher Deleuze might call an assemblage. Though they do not physically touch they are deeply intertwined, spatially, and ethically, in the deepest sense of the word – where the ethical is not reducible to the moral but references our way of being, our lifeworld, or milieu. In its originary sense, going back to Homer's *Iliad*, the ethical is already linked to the drive to break free, to be unfettered and at home in one's own haunt or habitat. This yearning for freedom is what unites Huck and Jim in friendship: Huck wants to be free of an abusive father, Jim wants to liberate himself from slavery. The river is not simply their road to freedom, it is their freedom; their nakedness is a function of their being at home, in their element as it were. The friendship between Huck and Jim – perhaps the most sublimely subversive friendship in American literature – hits upon the very essence of this ethical dimension, where the ethical is irreducible to conventional morality, or morality as a merely ideological structure.

Ray's sculpture has the merit of raising far more questions than it answers, questions about the perception of scale, the inter-dependence and transformation of figure and ground, the malleability (of our perception) of space, depth, and time. Ray does not simply arrange his pieces in space – rather, the space itself becomes part of the work: "space is the medium with which the sculptor works," as Ray puts it. But Ray's conceptual daring and ingenuity is in the service of something that goes beyond the merely conceptual and touches on the ethical in its primordial signification.

In Twain's controversial and much-maligned ending, Huck cannot escape the belief that he will go to hell for attempting to set the captured Jim free. The ethically sublime moment comes when Huck accepts damnation for the sake of Jim's freedom. While their relationship remains racially fraught and reproduces the hierarchies that form its socially given coordinates, it nevertheless outruns its social determinations. The work of Charles Ray reminds us, among other things, that true friendship, love and art, enjoy a certain autonomy relative to their social-historical context, and therein lies their inherently transgressive and ineliminable emancipatory potential.

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