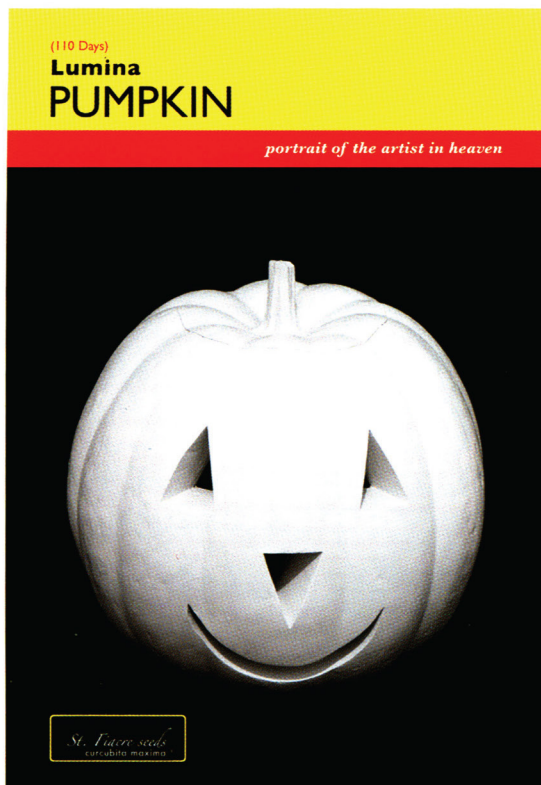


art on paper



Charles Ray

Visitors to the 1993 Whitney Biennial were startled by a large fire truck parked on the street at the entrance of the museum. What was going on? Was it an emergency? Where was the fire? From a distance, it looked like the real thing—something seen every day on the streets of the city. But up close, the reality shifted. Yes, it had the size and the generalized details of a real fire truck; but *Firetruck* was something else: a child's toy enlarged to life-size.

Firetruck was my first encounter with the art of Charles Ray and the start of a journey of admiration and anticipation that, like any meaningful artistic journey, has had its non-understandings, its rethinking, and its eureka moments. As a curator focusing on printmaking, I had a nagging wish to see Ray turn to the medium. Equally, I knew that the traditional forms of printmaking were antithetical to what I was seeing in his sculpture and installations. So, when *Pumpkin Poster* appeared in the fall of 2006, my wish was answered.

Ray conceived and designed the work to be a poster—albeit, one published in a limited edition of twenty-five. It has the size and clarity of presentation one associates with advertising posters found in store windows or on construction hoardings. The press release for the debut presentation of this work at Matthew Marks Gallery notes that Ray was inspired by finding a packet of seeds in 2004 at a gardening center near his studio. If one considers *Pumpkin Poster* to be the front image of the seed packet, the back was printed on the announcement postcard for the exhibition, which describes the wonderful qualities of this “new” fruit (“a novel white pumpkin excellent for painting and carving”) and offers instructions for planting and harvesting.

The white pumpkin in the poster is Ray's own photograph of a cast-plaster sculpture he made. The pumpkin, of course, is one of the many seasonal items stocked by shops in early September in anticipation of the upcoming Halloween festivities. In contemporary society, we have grown accustomed to manufacturers and advertising agencies catering to our desires for the perfect product—the fantasies of the perfect tomato, the right pair of shoes, or the car that will fulfill our dreams. With his *Pumpkin Poster*, the artist discreetly asks the viewer to pause, to think about these issues. The seeds for sale are sterile, the promised future is improbable. Yet, we can chuckle at our own frustrated dreams, like Linus at the end of yet another Halloween without the appearance of the Great Pumpkin.

Charlie Brown, Charles Schulz, Charles Ray. Self-portraiture in its broadest definition lies at the essential core of Ray's art. His genius centers on this knack to take an aspect of himself and incorporate it into a work that stimulates an “everyman” dialogue with the viewer. *Pumpkin Poster* is the latest episode in this ongoing dialogue—and one that I would like to live with.

—David Kiehl

Above left: Charles Ray, *Pumpkin Poster*, digital C-print (43 x 29 1/2 in.), 2006. Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery, New York. © Charles Ray