

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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ARTFORUM

NEW YORK

Charles Ray

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For more than five years now, Charles Ray has been making sculptures based closely on the human figure, somewhat in the manner of his first work of this type, *Aluminum Girl*, 2003. In his 2007 show at Matthew Marks Gallery, another such piece, *The New Beetle*, 2007, depicted, if that is the word, a naked young boy seated directly on the ground playing with a small model of a Volkswagen. Since then, Ray has been mining this vein in a number of works, three of which, all dated 2012, made up his recent exhibition in the same gallery.

The first to be completed, *Sleeping Woman*, had its origin in more than a hundred photographs taken by the artist of an African-American woman asleep on a bench on Wilshire Boulevard in Los Angeles. She seems to be wearing sweatpants, a lightweight jacket (which pulls up in back because of her bodily position), and sneakers. She's seated on the bench but is half-lying on her left side, with a ribbed blanket folded under her head and hands. The sculpture is life-size (actually, just over, so as to appear life-size), and has been machined from solid steel. The sense of solidity is tremendous, as is the implication of sheer weight (in fact, the piece checks in at just over two tons), which correlates, we are made to feel, with the theme of sleep itself, at least as encountered here. The character of her slumber—"geologic," as Ray put it in an e-mail exchange—finds powerful expression in the sculpture's weightiness as registered by the viewer, subliminally or otherwise. (In another work currently being completed in Osaka, Japan, *Sleeping Mime*, the character of the sleep—hence of the work as a whole—will be fundamentally different.) As always in Ray's work, but in the figures with a new explicitness, the viewer is invited to reflect on the host of specific decisions that went into the finished sculpture: in *Sleeping Woman*, for example, the decisions as to exactly how to treat her hair and her sneakers, two elements that called for a greater degree of stylization than did any others; or, less obviously, precisely what degree of exactitude would best suit the detail of the top of her underwear, which becomes visible above the waist of her sweatpants at the rear of the piece. To a remarkable degree, the success of the sculpture depends on the felt rightness—individual and cumulative—of such determinations. The woman's face in particular is a tour de force of affectionate near-literal realism in gleaming metal that at the same time is devoid of the least hint of sentimentality.



Charles Ray, *Sleeping Woman*, 2012, solid stainless steel, 35½ x 44½ x 50".

Then there is *Young Man*, a naked figure of a bearded man apparently in his thirties, who stands with his hands at his sides, his feet turned slightly outward, a bit of excess flab visible above his hips, and a vaguely sappy expression on his face. (The sculpture went through countless revisions at different stages in its creation before it was finally resolved, a process that is, of course, not visible to the viewer.) The naked male figure of *Shoe Tie* is slim but no longer young, crouching—the lower knee doesn't rest on the ground—while he pantomimes tying the lace of a nonexistent shoe. Amazingly, the "theatricality" of what the latter figure is doing in no way registers as problematic: The viewer accepts almost without thinking about it the rightness or, say, the naturalness of the implied model's pose, even while crouching in turn in order to make out the figure's face, which is otherwise hidden from view. (Crouching, one also sees more plainly the figure's pendant genitals, a tribute of sorts to the early kouroi Ray greatly admires.) These sculptures too have been machined out of solid steel, but the aura of each is distinct and indeed contrasts with that of the other two pieces in ways that there is no space to elaborate on here. A magnificent, deeply thoughtful show.

—Michael Fried