VISITING DIGNITARY

SPEED WALKING WITH THE SCULPTOR CHARLES RAY

On a visit to the Met, the artist visits a favorite Greek marble relief and muses on space, breath, and heart surgery.

By Naomi Fry

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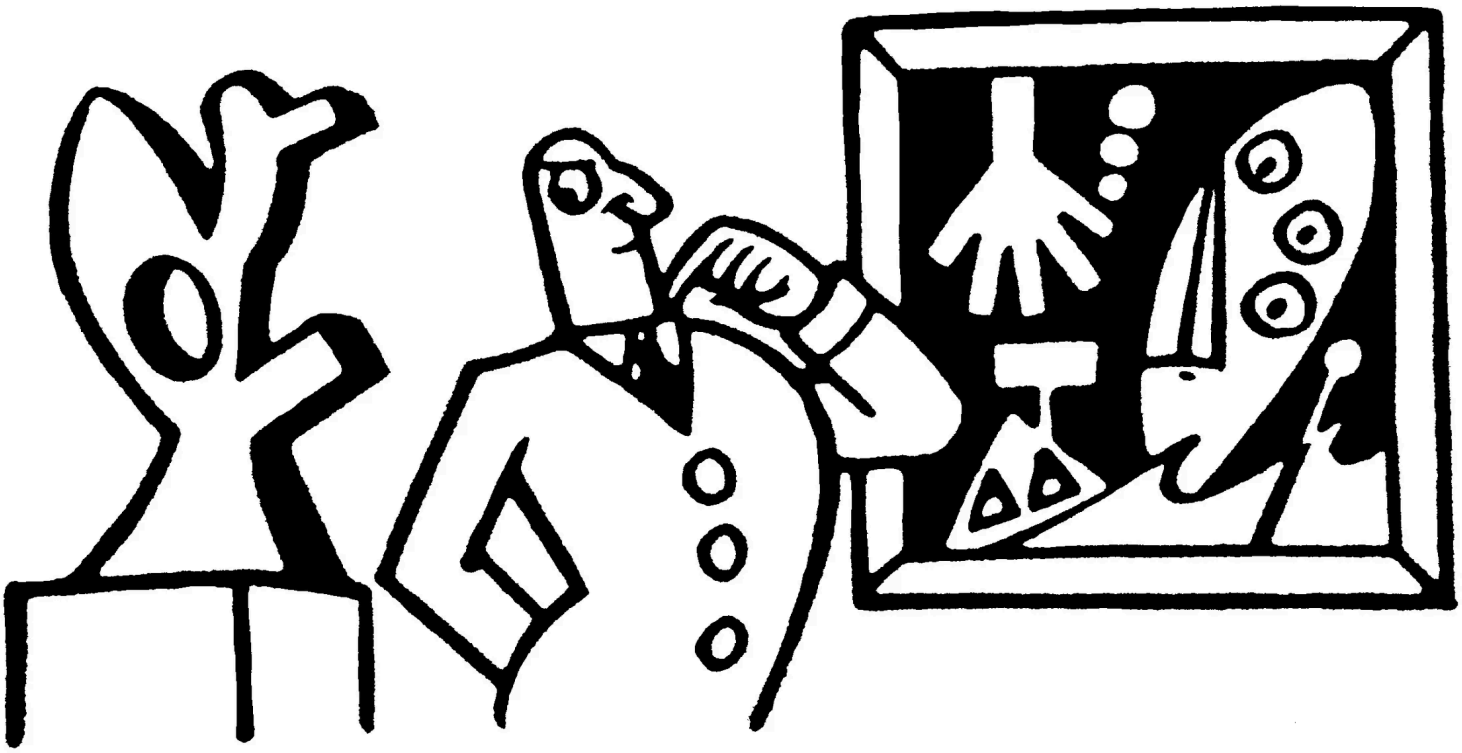

Bright and early on a recent Saturday, Charles Ray, the Los Angeles sculptor, stepped out of the Four Seasons Hotel, and walked west on Fifty-seventh Street. Ray, who is sixty-six, was in town for the opening of a show at the Hill Art Foundation, in Chelsea. At the luxuriously spare nonprofit space, his enigmatic sculptures—a life-size aluminum mime stretched on a camping bed, a sterling-silver mountain lion about to maul a dog, an apple core wrought in gold—were presented alongside Renaissance and Baroque bronzes, among them three Christs, which were selected by the artist from the collection of the hedge-fund billionaire J. Tomilson Hill and his wife, Janine. The curatorial gambit threw into relief the solemn, even spiritual quality of Ray's pieces, which can take fifteen years to complete.

Turning north onto Madison Avenue, his pace was measured but steady. "I walk a lot," he said. Fourteen years ago, his aorta was replaced during open-heart surgery, after which he started walking ten to twelve miles a day. "I get up at 2:30 A.M., leave at three, and I'm back home around 6:15, and then I have breakfast, swim for an hour, and go to the studio," he said. If there's time later, he'll walk some more. He used to walk in the dense darkness of the Santa Monica Mountains—"I had a flashlight, and it was really beautiful. I would see wild animals, even strange people"—but it made his wife, Silvia Gaspardo-Moro, nervous. Now he walks from Brentwood, where the couple lives, to the Santa Monica Pier and back. He also has a route in every major city he has shown in. "I have one in Paris, in Madrid, in Tokyo," he said. He never misses a day. "In Chicago, I have a nice route that I do along the lake, even when it's twenty below zero. You have to know how to dress."

Ray is spindly, with a mass of gray curls, rimless glasses, and the slight, kindly stoop of a man who makes an effort to meet his interlocutor halfway. Each of his sculptures involves a lengthy process of thinking and tinkering, over the course of which its materials might change, and its scale might shift. "I spent three years looking at details on a sculpture that I was working on, including a toenail," he recalled. "And I asked Silvia, 'Will anyone ever notice the slight changes I'm making to this one thing, the subtleties?,' and she said, 'No, but the meaning in these details adds up over time, like an ecosystem.' "

He went on, "There are no big revelations as you're walking, but over the yearscape the temporality of this regular action puts things in a more interesting perspective." A siren shrieked in the distance. "Sometimes I wonder, How much longer can this go on? I keep thinking, Well, I'll keep on doing this, and then I'll die, you know?" He laughed. Sculpture is similar. "It makes you see your entire temporal shape." He sketched a few quick strokes in the air, like the chalk outline of a body.

Across the street from the Met Breuer, formerly the Whitney, Ray paused. “This is my alma mater,” he said. He has participated in five Whitney Biennials. His eyes scanned the concrete façade. “For my generation, brutalist architecture meant that we had left home,” he said, “since that was the style of so many university buildings.” He began walking again, carefully skirting an overzealous jogger. The city was waking up.

On his New York route, Ray always tries to stop at the Metropolitan Museum, where he spends at least an hour looking at sculpture. It was a little after ten, and the museum was already teeming. “Lately, I’ve been trying the wings that are emptier,” he said, “like the Cyprus section.” But this time he headed toward the popular Greek and Roman galleries, where he stopped before a Greek stela memorializing the death of a child, from the fifth century B.C.

“I think this is one of the most profound pieces,” he said, taking in the carved marble figure of a girl, draped in robes, her face turned down toward two doves in her hands. “Look at the orchestrated elements of the form, in the brilliant *here-ness* of the sculpting!” His voice fell to an excited whisper. “The one part that isn’t a relief, where there’s a gap between the figure and the slab, is where the girl’s lips touch the bird’s beak!” He gestured toward the small space. “She’s dead, yes, but there’s *breath*, there’s *pneuma*, there’s *birdsong!*” He took a step back. “Looking at this makes me feel like it’s O.K. to die, because when I’m dead that space is still going to be there.” ♦

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