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Historiography in a Visual Form: Charles Ray's Dog and Mountain Lion

The *Dog and Mountain Lion* by Charles Ray is a sculpture that evokes a strong emotional reaction to a graphic, yet cinematic scene of a mountain lion feasting on a dog. Ray's use of silver and the sculpture's small scale draws the attention of viewers, while simultaneously painting a picture of crime, strife, and pity. The "Dog and Mountain lion" is 3.5 feet long and less than 2 feet high¹, and is shown in a gallery context. This work was created using a casting method and exists in two other materials and one larger scale. Ray's work acts as historiography presented as visual art rather than writing. He uses his work to create a new experience and stronger reaction while referencing both the greek sculpture of *Lion Attacking Horse* from the Capitoline museums, and Barthélemy Prieur's *Lion Devouring Doe*.

Historiography is the writing of history based on other critical examinations of related sources, and discussions on that topic.² Ray's sculpture functions as a new take on works that were prevalent pieces of art history. He was particularly interested in Barthélemy Prieur's *Lion Devouring a Doe*, and notes that the food chain as the topic of Prieur's work was meaningless, instead "meaning is emergent from it, rather than it from meaning."³ Ray sees the work as the derivation of a complex idea, rather than what it may seem upon first glance. "It's interesting to travel up and down a temporal food chain and try to see the greater abstraction in this terrifying

¹Loos, Ted. "Charles Ray, Walking a Fine Line With a Hungry Lion." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 13 May 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/05/13/arts/design/charles-ray-sculpture-matthew-marks-gallery.html.

²"Historiography." *Collegiate Dictionary. Merriam-Webster*, 2016, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/historiography>

³ Charles Ray, *Three Christs, Sleeping Mime, and the Last Supper*. Pagan Paradise, Exhibition Pamphlet, Hill Art Foundation, New York, September, 24, 2019

aspect of our sculptural existence.”⁴ As an artist, it is clear that Ray leans towards art that creates complicated images and ideas that go far beyond what a viewer initially thinks. He also references the emphasis on the “bending of space and time of [the] teeth and claws” in *Lion Devouring Horse* from the Capitoline Museums. To Ray, this work embodies a sculpture’s ability to “define gravity as a field that creates and dictates all that occurs.”⁵ He notes that both the Capitoline sculpture and Prieur’s sculpture allow the viewer to hold the image in their mind, and watch as the pieces take on their own energy and meaning. He sees the Prieur’s sculpture as sexual, yet private and intimate, while the Capitoline sculpture has a planetary and celestial energy.⁶ This relates to the material of each, the Capitoline lion and horse being made of marble, which is delicate and stands as a marker of history, while the Prieur lion and doe are made of bronze, a craft that Ray sees as parallel to clock making. He says that the work and the way it is made stands as “art’s own timeline”, meaning that it is a “delicate orchestration between what can be seen and what can be made.”⁷ This refers to how intimate the act of clock making is, as well as the simplicity yet underlying complexity of the material. These observations and ideas influenced Ray’s own *Dog and Mountain Lion*, as seen in the choice of a complex metal, and stand as his way to create a conversation between his work and works before his own.

Ray’s *Dog and Mountain Lion* offers a new perspective on the predator versus prey trope seen in the works he references. He considers his piece a “cinematic piece of sculpture”⁸, in reference to the sterling silver he uses as a material. The silver creates this cinematic quality to

⁴ ibid

⁵ ibid

⁶ Charles Ray, *Three Christs, Sleeping Mime, and the Last Supper*. Pagan Paradise, Exhibition Pamphlet, Hill Art Foundation, New York, September, 24, 2019; page 4

⁷ ibid

⁸ ibid

the work, while adding another layer to the work by reflecting the colors around it. Silver is also a strong metal, and emphasizes the strength in both animals being depicted. This sculpture is three and a half feet long and less than two feet high⁹, which Ray intends to close a “gap of separation between art and viewer”¹⁰ since it could easily fit into the mind of a viewer. Ray’s use of a graphic subject matter is also a stark difference from the other sculptures he referenced. In *Dog and Mountain Lion*, there is a lot of texture in the fur of both animals, their teeth are in a point of focus and are extremely sharp, and there is strength within the back legs of the lion. Ray also calls his image “pornographic”¹¹ which has a sexual connotation, but in this context he is referring to the reaction that a viewer would have when looking at the piece. Previously, the subject matter was what gave shock value to classic works. Here, Ray is able to manipulate and use the materials he wants, to add a layer to that shock, and strengthen the emotional reaction. The surrealistic quality of the piece, due to the immense detail yet glittery material, is shocking and offers a different perspective from that of Prieur’s sculpture, and the sculpture from the Capitoline museum. His work stands as another variation of these sculptures that many artists have created from many different mediums. However, his work is modern and is easier for people of this time to digest, as well as compare with works of the past. This intention is clear in the way the exhibit at the Hill Art Foundation was curated. By placing bronze renaissance pieces that are similar to his own, he encourages his viewers to think about the relation between his works and that of the past.

⁹Loos, Ted. “Charles Ray, Walking a Fine Line With a Hungry Lion.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 13 May 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/05/13/arts/design/charles-ray-sculpture-matthew-marks-gallery.html.

¹⁰ Charles Ray, *Three Christs, Sleeping Mime, and the Last Supper*. Pagan Paradise, Exhibition Pamphlet, Hill Art Foundation, New York, September, 24, 2019.;page 4

¹¹ *ibid*

Charles Ray uses his work to offer a new way to think of a classic trope used by sculptors for centuries. He inspires a conversation about the ways that materials, scale, and detail can influence the way a work is viewed, and even the energy that it may exude. On another level, this sculpture poses a question about whether the subject matter, when similar to that of others, is what makes the piece notable. It seems that the execution is what people take away with them after viewing a piece, especially upon first inspection. The work is eye catching, especially the way it is displayed in the gallery. With nothing but a tiny gold crucifix near to it, it takes up all the space in the room it is in. This allows for all the focus to be on this sculpture, and is responsible for all of the intense reactions to reactions to the piece. The work is magnificent on its own, and even more puzzling to look at, when considering that its a silver sculpture of a mountain lion killing a struggling dog. Ray's work is the embodiment of a modernized version of classic works, that also works to create a discussion about the relationship between different

aspects of sculpture and the way each part can change the way it is viewed.



Charles Ray's *Dog and Mountain Lion*



Lion Attacking a Horse from the Capitoline Museum



Lion Devouring a Doe, Barthélemy Prieur

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