

Insofar as the figure is shown sleeping (or pretending to sleep), the suspension of visual perception and by extension consciousness, a condition of darkness or even temporary blindness, is also implicit in *Mime*.²⁹ (These conditions link the sculpture to the genesis of *Shoe tie* as well.) It is thus not simply the closure of eyes but rather “the total kinesthetics of the sculpture that links to sleep or wakefulness” that is evident in the figure’s holding and releasing of tension at the same time.³⁰ With his innate potential for bodily movement, gesture, and touch, the figure of the mime, especially presented as sleeping, underscores the importance of other modes of sensorial engagement in the creation and understanding of the sculpture.

The making of *Mime* offers yet another way of considering how tactility operates in Ray’s practice: through his approach to materials. Using the same pattern, the artist simultaneously produced cypress wood (fig. 28) and aluminum iterations, which he understands not as merely two different versions of the same sculpture, but as separate sculptures altogether. Their material differences necessitated a distinct arrival at form. In the case of the former, master wood-carver Yuboku Mukoyoshi and his workshop in Osaka chiseled laminated timbers of Japanese cypress (hinoki). For the aluminum sculpture, robotic hands made the various parts that would eventually be mechanically fastened together, with seams still visible, to form the finished work. Both were made through the subtractive processes of carving and machining, with tools—ranging from manually wielded chisels to digitally deployed instruments—serving as extensions of the human hand to excise matter. These shared principles aside, Ray is also alive to the transformations that arise from different conditions of creation, which may also explain why he sees the works as discrete. In discussing the wood *Mime*, Ray acknowledged the kinship between material and conceptual processes: “Carving, too, can be a kind of miming. . . . Both crafts carve so close to the surface of their topology. A slip of the carver’s hand is a stumble in a mime’s performance. . . . I broke the boundary . . . by superimposing the craft of my subject upon the craft of making. This exchange of crafts is the *meaning* of the work.”³¹

In this intertwining of making and material toward the production of meaning, with no element, no detail too minor for consideration, Ray draws upon lessons learned from his deep study of archaic sculpture. He describes the haptic as formational in the creation of ancient kouros figures (fig. 29), observing that the process of gradually using successively smaller and finer punches eventually brought about “a democracy of parts because you have to build the whole thing all the way around in the third dimension. And that comes not just from its materiality but also from its making, which is so directly connected to its material.”³² In other words, through its making, the potentiality of material, of matter, is made active, i.e., it is in its mattering that the object is set in motion through time by the (extended) hand of the sculptor, suspending or deferring fixed meaning, which



Fig. 29. Statue of a kouros (youth). Greek, Attic, ca. 590–580 B.C. Marble, 76 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 20 $\frac{5}{16}$ x 24 $\frac{7}{8}$ in. (194.6 x 51.6 x 63.2 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Fletcher Fund, 1932 (32.11.1)



Fig. 30. Plaster pattern of *Mime* (pl. 17) on an army cot in front of Ray’s baled Chevy pickup truck in his studio, 2013

lies perennially on a horizon that may be seen but not be fully grasped.

In a photograph from Ray’s studio, the pattern of the human model that formed the basis of the *Mime* sculptures is placed on a real camp bed in front of the artist’s mechanically crushed Chevy pickup truck—itsself the basis for another sculpture (fig. 30). This pairing simultaneously gestures toward implied futurities of the finished works and shared premises in sculptural conception—the latter indicating an understanding of carving as a tangibly directed manipulation of space through the displacement of material.³³ The role of touch thus emerges subtly, even obliquely, but pervasively, as informing the formal and conceptual conditions that intertwine in Ray’s processual arrival at sculptural form. During a recent conversation, Ray shared a photograph of another sculpture in progress, showing a hand grasping a beer can. As with *Handheld bird* or even with the hand of *Mime* (fig. 31), this sample may one day be a finished work itself, but for now it remains brimming with sculptural potential.³⁴ “Have you ever squeezed the space out of an empty can? Where does the space go? This simple action is the beginning of my sculpture.”³⁵



Fig. 31. Charles Ray. *Study for a sleeping mime*, 2012. Aluminum, 4 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 12 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 7 in. (10.8 x 31.8 x 17.8 cm). H. Gael Neeson Collection



Sculpture in a Cultural Square

Charles Ray in Conversation with Hal Foster

Hal Foster

How did you and the curator, Kelly Baum, decide on which pieces to include in the show?

Charles Ray

Kelly wanted to include work from every decade: starting from the 1970s, when I was young, the '80s, '90s, and into this century. Kelly had a wish list; I added to it. She took away from it, and I did too.

Do you see these pieces as representative of each decade? Are they exemplary? "Prime objects"?

I don't believe in prime objects per se. There are more popular works and less popular, but that changes. And at different times and in different ways I have a different relationship to the work. The selection was also complicated by what was available. Before the pandemic my shows at the Centre Pompidou and Bourse de Commerce and at The Met were a year apart. Now they're a month apart, so work in Paris can't be shared with The Met and vice versa.

There are two big galleries (fig. 33). How did you decide on the ensembles of pieces? The arrangement isn't chronological.

Initially I had a room downstairs off the Greek and Roman galleries. It connects two areas of the museum,

and Kelly and her department chair, Sheena Wagstaff, liked that conceptually. We were going to extend the show throughout the whole museum. Sometimes I was for this and sometimes I was against it. Eventually we moved the show upstairs into its current location.

So why these particular pieces in these particular groupings?

Kelly saw *Huck and Jim* (2014; pl. 7) and *Sarah Williams* (2021; pl. 18) as anchors to the show. That desire positioned *Huck and Jim* in the first room and *Sarah Williams* in the second. The other works, while orbiting these two sculptures, were positioned according to a visual poetics. There wasn't a hard conceptual blueprint or thesis. I did want to have *No* (1992; pl. 1) at the entrance. It's an older work, a color photograph of a sculpture of me. I saw it as a didactic to the exhibition. You have to pass through that sculptural photograph to enter the show. When I made it, I was thinking about the impossibility of expression. I was a young artist trying to do a self-portrait, but the genre was in the way. Actually photography itself was in the way. I didn't take the picture—I brought the sculpture to a photo studio that did weddings and head shots and I told them, "Just do a standard portrait of this." They chose the blue background curtain. I look like an employee of the month!

Fig. 32. *Boy with frog* (pl. 9) installed at Punta della Dogana, Venice, 2011





