

Centre Pompidou visits

Guided audio tours through the exhibitions and permanent collection.

"Charles Ray" exhibition

For the first time in France, the Centre Pompidou and the Bourse de Commerce/Pinault Collection present a monographic exhibition (16th February – 20th June 2022) dedicated to Charles Ray, a major figure in contemporary American sculpture.

Can we sculpt the breath? The future? A ghost? In this podcast, Charles Ray talks about his work, explains his approach and, through each of his sculptures, questions his relationship to reality and time, to the visible and the invisible.

Colour code:

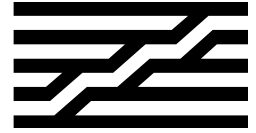
In black, Charles Ray's voice

In blue, woman's voice

In purple, the musical excerpts

In red, all the other sound indications





Podcast transcription

1 - *Self-Portrait*

[jingle of the show] Hello, good evening, welcome. Open wide your eyes and ears. You'll be taken for a visit at the Centre Pompidou. [jingle of the show]

Please come to my exhibition on the 6th floor of the Centre Pompidou. There are many sculptures on view. What they actually are, their true meaning and form may allude you! [transitional sound]

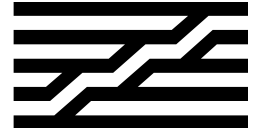
In the large gallery, you will encounter a mannequin that looks like me. Is it a poorly realized self-portrait? Or is it a sculpture of a mannequin?

Nearby the mannequin, there is a sculpture of a car wreck. It is made of reinforced plastic fiber and painted with a light automobile primer, yet its title is *Unpainted sculpture*. Did someone die in this wreck? Where is the ghost of the driver? Can a ghost be sculpted? [transitional sound]

Near the wreck is a small sculpture of my clothes left in a pile on the floor. This is a sculpture that took twenty years to make. It was started years before I was married, when I would leave my clothes piled on the floor. Like unpainted sculpture is these a ghost or a figure associated with this form? [transitional sound]

Like an ancient painted Greek sculpture presiding over this section of the exhibition is a work titled *Portrait of the Artist's Mother*. A large reclining woman masturbating while looking out at you the viewer.

Is she pleasuring herself? Perhaps she is a member of the world's oldest profession. But she is made of paper! Hand-made paper made in my studio by traditional methods. The flat paper was formed into a three dimensional manifold in the image of a naked woman.



Painted stylized flowers do not conceal her sexuality but make visible the electrical meaning that lies between the creator and the created. [transitional sound]

Plank Piece I and II, 1973

Plank Piece I and II were made in 1973. I was living in a house full of hippies and while we didn't have a door on the bathroom, we did have a huge clawfoot cast iron bathtub. All I did in those days was make sculptures, and at night, I often laid back in the warm water of this tub and thought about what I had made that day and what I could make the next day.

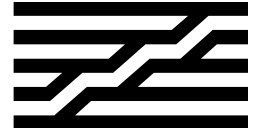
When I was thinking about a plank I was using as a sculptural element in the studio, I felt it connect to my stomach and then I felt it in the warm water behind the back of my knees. As I entered the bathtub every night, for a short period of my life I entered my sculptures every day. I used to deny any empathetic reading of the work. Friends would say "Oh my god how one could you hold that position? It looks like a car accident or a Goya print." I denied this reading and I would always say no, it's the relationship between a body, wall and a plank. [transitional sound]

2 - Future Fragment

Future fragment on a Solid Base, 2011

Future fragment is a large and solid aluminum leg on a solid aluminum base. Aluminum is light but this sculpture is heavy. Is the future heavy and the past light? Is it the other way around? *Future fragment* was once an entire figure modeled off a toy action figure that was found lying in the street.

Schwarzenegger had just become governor of my home state of California. I was interested in the heroic and barbaric fantasy of this little muscle-bound hero but I could not get the sculpture to feel real until I realized the leg of my larger-than-life-size figure was appearing from my future. It was a fragment from a sculpture made across the galaxy. [transitional sound]



Shoe tie, 2012

Shoe tie is also solid but it is milled from stainless steel. When I was walking in the Santa Monica mountains a few hours before the sun came up I bent over to tie my shoe. As I performed this simple act I remembered the folk rule : in the mountains never bend over to retie your shoe. Lift your foot on a rock or tree stump, tie the knot while upright to avoid a fatal mountain lion attack on the vertebra of the back of the neck.

While I squatted on the ground my neck bent and exposed as I tied my shoe, I had the thought that if I was killed by a lion and became a ghost I would not need a shoe to tie, the simple gesture would be the haunting. [transitional sound]

All My Clothes, 1973

All my clothes is a series of snapshots of my entire wardrobe as it was in 1973. The clothes change from picture to picture and you may think that I stay the same, but I'm not so sure. [transitional sound]

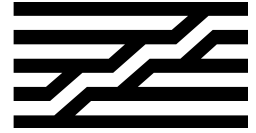
Fall '91, 1992

Fall '91 is affectionally called "the big lady". Is she a big lady or are you a small viewer? Hallucinogenic drugs are often depicted with distorted colors, loss of focus of shape form and space, but like Caro's *Early One Morning*, structure remains crisp, clear and solidified.

There is no distortion of form or relations of parts: a nose, a shoe, eye, hand or dress, all remain in exact portion to each other. But as you approach she grows while you shrink. It is space itself that becomes distorted. If early one morning I turned space itself to a shrinking and expanding accordion the drug itself as in *Fall '91* was simply the viewer's approach. [transitional sound]

Family Romance, 1993

During the election cycle of 1992, "family values" became a rallying call of liberal and



conservative debates. There is a traditional hierarchy in the family that runs from the father, to the wife and down to the youngest child. This hierarchy seems proportional to the family members scale. My sculpture brings the parents down and the children up. They find an equality at four feet, two inches. But amongst these shifting scales and disturbing politics, one can find meaning in the juncture of the hands.

It is the relationship of parts that holds these figures together. [transitional sound]

3 - Yes and No

Yes, 1990

For a number of years, I wondered how I could push my subjective state out into the objective world. *Yes* was initially titled *From the Subjective to the Objective* and it began as an abstract drawing. It slowly took the form of a photographic portrait held in relationship to the room it was in.

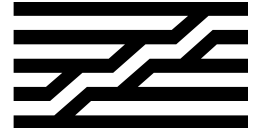
I took a dose of LSD and when I was hallucinating and the room was breathing, I had a portrait photographer take my picture. I then had a company produce a large sheet of curved glass. A carpenter built a curved frame and a construction team built a wall in the very room I was photographed in and the portrait fits perfectly on the curved surface of the wall. When you enter the room, the portrait and the wall appear straight, while the two side walls illusionistically bend outward. Many of the most interesting and important aspects of our life are in our peripheral vision.

I named this work “Yes” because when I made it, President Regan and his wife were waging a war on drugs. The rallying call was “Just say NO.” A hallucination, like the burning bush, is affirmative. While delusion is always in the negative.

[transitional sound]

No, 1992

Is *No* a portrait of me, or of infinite regress? *No* is the second photographic portrait of the artist in this exhibition. It is the opposite of *Yes*, it perceives inward rather than



outward. I wanted to make a portrait of myself, but genre always seemed to get in the way. This portrait is in the style and size of an “Employee Of The Month” photograph hanging in a department store. But it’s actually a portrait of a plastic dummy, made in my likeness. Before you can read the portrait, you fight the genre of professional photography. And if you can move through that, you still do not arrive at me. A professional photographer took a photograph of a plastic likeness of the subject, even choosing the photographic backdrop paper.

An ancient philosopher was once asked by a student, “What does the world sit on?” and the philosopher answered, “The back of a turtle.” And the student asked, “What does the turtle sit on?” and the philosopher answered, “the back of another turtle.” And when the student asked the question for a third time, the philosopher answered “It’s turtles all the way down.” [transitional sound]

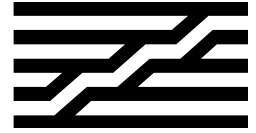
4 - *Hinoki*

Hinoki, 2007

Highway One runs north and south along the California coast. While driving from Los Angeles to San Francisco, I came across a fallen oak embedded in a field off this road.

Bugs had eaten out the heartwood, a storm then toppled the tree. To my eye, it had been on the ground perhaps thirty years. The side of the tree laying on the ground had deteriorated. The log, for the most part was still intact. I felt as if it would collapse in five or six years.

I was drawn to the field that the log was in, and then to the tree itself. Finally, I found a trajectory that seemed theological in its spatiality. This was the great empty chamber within the tree itself.



Over the next months, I returned several times to photograph, study and think about the structure. It seemed impossible to remove from this location. Not only was it embedded in the ground, but also in the space all around.

A winery owned the land and I inquired if I could make a mold of this great natural structure. They said “No.” I asked if I could buy the tree and remove it from the site. They said “No” to this as well.

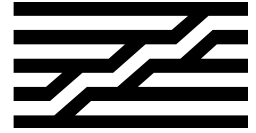
Eventually, I returned with trucks and workers and in broad daylight, cut the tree into many pieces and brought them south to my studio in Los Angeles.

Some of the pieces were so rotten they just broke in half. I had internal and external structures and surfaces, scrambled shapes, forms and sections, a mind-boggling jigsaw puzzle.

For a number of years, I took silicone molds of all the parts, cast them in fiberglass and slowly but surely reassembled the structure. I knew this sculpture’s armature would be pneuma. For years, external pressures of wind, rain, bugs and UV had brought inward pressure and deterioration. The log was returning to the ground.

I thought if I made or constructed a very large inflatable, not a balloon, but an inflatable that captured each and every aspect of its structure, coincided with its interior and exterior. My armature could be a reverse of the natural processes. Breath, air, would push out against the forces that had been pushing in. Pneuma, breath, air, is also the word of God. Not being overly religious, I found that an inflatable would be so detailed that it would simply become a feat of its own construction. I was at a loss what to do until I realized that intentionality and the very making of a structure was itself pneuma.

It certainly involved my breath, if not the breath of God. I finished my fiberglass pattern, an exact replica of the fallen tree, cut it into large barrel shapes and shipped it off to Osaka, Japan, where the master woodcarver Yuboku Mukoyoshi and his team carved the log into hinoki, the sacred wood of Japan. They carved the inside and the outside.



The details of their work brought a monumentality to the structure. The sculpture took so many years to make and the fact that it was carved by Yuboku, makes me feel that this is a Japanese work of art. [transitional sound]

5 - Puzzle Bottle

Puzzle bottle, 1995

Puzzle bottle is near how a table works both at the far end of the exhibition.

They exist in different realms. Pull the cork on puzzle bottle. I cannot really speculated what will happen to the figure. It was built in puzzle parts creating the primary meaning of the sculpture. What is first thought of its primitive or primary shifts and becomes secondary or emergent as a sculpture moves through time? The meaning of the sculpture shifted when I imagined pouring the space out onto the floor.

[transitional sound]

Sitting on the floor nearby *Puzzle bottle* is a sculpture titled *How a table works*. A table is four sticks and a piece of wood until you place an object on its top.

It has work to do and this work is in the social realm rather than the physical.

How a table works is made of only three elements. A table, the still life and the structure that holds it all together. [transitional sound]

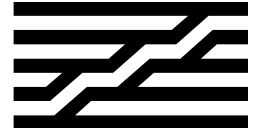
Mime, 2014

Sleeping mime is made of wood. carved in japan with my attempt to bring the craft or art of miming to the level of the craft or art of wood carving. Is the mime sleeping or miming sleep? Are the Japanese craftsmen carving or simply dreaming?

[transitional sound]

School Play, 2014

My fabricator, Mark Rossi's child, is named Abel Rossi. He was the model both for the



New Beetle and a few years later, *Boy with Frog*. Several years later, during his high school years, my wife showed me a snapshot of Abel performing in the school play.

My sculpture charts the complexities of surface, both physical and social, an older boy, slightly jaded. A bed sheet toga and plastic sword, t-shirt and contemporary sandals brought him on to this high school stage. Solid stainless steel, a robotic hand, a sculpted toga with its knot so clearly tied by a mother or a teacher.

A toy sword, a minor role and the boy's ability to project himself out of the school and into the world is captured or converted through the complexity of identity, society, imagery and abstraction. [transitional sound]

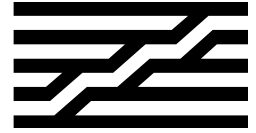
6 - Huck and Jim

Huck and Jim, 2014

Huck and Jim, two literary characters out of Mark Twain's novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, are part of, if not controversially, the literary curriculum of American secondary schools. It is a novel we all read, and like the Mississippi River, it is embedded in our culture. Jim is a runaway slave, and Huck, fleeing an abusive father, and a well-intentioned Mrs. Watson, escape down the Mississippi River on a makeshift raft.

The work was originally commissioned for the Whitney Museum of American Art. The bond between a white boy and an African American slave fleeing for his freedom down a highway that is a river, both geologically and socially, encounters one adventure after another. It is a spatial book and it is the American version of Homer's *Odyssey*.

This sculpture doesn't illustrate, but is sculpted around a moment in Chapter 19. Huck and Jim ponder the infinite number of stars spread out across the milky way, reflected in the river itself. Jim ponders that the stars were created and Huck thinks that they simply always were, too many to have been made. Who could have made



them? And Jim, he says: "The moon, she laid them". Huck, having seen frogs lay their eggs, an infinite number in rivers of spermatoa, causes him to think that he reckons this could be so.

My sculpture charts two gestures: Huck, a boy with a lung full of joy, reaches into the river to scoop up frog eggs. Jim, a young man, his hand tentatively hovering over Hucks back, looks out at the world with anxiety. He understands the greater implications of their voyage and escape.

[jingle of the show] It was a Centre Pompidou podcast. You can find all our podcasts on the Centre Pompidou website, its listening platforms and social networks. See you soon with the next podcast! [jingle of the show]

Credits

Production: Delphine Coffin

Voice: Charles Ray

Editing: Léo Chardron

Mixing and recording: Ivan Gariel

Sound design: Sixième son

Practical information

www.centrepompidou.fr/en

www.centrepompidou.fr/en/visit/accessibility