

During my student years, towards the end of a boozy dinner party, my flatmate turned to our guests and asked them whether, were they to bump into themselves in the bar of an anonymous hotel, they would take themselves to bed. Their answers were mixed. One said 'yes', on the grounds that she knew exactly what would please her. Another said 'no', because, as a selfish lover, he'd want everything his own way. A third agreed she'd do it, but would walk out on herself in the morning. ('Everybody else does, so why not me?') A fourth concluded he wouldn't, but that he'd enjoy leading himself on.

'Space', wrote Arthur Schopenhauer in the introduction to his *On the Will in Nature* (1836), 'is the condition of the possibility of juxtaposition.' Without it there can be no relationship between one object and another – indeed, its universal absence would render the concept 'object' absurd. Space is an imperfect prophylactic against solipsism and is, like time, a dimension in which anxieties take root. As the responses to my flatmate's question suggest, even that known quantity the self becomes somehow other if we imagine it in spatial proximity to ourselves. A material presence, it seems, always supports a measure of apartness. This is not the same thing as an absence or a gap.

For over 30 years space has been at the centre of Charles Ray's art practice. Not only physical space – something that he has said clings to the armature of Anthony Caro's sculpture *Early One Morning* (1962), a formative influence, 'like clay'¹ – but also that which slops and fizzes between what we think we know and what is, and between what we expect and what we get. In a catalogue essay that accompanied his 1998 retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles, the show's curator, Paul Schimmel, recounts an anecdote told to him by one of the artist's instructors at Illinois' Marmion Military Academy, in which the teenage Ray marched his troop 'in drill formation down an alley into a wall'.² While it would be reckless to interpret this adolescent prank as an early work *avant la lettre*, its slapstick humour is nevertheless edged with a number of sharp observations about authority, obedience and the bruising consequences of a meeting between an immovable object and an irresistible force that seem to anticipate his future artistic practice. Picturing the procession of cadets thumping one into the other, we might imagine them as the gulled, ridiculous descendants of the figures depicted in Phidias' Parthenon frieze (443–438 bc) or as a cacophonous cover version of Luca della Robbia's *Cantoria* (1431–9). Ray has spoken of sculpture as 'actually sequencing form and space; that's what is important, somehow'.³ Even in that tangle of youthful limbs there was, I suspect, a certain order of things.

If this pile-up of boy soldiers was the result of a spatial command, Ray's *Clock Man* (1978), performed while studying at Rutgers University's Mason Gross School of Art, saw him follow nothing but his own temporal lights. For this piece the artist climbed into a wall-mounted wooden box set with a clock-face, leaving only his dangling, pendulum-like legs visible, and blindly manipulated the hour and minute hands according to his own internal sense of time's passing. When the performance concluded at 3pm, Ray's clock read 6pm – a difference of three hours. It's predictable, of course, that a discrepancy will exist between a mechanical measurement and a human estimate of a given duration (even the most assiduous chanter of 'one-Mississippi, two-Mississippi' will now and then swallow a 'p' or elongate an 's'), yet *Clock Man* points not only to this but also asks whether it is the computation or the perception of time that has a greater claim on the real. If Ray experienced his performance as lasting 180 minutes longer than the spectators' wristwatches told them it did, is it not possible that, for him at least, those extra minutes actually ticked by? Isn't every human, even one whose face and hands are hidden, a clock of sorts? Perhaps Ray's piece is about our fear of fully accepting our own subjectivity. Doubting ourselves, we have become a species of hybrid clock-men.

Authority of a different sort informs a number of works made by Ray in the late 1980s and early '90s that engage with the stern legacy of Minimalist sculpture. Approached in the exhibition space, the open-topped aluminium cube of his $32 \times 33 \times 35 = 34 \times 33 \times 35$ (1989) seems at first to be the work of a late and very zealous convert to the Donald Judd 'specific object' – it admits to no mimesis, no metaphor, no inequality of parts, just machine-milled matter and monkish plain surfaces. Peer very closely, though, and it becomes clear that, far from resting like an ontological certainty on the plane of the gallery floor, the piece's bottom two inches have actually been recessed into the ground beneath our feet, making its inside dimensions fractionally larger than those of its outside. What are the consequences of this geometric TARDIS? One is the cleaving of Minimalist sculpture's gestalt. Another appears to be the confounding of the viewer's expectations – or even the failing of their trust. Ray has said of this sculpture that he 'was thinking of the mind/body problem, a projection of what would happen if you put a thought in a box'.⁴ What happens, in this instance, is that thought becomes a cuckoo; what happens is that matter is displaced.

Like that of $32 \times 33 \times 35 = 34 \times 33 \times 35$, the title of Ray's *7 1/2 Ton Cube* (1990) is, while descriptive of the mathematical facts of the work, at odds with its appearance. A solid steel block sprayed with white car paint, the piece looks far lighter than it is. The temptation is to touch it, to punch it, to verify its cartoon density. (If Road Runner were ever chased through a museum by Wile E. Coyote, surely this is the work he'd contrive to drop onto the luckless predator's head.) A similar kinaesthetic pull is present in *Ink Box* (1986), which saw Ray fill a painted, open-topped steel cube to the brim with black ink, creating a 'solid' object by the addition of a sixth, liquid plane. Perhaps the most vivid way to evoke the death-drive erotics of the piece is to picture someone in a white silk scarf leaning down to inspect its glossy surface and then rising, only to find that the scarf's fabric has greedily absorbed its fill of ink. As with *7 1/2 Ton Cube*, *Ink Box* asserts that, from a certain perspective, truth and lies look very much the same. Step too close to the lie, though, feel its temperature and texture, and it'll leave its telling mark upon you.

In some ways a one-dimensional cousin of *Ink Box*, Ray's *Ink Line* (1987) is a pin-like stream of black ink that falls straight down from the gallery ceiling to the floor, its continuous horizontal presence ensured by concealed pumps. Although not quite a line in the strictly geometric sense it nevertheless intimates the dynamism of the relationship between one point and another – its state of perpetually re-inscribed becoming. Standing beside the piece, it's hard not to feel the desire to break the stream with your hand and bring the work into your own, three-dimensional world. (Ray has said: 'You know what will happen but you want to do it anyway. What interests me isn't spilling the ink, but wanting to, whatever that's about'.⁵) Thought about for a moment, such an action would not materially harm the work, and any damage it would inflict on the exhibition space would be nothing that a few coats of cheap paint could not fix. The real victim would not be the artist or the institution, then, but rather the next viewer, who would be robbed of the possibility of imagining their own splayed fingers making the ink-drops fly. *Ink Line* is, in a sense, a

contract drawn up between the members of its audience – one in which the satisfaction of a desire is refused, so that everybody may experience that desire's pang the better. Ray invites us not to subvert his own authority, or that of the White Cube, but rather to test our commitment to a version of Immanuel Kant's 'categorical imperative' in which a local scratch is traded for a universal itch.

The work that signalled Ray's shift from abstract to figurative sculpture is most often identified as *Self Portrait* (1990), a mannequin made in the artist's image, complete with a nervous gait and a nerdy fleece and fishing hat. But while it marks a sea change of sorts, its currents of muted aggression, and even of anthropomorphism, also ripple through the earlier *Rotating Circle* (1988), perhaps Ray's most cosmetically non-representational work. First shown in the 1988 Whitney Biennial, the piece comprises a white, nine-inch diameter disc set flush into the wall at head height, which rotates, by means of a noisy hidden motor, at such a speed that it appears to be stationary. While it is, to a degree, concerned with the way visual evidence may paper over the cracks, it's also something that the viewer must deal with in the manner that they would another human being – that is to say, face to face. We might imagine *Rotating Circle* as an interlocutor in an angry circular argument, or else as a person who, while they appear to be enduring our company with infinite patience, is actually taking a spin through their own, ineffable thoughts. 'Another aspect of it for me was making something that was so abstract it became real or so real that it became abstract,' stated Ray in an interview in 1990. 'You go in so far you come out the other side.'⁶ Looking back, this is a concern that has informed almost every work he has made from *Rotating Circle* to the present day.

One of the abiding fantasies of the 20th century was the work of art that relied on nothing but its formal qualities for its effect. Two factors make this an impossible dream. The first, as old as our species, is the human habit of simile – however hard one wishes for a slab of marble or a passage of paint to speak only of itself, there will always be somebody who likens it to a tombstone or a sunbeam, and from there it's only a short step to all sorts of narrative and metaphysical stuff. The second, which was born on the same day as the fantasy, is that attempts at fabricating such art inevitably accrue a history. As Ray's cube works demonstrate, even something as apparently autonomous as a platonic solid has a complex back-story of artistic ownership, and one than cannot help but inflect every fresh iteration of that form. While a niche approach may mitigate this for a short spell, it has its limitations (one polyhedron, once it attains a certain number of facets, looks very much like another), and this anyway does nothing to counter our inclination to import ideas into an image or object from elsewhere. How, then, might we begin to separate out that which inheres in a work of art and the things on which it piggy-backs? One answer is provided by Ray's figurative sculptures, which by cruising in the slipstream of our collective psychosexual hang-ups succeed, counter-intuitively, in highlighting their own specific and intrinsic formal properties. Perhaps the best-known example of this is the artist's *Fall '91* (1992), a series of three two-metre female mannequins decked out in shoulder-padded power suits and arranged in confident, faintly aggressive poses. Always exhibited separately, they tower above even the tallest adult, unblinking symbols of the mother who will never allow us to grow up. But while the extrinsic business of family dynamics is responsible for much of these figures' impact – as Ray puts it, they 'surf the Freudian wave'⁷ – this does not account for the fact that, as you move away from them, they appear to become bigger relative to your body. We might, of course, take this irregular spatial relationship as a metaphor for the distant parent looming large over the adult self, but the effect would be the same were the sculptural element a virago in high heels or an abstract vertical mass. Ray does not ask us to ignore the external associations we might map onto a given form, but rather employs these to tune us in, very precisely, to that form's internal power. Something similar occurs in *Male Mannequin* (1990), for which the artist fitted a fluffy-haired cast of his own genitals to the crotch of a found shop-window dummy. While the work is in some senses a gift for the type of criticism that favours cultural arithmetic over looking – a catalogue essay by Bruce W. Ferguson from 1994 announces, in all earnestness, that 'this is (finally) the fully desexualized surrogate of normality whose phallogocentric power is usually garbed in a language of hegemony, an architecture of authority, a techno-military network of dominion, and metaphors of inscription'⁸ – it is also a subtle study in different representational registers, and a sculpture in which the space created by a looped forefinger, or the precise triangulation of the flared glans and the unevenly suspended testes, is as important as the theoretical implications of a usually smooth-groined mannequin growing a cock and a pair of balls.

None of this is to say that the psychological content of Ray's work is a mere Trojan horse for form. Indeed, the best of it employs the relationship of parts, the Anthony Caro-like juncture of one sculptural element with another, to amplify and complicate narrative meaning. In his sculpture *Family Romance* (1993) Ray presents us with a group portrait comprising a naked father, mother and pre-pubescent son and daughter, all of whom are, despite their developmental variety, the same height. Crafted with incredible precision the work employs this parity of scale to highlight physical difference: with their large heads, sloping shoulders and plump and hairless genitalia the children might belong to a quite separate species from their parents. Standing in line like protesters at a police barrier or newlyweds before a priest, the family members hold hands: the father with the mother, the mother with the son, and the son with the daughter. What do these moments of connection – these formal hinges – imply? Given the work's title, it could be anything from a simple genealogical narrative to multiple and surprising episodes of incest (with their dim eyes and stocky, brutish bodies, the children appear more than capable of coercing their parents into some sticky, heart-breaking act), or else a familial relationship that, the monarchical politics of scale being inapplicable, replicates the republicanism of a love affair. Ambiguity is, in and of itself, an unremarkable thing with which to imbue a work of art, but the equivocal quality of *Family Romance* is genuinely disarming. Like the artist's related sculpture *Firetruck* (1993) – a model fire-engine remade to the size of a real fire-engine and deposited on a New York street, transforming the city into a vast playground – it employs a formal property, scale, to shift our psychic lives into new and troubling terrain.

While *Family Romance* hints at incest, Ray's *Oh! Charley, Charley, Charley ...* (1992) is about nothing if not self-abuse. What is significant, here, is not how much Ray reveals of himself, but how very little. Circle-jerking with his clones, he provides the viewer with no entry point, no tender, vulnerable spot. This is pure masturbation. However, for all the hermeticism of the scene, it seems to know something of awkwardness, and even disappointment. Here and there the artist baulks at giving himself a foot-job, or else attempts to stir his half-flaccid penis back into full life. We might – pace my flatmate's suggestion – take up the opportunity to go fuck ourselves, but sometimes space has a cruel habit of alienating us from even the most familiar body of all.

If before the mid-1990s Ray was never the most prolific of artists, preferring to tune and calibrate his sculpture over a period of several years, since then the stream of works from his studio has slowed to a near trickle, making each one's emergence something of an art-world event. We might think of *Unpainted Sculpture* (1997), a fibreglass cast of a car caught up in a fatal accident, the surface of which was (against the grain its title) primed with grey paint, the better to evoke the ghosts that might haunt the twisted, Möbius-strip topology of the original wreck. We might think, too, of *Aluminium Girl* (2003) – which began as a life-cast of the artist Jennifer Pastor and became, through its interplay of naturalistic and heavily stylized representational modes and the soft contours of its base material, an object that one could almost believe might step out of its coat of white paint – or of *Untitled (Tractor)* (2005) – a simulacrum of a found piece of broken agricultural machinery fabricated by a

number of assistants, each hand-modelled component of which bore the faint imprint of its maker's particular sculptural style. None of these works, however, spent quite so long gestating as Log, a sculpture some ten years in the making that debuted in the artist's home town of Los Angeles early this year.

Log borrows its form from a fallen tree that caught Ray's eye while driving along the California coast. Having cut the ten-metre hollow trunk into pieces and taken them to his studio, he moulded them inside and out and cast them in fibreglass before shipping the casts to the Osaka studio of master woodcarver Yuboku Mukoyoshi, where they were replicated in high-grade unfinished Japanese cypress – hinoki – before finally being reassembled for exhibition back in LA. Displayed horizontally and supported by two plain wooden blocks that resemble the plinth on which statues of the Buddha are customarily placed in Japanese shrines, the piece, with its ridges and gullies, its scalloped tool marks and traces of numerous assistants' hands, feels not mimetic (it's too wilfully styled for that), but rather as though it's made, somehow, of densely compacted intentionality, like a wish, or a prayer. Discussing the piece with me, the artist spoke about the Greek concept of *pneuma*, or breath, and listening to the untreated wood of Log creak and settle, one might imagine that Ray, Mukoyoshi and their assistants had somehow brought the dead tree back to life. Here the distance between one thing and another, between the original object and its re-imagination, is – against all the odds – measured out in something close to hope.

This month sees Ray present a group of new works at Matthew Marks Gallery, New York, which trace a thematic orbit around birth, childhood and (male) maturation. *Chicken* (2007) is a porcelain egg pierced with a circular, coin-sized aperture, through which the viewer can glimpse a foetal chick, curled up in amniotic sleep. We might interpret the piece as an empiricist's answer to the philosophical riddle of 'What came first...?', or as an understudy for a gestating human being, but I suspect that the piece is really about the energetic birthing of space. Within the fragile shell, the bird's beak, feathers and gnarled claws provide an armature for a compact, almost baroque spatiality that floods out through the portal into the wider world, there to undergo infinite expansion, a universal unfolding. (We might also imagine this process working in reverse, and the space inside the egg as something close to an imploded galaxy or neutron star.) If *Chicken* depicts a point of departure, *The New Beetle* (2006) takes place a little further down the road. Here, a naked boy fashioned from white-painted steel sits on the floor, his right hand on the roof of a toy car which he stares at with a rapt concentration that recalls the *Fedele*, a celebrated ancient Greek sculpture of a youth removing a thorn from his foot, or François Rude's *Young Neapolitan Fisherboy Playing with a Tortoise* (1831–3). Ray's choice of Volkswagen's 1990s update of their classic Beetle is significant, not only anchoring the pan-temporal motif of a nude child in a particular time, but also suggesting that the notion of retro is as much about refining or reformatting as it is about nostalgia. And yet, it is the boy's very contemporaneity that makes him a disquieting figure. We do not commonly read antique statues of pre-pubescent as vulnerable innocents to be protected, but it's hard not to identify Ray's kid (and he is a kid, a product of a proximate reality) as a potential victim of present-day adulthood. Perhaps what the boy in *The New Beetle* needs is a guardian, which is exactly what *Father Figure* (2007) appears to provide. A scaled up, painted steel reproduction of a plastic toy of a farmer riding a tractor given to Ray by the artist Kiki Smith, the piece emanates a benign paternalism, and seems to guarantee that the fields will be tilled, the harvest collected and our planet's children will go to sleep with full bellies in safe, warm beds. Produced in 1950s America (although it is possible it was cast from an earlier mould, which would account for its faint atmosphere of Franklin D. Roosevelt's 1930s 'New Deal'), the original toy undergoes a surprising transformation when enlarged to several times human size. The farmer's schematically sculpted face begins to take on an East Asian aspect, as though he were not an agricultural worker from the US grain belt, but rather a member of a collective farm in Soviet-era Kazakhstan.

However, while *Father Figure* suggests that we're not in Kansas anymore, its seated patriarch is no Wizard of Oz, no scrawny, mendacious manipulator of smoke and mirrors. Instead, he's a kid's toy grown bigger than any adult, a childish thing we need not and perhaps cannot (with his comforting, faintly oppressive mass) put aside. For all this, though, his juxtaposition with Ray's *Chicken* places his authority in dispute. He may farm the familiar space around him, but within the zygotic antechamber of the eggshell a new and unpredictable universe is always about to explode into being.

1?'Early One Morning', Interview with Michael Fried, Tate Etc. 3, spring 2005, p.51 2?Paul Schimmel, 'Besides One's Self', Charles Ray, exh. cat., Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and Scalo Verlag, Zurich, p.60 3?'Anxious Spaces', interview with Robert Storr, Art in America, November, 1988, p.105 4?'Charles Ray interviewed by Gunnar B. Kvaran'. Charles Ray – Black and White, exh. cat., Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art, Oslo, 2006, p.2 5?'Charles Ray, exh. cat., Newport Harbor Art Museum, 1990, p.10 6?'Ibid., p.12 7?'Charles Ray – Black and White, p.3 8?'Bruce W. Ferguson, 'The Sculpture of Charles Ray', Charles Ray, exh. cat., Roseum Centre for Contemporary Art, Malmö, 1994, p.22

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