

Charles Ray, Walking a Fine Line With a Hungry Lion

By [Ted Loos](#)

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WALDEN, N.Y. — The Los Angeles sculptor Charles Ray woke up at 5 a.m. and walked for four hours, as he does every day, both for his health and for solitary reflection time.

Only he was in New York City at the time, so he used Central Park. Energized, he got into a car and came up here to the Polich Tallix foundry in Orange County, to see some men about a lion and a dog.

Mr. Ray, who is known for his mysterious figural sculptures that “circle ancient themes and conventions,” as Roberta Smith wrote in a review, was finishing his painstaking work last month on new versions of a 2017 piece, “Mountain Lion Attacking a Dog,” for the exhibition at Matthew Marks Gallery in Chelsea, through June 16.

The cast sculpture comprises two main pieces, interlocking where the mouth of the lion meets the neck of the dog — the killing moment frozen in time. And it epitomizes the artist’s enigmatic relationship with his subject matter. Even when he is sculpting a nature scene, Mr. Ray unearths something uncanny that can provoke a reaction.



Mr. Ray photographing two versions of his work-in-progress. Even his fans acknowledge that his subjects can have unpredictable effects on viewers. Lauren Lancaster for The New York Times

You wouldn't necessarily know it from his process, which is steeped in art historical and aesthetic concerns. Wearing a dark knit cap that hid his unruly hair, Mr. Ray agonized, meditated and philosophized about every aspect of the piece.

Just the seams on "Mountain Lion" have occupied his mind for a year — he doesn't "encourage" them, he said, but it often can't be helped. "Sculpture and seams are like boxers and broken noses: They go hand in hand."

The five new pieces in the show represent a large portion of the work he has completed since his 2014-2015 retrospective, shown in Chicago, which may help explain why they cost between \$2 million and \$8 million each. For a major artist, Mr. Ray produces very little. "I work very slowly," he said.

Mr. Ray had completed a sterling silver version with a rich gleam that made it hard to look away from. Next to it was a stainless steel version that required more polishing. "The stainless is like video, with all the realism and information, and the silver is like cinema, it's warm and emotional," said Mr. Ray, 64, who is known to all as Charley.

Some 40 people have had a hand at some point in the several-year process making the work. It began with having a real mountain lion in his studio, gnawing at a steak that was nailed to a piece of wood.



From Mr. Ray's show at Matthew Marks Gallery, "Reclining Woman" (2018) is made of machined steel and is slightly larger than life-size. Every detail is carved with a directness Mr. Ray matches by her frank facial expression. Matthew Marks Gallery

The piece was inspired by the sculptor's long walks in the hills above Los Angeles, where the wild cats prowl, and also by a Greek marble sculpture, "Lion Attacking a Horse," that Mr. Ray saw at the J. Paul Getty Museum.

But ask what it's *about*, and you'll get a sideways answer. "One could say I've spent a great deal of time making very little of my subject matter," Mr. Ray said with a wry smile.

James Rondeau, the president and director of the Art Institute of Chicago and co-organizer of Mr. Ray's retrospective there, said that the artist creates "vehicles that pick you up somewhere and drop you off somewhere else."

"They're not narrative," he added. "He's making figurative sculpture relevant in the present tense, but connecting it to a long continuum of art history."

Put another way: It's sculpture densely packed with references, which is why the critic Hal Foster called him "catnip for art historians."



“Mountain Lion Attacking a Dog” (2018) in sterling silver. A hypothetical scene from the hills near the artist’s home in Los Angeles is 3½ feet long and less than 2 feet high. The smaller scale tends to encourage viewers to lean in to examine the detailed surfaces of the animals’ muscular bodies.

Matthew Marks Gallery

The public has at times had a different reaction, as have institutions that feared controversy, particularly with his nudes.

Mr. Ray is perhaps best known for “Boy With Frog” (2009), commissioned by the luxury goods tycoon François Pinault for the piazza in front of the Punta della Dogana, his museum in Venice, but later removed. The nude sculpture was beloved by many, but offensive to others — though it is no naked-er than the subjects of artworks all over the city — and locals wanted the return of a displaced lamppost there. (A version was installed at the Getty Center because of its echoes with the older art inside, and it remains uncontroversially on view on the steps leading to the main entrance.)

Even his fans acknowledge that his subjects can have unpredictable effects on viewers. “People can get stuck with his provocative content,” Mr. Rondeau said.

That was the case with “Huck and Jim” (2014), inspired by “The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.” The two naked figures — a black man and a white boy, almost-but-not-quite touching — were intended to be displayed in front of the Whitney Museum of American Art. But it was considered too contentious and the museum offered to move it inside; instead, Mr. Ray withdrew the piece.

“Disappointed is the wrong word,” Mr. Ray said of his feelings on the matter, though he sure seemed it. He said he was working on a public home for the piece.



“Boy With Frog” (2008), shown at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 2016. Tim Tiebout

Though his earliest phase involved pared-down, Minimal art, he first lodged in the public consciousness with works like “Family Romance” (1993), a naked nuclear family in which the son and daughter are the same size as Mom and Dad.

“When I was a younger man I was very aware — and perhaps still am today — of a degree of provocativeness carrying a work into a room and grabbing people’s attention,” Mr. Ray said.

From the start, the art world has esteemed his work. “He has a complete understanding about the weddedness between conceptual ideas and the world of form, and the way they are integrated,” said the artist Laura Owens, who first met Mr. Ray some 20 years ago when he hired her for her first teaching job, at U.C.L.A., where he ran the sculpture program.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s classical collection — in particular a Greek kouros, of a naked young man — has long been a source of inspiration, particularly for Mr. Ray’s “Aluminum Girl” (2003), the first in his series of white-painted metal figures. It is on view at the Met Breuer in the exhibition “Like Life: Sculpture, Color and the Body (1300 — Now).”

Sheena Wagstaff, the chairwoman of the modern and contemporary department at the Met and co-organizer of “Like Life,” said: “The first time I ever visited him in L.A., he was reading Pliny. That’s not your normal studio visit.”

“Mechanic 1” and “Mechanic 2” (both 2018), painted steel. One figure removes the wheel rim from an automobile tire while the other crouches and watches. The matte white finish highlights details on the sculptures. Matthew Marks Gallery

On the day of the foundry visit, Mr. Ray was digging into the details of his sculptures like a Renaissance carver, though his assistants make the actual marks. He pointed to various areas on the finely hatched belly of the dog — in this piece, the canine’s supine vulnerability gave the piece his signature strangeness.

“These are marks from a clay tool; some are natural, but others are like a Japanese comic book, or like a Lichtenstein,” he said. “They are not randomly sprinkled on there — and that’s what took a long time.”

At lunch in an Irish pub after his foundry visit, Mr. Ray told one of his signature loopy stories about how he sent a sculpture to a collector “and I sent 12 empty crates along with it. I said the 12 empty crates is the space that goes around it.” He added, “He was totally freaked out.”

It was a joke, or maybe more of a wish, since he advocates lots of air around his sculpture. For the Matthew Marks show, Mr. Ray spread three works in one building and, in an adjacent space next door, installed just two more.

You could say that Mr. Ray leaves room for the uncanny wherever he goes.

Charles Ray: three rooms and the repair annex

Through June 16, at Matthew Marks Gallery, Chelsea; 212-243-0200; matthewmarks.com.

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