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Art in Review



CHARLES RAY, MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

“Sleeping Woman” (2012), a sculpture by Charles Ray.

Charles Ray

Matthew Marks Gallery
522 West 22nd Street, Chelsea
Through Jan. 12

Figurative sculpture is almost as old as the human body but also as new as whatever fresh materials, techniques and meanings artists can rally to their cause. The latest confirmation of this comes from Charles Ray’s new forays into post-Conceptual realism, three works based on actual people (but 10 percent larger) and carved by computer-driven machines from solid stainless steel. Luminous rather than reflective, they form a beautifully spare arrangement in Matthew Marks’s large, nearly empty gallery and produce a cat’s cradle of ricocheting ideas. Their solidity is not immediately apparent, but they sure don’t seem hollow. They are as much heirs to process-oriented Post-Minimal sculptors like Richard Serra and Barry Le Va as to postwar realists like George Segal and Duane Hanson.

They circle ancient themes and conventions. The standing male nude of “Young Man” echoes the pose of the “Kritios Boy,” the early Classical Greek sculpture thought to be the first instance of contrapposto, but he is clearly a 21st-century nerd: unsteady on his feet, with sloping shoulders, incipient love handles and a slightly too-large head, partly a result of thick hair

and a full beard. Factor in his open mouth and slightly buck teeth and the figure becomes a study in unwitting insecurity. It implies social notions of manhood as a facade beyond the reach of most men.

“Sleeping Woman” is a clothed, heavysset black woman asleep on a bench. She is clearly homeless, making her very much of our era. But she is also implicitly regal and descended from various sculptures of sleeping Venuses, muses and goddesses, most interestingly the small, broad-hipped Neolithic figurine known as the Sleeping (or Dreaming) Goddess of Malta, as well as the compact, bodiless head that is Brancusi’s “Sleeping Muse.”

“Shoe Tie,” a nude self-portrait of the artist crouching down to tie a non-existent shoe, echoes the Greco-Roman “Boy With Thorn,” but is also a modern-day jogger about to go for a run in the park (implied by the other two sculptures). This figure is as at ease in his body as “Young Man” is not, and as focused as “Sleeping Woman” is oblivious. His completely unfettered genitals may be something of a first for sculpture. Such an unusually pure if visceral expression of gravity — long an interest of Post-Minimal sculptors — might be seen as an attempt to compensate for the pendulous female breasts that have appeared in sculpture since forever. It’s a start.

ROBERTA SMITH