

Art in Review: Charles Ray, Roberta Smith

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Charles Ray began his career as a craft-conscious Conceptual joker tackling different sculptural properties: scale, gravity, weight and illusion. His early work includes a photograph of him trussed and tied to a rather slender tree branch, a black cube filled to the brim with printer's ink and a series of objects on a table that rotate slowly and almost imperceptibly, creating an unstill life.

He later filmed a young woman standing as motionless as a mannequin on a revolving turntable, wearing a succession of rudimentary garments he had made. He has made a toy fire truck the size of a real one and a fastidious ghostly gray fiberglass reproduction of a car involved in a fatal collision. He is probably best known for his mannequin sculptures, including enlarged versions of the store-window variety and some hyper-real self-portraits.

Mr. Ray's first New York gallery exhibition since his 1998 retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art is an obviously costly, deceptively sedate affair in which three very different works are set far apart in a bare, cavernous gallery. They indicate that he is becoming something of a sculptor's sculptor, parlaying his interests into meditations on sculpture's presence, above all its stillness and solidity, its ability to mimic yet deny life. Each work is more resonant than the next.

"Chicken" is a life-size porcelain and stainless-steel sculpture of a tiny chick breaking out of an egg. "The New Beetle" is a life-size sculpture, in cast stainless steel painted white that resembles vein-free white marble, of a naked young boy curled on the ground and resting on one hand while he plays with a toy car. The slouchy pose suggests Narcissus, but the boy is just the opposite, oblivious to himself and his nakedness, completely lost in the make-believe of the car, which is more exactly rendered than his face.

Like the fire truck, the third work, "Father Figure," is a cast plastic toy enlarged to life size, a height of about eight feet. All green except for black tires, it shows a farmer driving a tractor; his head and torso are turned to the right as if to say hello. But the tractor is immensely powerful, and his body is fused with it in a way that seems implicitly monstrous. That the sculpture, which appears to be fairly lightweight unless you touch it, is actually solid stainless steel adds a primal force. This guy is Frankenstein's monster on wheels, in a good mood for the moment, but don't push it.