

# NEW YORK OBSERVER

## Shoeless Ray

CONTEMPORARY ART'S  
MOST OBSESSIVE PERFECTIONIST  
HAS A NEW SHOW  
AT MATTHEW MARKS

**A trio of sculptures,  
years in the making**

*By Andrew Russeth*

**ART** A few years ago, Los Angeles-based artist Charles Ray had heart trouble that required surgery. After he recovered, one of his doctors told him that he should start walking as much as possible. "So I was taking these really long walks," he told *The Observer* last week at the Matthew Marks Gallery in Chelsea, where an exhibition of his work has just gone on view. Every day, he said, he would find himself walking by the same bench at the corner of Wilshire Boulevard and Seventh Street, in Santa Monica, "and usually a homeless guy was on it, and I would talk to him and give him some money and stuff like that."

In Matthew Marks, Mr. Ray was standing next to a life-size, realistic metal sculpture he has made of that bench with a woman lying on top of it. She leans over on her side, slumbering peacefully on a blanket like a contemporary Ariadne. Her jacket is pulled up, exposing part of her back. She is based on a homeless woman he saw while he was walking by one day. He went on to spend years on the sculpture—three of them on her shoes alone.

Asked why he invested so much time in what would appear to be a banal scenario—a woman on a bench—he began his answer by retreating from his sculpture. "I came up from this direction," he said quietly, approaching it from behind. The shape her body made on the bench was, he recalled, "so big and transcendental in a way, you know? I saw the underwear and the lace, I just immediately knew I wanted to machine it. I knew I wanted to make a sculpture out of it. What would happen with the machine tool? I was trying to push her, to bring her *ka*, or her soul, up through her physicality and out across her clothes, that was sort of the attempt." As far as he knows, the woman is unaware that she has been shown in art galleries twice, a few months ago at Matthew Marks's new Los Angeles branch, and now in New York.

It's an old cliché that you can get a pretty good idea of what an artist is like by the work they make. Though it's not universally true, big, bold paintings tend to be made by big, bold people. But who makes a delicate, detailed sculpture of a homeless woman or, for that matter, a work like *Oh! Charley, Charley, Charley...* (1992), a set of eight identical, terrifyingly lifelike, self-portrait nude sculptures engaged in an orgy? (That one is on permanent display at the Rubell Family Collection, a private museum in Miami, and is probably Mr. Ray's best-known work.)

On the day he met with *The Observer*, Mr. Ray, who will turn 60 next year, was weathering the chilly gallery in a blue knit cap and scarf—the heat had not yet been restored following Hurricane Sandy. Aside from those moments when he is really excited, which are few and far between, he speaks slowly and deliberately, in a voice just a notch or two above a whisper. He has a guarded warmth that betrays his Midwestern roots—Chicago-born, he went to college at the University of Iowa.

Unlike the artist who made them, Mr. Ray's sculptures are often unsettling, frequently because of their mind-bending proportions, and they defy the reigning attitudes of much high-end sculpture.

A key characteristic of art in the market boom that started in the late 1990s was that art got very big, and very shiny. Artists became almost as well known for their staggering fabrication costs as they did for the works themselves. Something was born that one writer referred to as “bling conceptualism.” Many of the pieces made in the “bling” mode tend to have more than a whiff of luxury goods about them, like Jeff Koons's mammoth candy hearts and beveled diamonds. Which makes Mr. Ray's sculptures startling—a perfect replica of a crashed car, assembled part by part (*Unpainted Sculpture*, 1997), for instance, or here, a woman sleeping on a bench. His pieces include a female mannequin, dressed in a pantsuit, 30 percent larger than life-size, and a family of four, all the same dwarf height, completely naked.

‘We’re all equal in sleep.’

But he prefers talking craftsmanship to talking content.

“I spent a long time taking pictures,” he said, recalling the day he came across the homeless woman. “She was just out on a very busy intersection and just amazingly sort of asleep like a mountain, just unwakeable. And then I walked home, which was about 40 minutes away, I looked at my pictures and thought, ‘God I don’t have enough pictures,’ and I walked all the way back and she was still there. Trucks were going by, and she was just totally asleep.”

The sculpture, *Sleeping woman* (2012), is solid stainless steel and was cut with a machine normally used to build large motors and injection molds. Though it weighs about 6,000 pounds, it looks remarkably light—Mr. Ray and his assistants polished the piece such that reflections in it appear in soft focus. He takes a certain pride in the solidity of his sculptures. To demonstrate it, he draped part of his sweater over one, and asked *The Observer* to bang a hand on it—the thing was as immovable as a boulder.

Because of his slow, deliberative process, Mr. Ray's exhibitions are relatively infrequent, and are greeted with the kind of enthusiasm usually reserved for auteur filmmakers. He may be his generation's greatest sculptor, for his relentless inventiveness and ability to flout convention with grace. He's appeared in five Whitney Biennials and two Venice Biennales, and—if you're someone who judges these sorts of things using dollar signs—he is one of only a handful of artists working today who can command

more than a million dollars for a new piece. All three sculptures in the Marks show have sold.

His art has always rewarded extended viewing. He packs artworks with details, and fashions them in unorthodox, irreverent ways. In the 1980s, when he was focused on abstract sculptures that resembled common objects (tables, shelves) and minimalist forms with unexpected quirks, he made what appeared to be a black string that extended from floor to ceiling. In fact, it was a thin band of heated ink, continually circulated via a pump system. Another piece from that time looks at first glance like a nondescript cube but, on closer inspection, reveals itself to be a black steel box filled to its brim with 200 gallons of newspaper ink. His art reveals and plays in the gap between the eye and the mind.

As we stood together in the gallery, examining his sculpture of the woman from a few inches away, he pointed just below her blanket. “There's a purse in there,” he said. “See the purse?” It's easy to miss the small fold of metal. “Initially that was sculpted really obviously, but over the years, you go, ‘No, it's better if you don't even see it or over a long time, you see it eventually—someone sees it one day.’”

The more you look at the figures in the Marks show—aside from the woman, there's one of a nude young man and a self-portrait—the weirder they become. He typically starts with photographs of his subjects, which he uses to make a clay model, scans that into a computer, reshapes it, uses a machine to cut a foam model, covers that in clay, works that and then scans it again. Periodically he uses a plaster-like

material called Forton to make casts that serve as “lighthouses so I can see my way back if I go in one direction too far,” he said. “They go in and out of the computer.” It’s an elaborate process, but eventually a steel sculpture is cut. He and his assistants worked the surfaces of the three machine-cut sculptures in the show so that they have the soft look of clay in some places, the hard-edged technical perfection of the machine in others. Because of these variations, they seem to glide in and out of focus as you examine them. It’s art as slow food. “There is a time that it asks of you,” he said. “It’s not a special effect or a trick. It’s a richness of events on the surface of the sculpture.”

He spent three years working on the woman’s running shoes, finally alighting on a solution only after he and his assistants agonized over her hair. “It was just totally a mess,” he said. “As soon as you try to start sculpting that, you bring your hand to it and you bring style to it. So very quickly she started looking like Don King, when we’re doing it. You know, because you’re touching it and you’re handling it. So we’re doing it over and over and after many months, it would just never really resolve. One morning I came in and they had loaded it up with fresh clay, and I said, ‘Just don’t touch it, just leave it.’ Countless hours of work, only to realize they should just slap clay quickly on her head. He left the shoes similarly raw. “It’s like a quote,” he said. “There’s a passage from the ground to her mind, or from her mind to the ground. She’s in the dust. There’s something about the earth in her head, the earth on her shoes, the dirt, the mud.”

Those are the obsessive details that comprise the big ideas. “She can be almost a modern narrative, if you will,” he said. “Sleep as geology. She sleeps as a mountain. She’s homeless—the sculpture is

hard to get rid of. She’s here for good. I see her as very Egyptian actually, this idea of a *ka*, a soul. And there’s another beautiful thing that I see. We’re all equal in sleep. She sleeps, you know, the same as Donald Trump sleeps, you know what I mean? We’re all equal there.” Mr. Ray has called his works “meaning machines”—intensely strange, beautiful objects that we are gently invited to make sense of.

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“This one is just so sort of stark—just a naked guy,” Mr. Ray said, as he walked a few yards over from the woman to *Young man* (2012). *Young man* is a standing figure. He appears to be in his mid-20s. He has shaggy hair and a beard, and his arms are at his sides. “He’s surly a little bit,” said Mr. Ray. “Not surly: he’s nice but a little aggressive, a little passive-aggressive.” The sculpture is based on a friend of Mr. Ray’s. “He doesn’t go to the gym,” he added. “He’s a boring guy, if you will. But I spent so much time trying to sculpt an aspect of him. Many of my sculptures take a long time to make. This is the first one where I think I *used time* to make it. I spent so much time trying to find his gestures, his self.”

In the self-portrait, Mr. Ray is again nude. The work is called *Shoe Tie* (2012), and it’s the newest sculpture in the show. He’s crouched down and appears to be tying his shoe,

only there’s no shoe because he is completely naked. It’s as though the artist is ducking out of sight, trying to avoid being seen by someone, but there’s nothing in the gallery to hide behind. “It came from this idea that if there was a ghost and he was to tie his shoe, he wouldn’t need to have a shoe,” he explained.

“Here’s a remnant of that, of the original idea,” he said, pointing to the figure. “See how the arm goes through the knee?”—in the sculpture, his left elbow glides just barely into the his lower thigh—“It’s transparent, but it’s solid steel. And that was more obvious before, and with time I’ve kept it, but made it less and less obvious. So he was originally like a ghost. He’s also bigger than life, a little bit.” He crouched alongside the sculpture and pretended to tie his shoe, in order to show that his own thumb was just a touch smaller than the sculpture’s.

“When you make a sculpture,” he explained, “you’re working in experiential space, so if I were to make you exactly your size, you would appear diminutive because when you talk you’re always moving or shaking or your hands are going here, so that vibration makes you bigger as one experiences you.”

It’s a bracing thought: we are smaller than we think. And just as we work to understand things like that about ourselves, Mr. Ray struggles to understand his sculptures over the time he spends with them. “My ideas about what I was going to be doing changed over the years,” he admitted at one point in our interview, examining *Young man*, and later, as he surveyed his exhibition, he said that he sees the three sculptures “as very modern, very much in the future, in a way. They kind of tumble into time. They’re solid. They’re off into time now.”

[arusseth@observer.com](mailto:arusseth@observer.com)