

Charles Ray unlocks the door of an empty storefront down the street from his studio in one of those neighborhoods in Venice, California, that has no dearth of liquor stores. The large space is empty, save for a young boy playing on the floor with his toy car. When Ray flicks on the lights, it becomes clear that the child is a sculpture, a nude rendered in a smooth alabaster white. The surface detail is spare: gently protruding ribs, some grooves for hair. The boy's gaze is cast downward toward the car, compelling the viewer to kneel next to him and try—fruitlessly, it turns out—to read the expression on his face. Ray, too, squats down. "I'm really interested in where we are right now—down on the floor," he says, satisfied. "I think that's where the artfulness of it is, where you find yourself in front of the work. You know, physically, this brings you to the floor."

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More than five years in the making, *The New Beetle*, which was originally sculpted in clay by a crew of assistants and then cast in stainless steel and painted white, is the latest piece by the enigmatic artist to take childhood as its ostensible subject. In 1992 there was the six-foot-tall *Boy*, an overgrown youngster in shorts, suspenders, knee socks and effeminate T-strap shoes, who looked like a slightly sinister version of the *Bob's Big Boy* mascot or a future inductee into the Hitler Youth, and in 1993 came *Family Romance*, a family of four that's nuclear in more ways than one, with the young children mutated to the size of their parents. The heavy psychological implications are apparent to just about everyone—except Ray. He would rather talk about "sculptural space." Critics and curators, he complains, have paid far too much attention to his psyche, focusing on biographical details, like the fact that he got shipped off to a military academy for high school. "Work is rich," he says. "It can be looked at psychologically or philosophically or personally. The interpretive nature of work is different than the work itself. The interpretation of work isn't the key to understanding it. I'm worried about making a good sculpture. I'm not so worried about the interpretation of it."

Ray's concerns with making *The New Beetle* revolved around "the juncture between the hand and the car" and making the car more detailed while keeping the boy more "virtual," or abstract. Asked about the realism of the ribs, Ray (who is childless) opens the door just a crack: "Kids have such strange bodies. Different parts are growing, and you know, they have weird lumps and bumps and things that are normal."

Back in his studio, where the floor tiles are crumbling in places, works sit in various stages of development. On one table is a brown leather wallet, or at least what looks like one. Ray picks it up and demonstrates that it's actually a clay prototype of a sculpture, which he may eventually make in steel. "I wanted to make a sculpture that you could carry in your pocket," he says with all sincerity. Nearby stands a headless, armless man's body, a work in progress made with foam and covered with clay. The model "was a young artist, a friend of mine, who doesn't go to the gym—and I like that specificity of the body," Ray says. "I'm kind of still struggling. I'm trying to keep this from ending up like muscle, but to get more of that love handle, belly thing."

Ray is happy to discuss the nuts and bolts of his art—"happy" being a relative term. A melancholy emanates from Ray, whose voice is a mumbling monotone and whose bespectacled face is often expressionless. At 54, he admits to being something of a loner, and he seems like a man who does not want to give anything away.

His oeuvre is small but profoundly powerful. As a young man studying art at the University of Iowa in the Seventies, he began to experiment with a kind of performance sculpture, using his own body, a practice he continued into the Eighties. In *Plank Piece* (1973), for instance, his torso dangled over a wood plank that was jammed from the floor to his waist, lodging him about three feet up against a wall. (It was widely seen as a parody of Richard Serra's "Prop" pieces, but Ray says that while Serra was certainly an influence, there was no parody, or even humor, intended.) Though he gradually moved away from performance, he repeatedly returned to his own image, making all manner of self-portraiture—from photographs like *All My Clothes* (1973), consisting of 16 pictures of himself wearing his entire, heavily plaid wardrobe, and *Yes* (1990), a photo of himself while on LSD, to *Self-Portrait* (1990), a department-store mannequin bearing Ray's likeness and dressed in his favorite, inexpensive sailing outfit. Perhaps most famously and most outrageously, *Oh! Charley, Charley, Charley...* (1992) is a sculpture of eight lifelike Rays engaged in mutual masturbation.

Ray, however, seems to be in deep denial about why the piece might spark curiosity about what's going on inside his head. "I used my genitalia—that's not important," he says. "People make a big deal out of that. But you know, should I ask my assistant if I can use his?" The piece, he insists, was born of a desire to fashion a compelling multifigure sculpture, and nothing of his true self was revealed. But if there is no connection to his own identity, why did he give each figure his face, and why on earth did he name the thing after himself? Now he's stumped. "No, that's true, you're right. It was my face and my name." He pauses. "Is that interesting?" Later he says that my questions themselves reveal "faults of the piece."

Paul Schimmel, chief curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, laughs when told of Ray's reticence. Sure, says Schimmel, who organized a midcareer Ray retrospective in 1998, formal issues of group sculpture and allusions to works like Rodin's *The Burghers of Calais* are at play in *Oh! Charley, Charley, Charley...*, but there's no getting around the fact that the figures doing the masturbating are all Ray: "It is what it is."

One thing the two men, who have been friends since the Eighties, agree on is that the piece is less orgiastic than meditative. "I think it's more lonely than pornographic," says Ray. "I'm not with a partner. I'm with myself." Notes Schimmel, "It came at a time when it seemed he realized he was having these relationships that in some ways were repeating themselves, and in some ways he was having the relationships with himself." Shaun Caley Regen of Regen Projects, Ray's Los Angeles gallery, finds his ability to subtly infuse his artwork with personal concerns to be one of his most powerful tools. "You look at *Oh! Charley, Charley, Charley...*, and it's very psychological, but it reverberates on many different levels," she says. "He finds the universal from the personal."

Ray was raised with four brothers and one sister in Winnetka, an affluent suburb along Chicago's North Shore. His family owned a commercial art school. Ray knew early on that he wanted to be an artist, and in the summers he took courses at the Art Institute of Chicago. At age seven he discovered his other great passion in life: sailing. His father bought him and his brother an eight-foot dinghy, and the boys would sail on Lake Michigan. Ray, who has lived in L.A. for 26 years, now has a 44-foot boat that he frequently mans solo and captains in races for as long as the eight or nine days it takes to reach Hawaii. The sailboat seems to be his only extravagance. (He still lives in a modest, rented house.) But friends say that he is happier now than he's ever been, in part because of his longtime girlfriend, Silvia Gaspardo-Moro, whom Ray at one point in the interview refers to as "my wife." "Charley's a very intense person," Regen says. "He always has been, and you could see it in the work."

Ray works obsessively but deliberately. This past spring he had his first major gallery exhibition in a decade, a widely discussed show at Regen Projects featuring a single, jaw-dropping sculpture of a dead tree; in November Matthew Marks Gallery in Chelsea will hold his first significant New York exhibition since his MoCA retrospective traveled to the Whitney in 1998. There *The New Beetle* will be on public view for the first time, along with *Chicken*, a life-size chicken egg pierced with a tiny hole through which the embryo's head is barely visible. The goal, Ray says, was to create a sculpture even farther removed from the pedestal, one that could be held in the palm of your hand. "I wanted the life force, or the energy, of the chick hatching to be met with the energy of your looking—with your bending over, with your curiosity," he explains, gingerly holding the not-quite-completed piece. Sculpted in porcelain, the project took four or five years for Ray to perfect. "I had an incubator and hatched some chickens," he says, then, pointing to a picture of some chicks, adds, "This one died." First he grappled with how to render the chick "without being cute." Then he wrestled with whether the bird should be partly emerged from the egg, an idea he scrapped because, he says, the naturalism of it made the piece "more imagistic than sculptural": There was no need for the viewer to bend over, to participate; the experience was complete. The resolved egg, with a circular "portal" allowing a glimpse of the chick, "is more about looking."

Ray's third piece in the Marks show is as awesomely imposing as *Chicken* is delicate. Called *Father Figure*, it's a sculpture of a man sitting atop a giant green tractor; the whole thing is rendered in 18 and a half tons of stainless steel. His model for the piece, a toy tractor that artist Kiki Smith, a longtime friend, sent him years ago, sits on another worktable. "I was really interested in the man and his relationship to the machine," Ray says.

He spent a year and a half scaling up the toy on a computer, using a program that simulated sculpting in clay, in order to get the detailing and perspective just right. Next came maquettes carved in foam, and finally, the finished steel piece, produced by the same kind of machinery that makes airplane parts. Ray has played with scale before—his Fall '91 (1992) featured a trio of women outfitted in career attire and standing eight feet tall—and acknowledges that monumentality alone can make a work more powerful. "You know, there's something about a toy to a child where the relationship is real, where the kid is playing and it's just really amazing," he says. "How do I make that experience real for the adult? It's not so much the size, I think—it's the weight. I can feel the gravity of it. It's solid. Immovable."

Father Figure isn't Ray's first tractor. *Untitled (Tractor)* (2003–05) tackled a different sculptural concern. Initially, Ray had wanted to base a piece on a jungle gym, which he considers a child's entrée into society—and therefore, our first "civic space"—but, frustrated with its progress, he drove out to see a broken-down tractor that a friend told him kids played on. Ray, too, had played on a tractor as a child. He bought it, hauled it back to his studio and dismantled it, piece by piece. Assistants hand-sculpted the thousands of gears, springs and hoses, and Ray eventually decided to cast the work in aluminum and put it all back together. The tractor's meticulously sculpted engine is every bit as relevant in Ray's mind as the exterior. One day, 10 years ago, even before he came across the tractor, Ray was driving on back roads in central California when he spotted a dead oak tree in a field. "It had fallen maybe 30 or 40 years ago," he recalls. "And it was just collapsing. Maybe another five years and it would collapse. Some parts were hard, some were not." The sun and rain and wind and insects had had their way with the trunk, creating furrows and crevices along its roughly 30 feet. "It had a beautiful chamber running through it," Ray says, with more sadness than joy in his voice. He developed an attachment to its physicality as perhaps only a sculptor can. "It was on a winery," he recalls. "I asked them if I could take molds of it, and they said no. I asked them if I could buy it, and they said no. They were just 'no' people."

"I offered \$10,000 for it," he adds. "It was just a log." After a year of failed negotiations, he decided to look for another dead tree to use for a sculpture. "I spent a year hiking, and I saw a lot of logs," he says. "All over California I hiked." But none could match the original in its shape or in its singular pattern of rot. That first dead tree just spoke to Ray. So he drove back and took it. "You know, with chain saws."

As with most of his works, he didn't really know what he was going to do with the tree. He thought about making a giant inflatable piece, but he was turned off by the inevitable technical flaws. Still not sure where he was going with it, he made molds of the log, inside and outside, and cast it in fiberglass. Then it dawned on him: Turn the tree back into a tree. He shipped it to Japan, where master carvers, working in the manner of their 11th-century forebears, spent five years carving every sliver of bark, every crack, every insect burrow into Japanese cypress, or hinoki.

"I think the tree is his greatest achievement," says Schimmel, who put up a fight to acquire Hinoki for MoCA. (Instead, pending trustee approval, it will head to the Art Institute of Chicago; Ray apparently wanted it to go to his hometown.) "The idea of both the cast and the carving on the foundation of the found object is a real achievement. The piece itself is just insane. You look at it, and you see it one way from a distance. Then you come closer, and you know why he had to have that tree."

For Ray the bends in the road, the blind turns, are what making sculpture is about. "What makes an interesting work is what the trip's like to the artifice," he says. "It's where you finally find the crack in the foundation."