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*"THE BEST ART IN THE WORLD"
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Charles Ray and the Uncanny at the Met

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For over five decades, Charles Ray (born Chicago, 1938) has experimented with a wide range of methods, including performance, photography and sculpture, the medium for which he is recognized today. In the process, he has moved the tradition of Western art, modified the power of materials, and pioneered major advances in sculptural production, combining the analogical and the digital. Ray's intriguing and occasionally troubling work addresses not only art history, popular culture, and mass media but also identity, mortality, race, and gender in sometimes provocative, often resonant ways. Throughout, he has remained deeply invested in exploring the fundamental relationships between form and space, figure and ground.

Ray studied at the University of Iowa and Rutgers University, where he was exposed to a variety of artistic approaches, including mechanical sculpture, intermedia arts, and process-based performance. In 1968 he moved to Los Angeles, where he continues to work today. Situated at The Met, whose collection the artist has long studied, Charles Ray's Figure Ground invites sculptures from every period of his career with key photographs from the 1970s to explore central aspects of his oeuvre. The works have been intentionally arranged in order to forge subtle connections between objects as well as between objects and viewers. Similar to a scholar's stone, which both provokes and facilitates the process of discovery, Ray's sculpture poses many trenchant questions but answers none directly.

Please do not touch the artwork.

Huck and Jim, Charles Ray (American, born Chicago, Illinois, 1953), 2014, Stainless steel, 9 ft. 3 in. × 54 in. × 53 in. (283.2 x 137.2 x 136.5 cm), collection of Lisa and Steven Tananbaum, © Charles Ray, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

The Metropolitan Museum of Art (<https://www.metmuseum.org/>)

January 31 through June 5, 2022

By **EKIN ERKAN**, June 2022

The “uncanny”, an oft-utilized term in aesthetics and literature, has been characterized as an off-putting, eerie, shuddery feeling which we feel in response to certain perceptual phenomena. However, the necessary and sufficient characteristics that “uncanny” phenomena need to meet have long eluded theorists, making it something of a loose concept. Since the term was popularized by Freud’s now-famous essay, it has been taken to pick out an unsettling aesthetic ambivalence between that which is familiar and simultaneously unfamiliar. These aesthetic ambivalences might be unlikely coincidences—for instance, identical twins or artworks—e.g., Madame Tussaud’s waxworks—that that capture someone’s likeness. Nevertheless, likeness in and of itself is not enough for something to be “uncanny”. Where this the case, photorealist paintings would be the archetypal “uncanny” works. Indeed, there is something—something slight and marginal—which is characteristically “off” that pervades the uncanny.

This *something* has, however, been remarkably difficult for philosophers and art historians to pin down. Nicholas Royle, in diagnosing the pervasive ineffability of the “uncanny”, has remarked, perhaps all too definitively, that “the uncanny is destined to elude mastery, it is what cannot be pinned down or controlled.” If we take Royle at his word, then we might regard the uncanny as terminally inexpressible, analogous to how Justice Potter Stewart wrote of “hard-core pornography” when adjudicating the putative “obscenity” of Louis Malle’s 1958 film *Les Amants*, famously noting that while impossible to define, “I know it when I see it”. Perhaps, then, the “uncanny” ought not be approached with a definition-first purview but a functional one—i.e., an

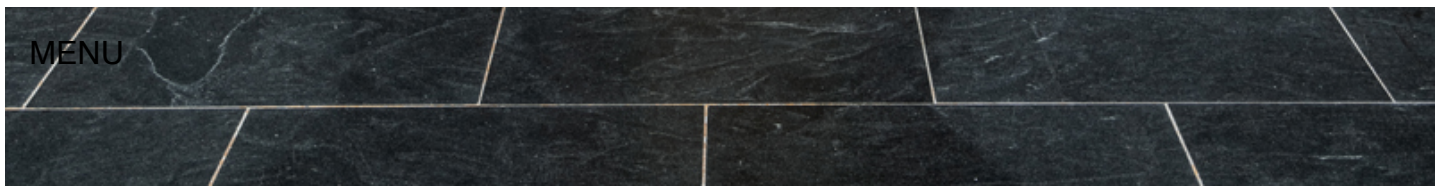
approach that inquires as to what the “uncanny” does, serves, or phenomenologically elicits? And it is this question that many of the sculptures that compose Charles Ray’s *Figure Ground* get to the heart of, with Ray utilizing the “uncanny” as an aesthetic framing device that unsettles normative imagery from their presumed sociopolitical anchor. In turn, wielded by Ray, the “uncanny” allows for a critical and speculative mode of intelligent viewing.

Ray’s Metropolitan Museum exhibition is made up of three gallery rooms that include minimalist kinetic ensembles and stand-alone pieces, installation pieces, and a series of sculptures that draw on the nuclear family and the two protagonists of *Huckleberry Finn*. These latter two sculptural works are, arguably, the most enthralling works, as they subtly toy with scale and verisimilitude to wittily instrumentalize the “uncanny” as a framing device. In one such work, *Family Romance* (1993), we are presented with four members of a family. The mannequins’ hands are outreached and interlocked, their wide stance unspooling into one another. The title alludes to an essay penned by Freud in 1909 concerning intrafamilial conflict and the apothegm “family values”, famously used by Ronald Regan and repeated by George H.W. Bush during his unsuccessful 1992 presidential campaign. Fittingly, Ray’s assemblage parodies the archetypal heteronormative family, albeit the parody is subtle. Each of the family members have blanched white skin and are the same height, suggesting a modular logic—as if the allocentric, Angle-American worldview is a recipe to be repeated ad infinitum, interwoven into the American imaginary, such that it generates the all-American white suburban family *par excellence*. Of the four painted fiberglass mannequins, the son and mother, with evenly trimmed auburn hair, center the assemblage, which is bookended by a modelesque father and toddler-aged daughter. Notably, age is revealed not via height but by proportion. Furthermore, all four sculptures are nude, with coral-pink blotched flesh and eyes poised in a wide, beady resonant stare. Neither servicing the art historical tradition of the nude, as many of Ray’s other sculptures do, nor extolling beauty, nudity here furthers the alienation-

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affect of the uncanny. In turn, the four figures feel forbidding, stony, and cult-like. This, paired with the cleaving of all four family members to the same exact height, makes the familiar and familial feel foreign.



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Charles Ray (American, born Chicago, Illinois, 1953), *Archangel*, 2021, Cypress, 13 ft. 5 . in. × 89 . in. × 45 . in. (410.2 x 227.3 x 115.6 cm), collection of the artist, courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery, © Charles Ray, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

Aside from their equivalent height and nudity what, exactly, is off about this white, suburban family, hands clasped together? While the erect stance is certainly unnatural, upon closer examination one also notices that the body proportions are slightly off and that each figure enjoys unnaturally slouched shoulders. The white, Protestant four-person nuclear family speaks to a common “imaginary” steeped in the American dream and its coeval 1950s ethos, reified by both Neocons and the more contemporary “populist” right wing. By swallowing that which is an American fixture as archetypal as “apple pie and July 4th fireworks” into the belly of the uncanny, Ray is able to make us aware of the haunting nature of that which is a looming fixture. The “perfect all-American family” is, after all, an imaginary that speaks to a racial and allocentric worldview stoked by political entrepreneurs who repeatedly cull and reinvigorate homogeneity to quell anxiety over ever-exacerbating economic inequalities. Resisting the all-too-facile urge to reduce his work to surface-level trite messaging, Ray’s dexterous art practice allows for the uncanny to take aesthetic hold and, in doing so, make us aware of the eerie and the absurd which functions as a carrying card for reifying the now-lost “good old days”.

Ray’s painted fiberglass sculpture, *Boy* (1992) draws from this same theme: a mannequin that presents the idealized codes of race, gender, sexuality, and beauty, this figure features the correct proportions. The eponymous boy is clothed in denim suspenders, bleach-white knee-high socks, and polished Stygian clogs. He is a prepubescent white male but enjoys the height of an adult male. The boy’s anachronistic clothes, hallow eyes, vacant simper, and the gun-shape that his index finger and thumb are fashioned into deprive him of the innocence associated with the traditional American idea of boyhood. Given the recent series of school shootings in America, the boy’s fingers are particularly harrowing—such is the case despite the

work was made seven years before *Columbine*. It is thus both the sociohistorical background conditions of viewing, alongside Ray's toying with height, that evokes the uncanny here. Ray's *Boy with frog* (2009) further draws on the subtleties of violence and boyhood. Again, we have a nude young boy, his back arched and stomach distended; the sculpture is achromatic and his empty eyes, crowned by a lock-tousled bowl cut, gaze blithely at a tortured frog dangling before him. Here, the uncanny is a product of the outpouched stomach and the act of tormenting a helpless creature.

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Charles Ray (American, born Chicago, Illinois, 1953), *Boy with frog*, 2009, Painted stainless steel, 96 x 29 .
 MENU × 41 . in. (243.8 x 74.9 x 104.7 cm), Philadelphia Museum of Art, Promised gift of Keith L. and Katherine Sachs, © Charles Ray, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

Boyhood and masculinity are, indeed, one of the recurrent themes in *Figure Ground*. One of Ray's newer works, *Archangel* (2021), envisions the archangel Gabriel, descending onto the ground. Carved from Japanese cypress by woodworker Yuboku Mukoyoshi using a single block of laminated timber, *Archangel* presents an adult male perched atop a simple box. Although the figure's exposed torso and outstretched arms evoke a crucifixion scene, Ray uses untimely indices like rolled-up pants and flip-flops to posit him into the twenty-first century. This is one of the exhibition's more meditative and ambiguous works. One of the readings that comes to mind is the re-location of themes like sacrifice and atonement in the contemporary context. Caught in a delicate balance, the young man is visually pleasing such that the uncanny only strikes once the viewer connects his pose to Christ's martyrdom.

A number of my favorite works in this show find Ray plucking scenes from Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. One such example is *Huck and Jim* (2004), which interprets a moment from the book where the two protagonists debate the origin of the stars as they sit afloat a raft travelling down the Mississippi river. The figures are presented in twice their would-be life-size dimensions—in turn, the uncanny presents itself once again, vis-à-vis dimensionality. Huck bends forward to pick up an invisible object while Jim, stoic and staid, stares into the distance, his hand lingering an inch over Huck's back. Ray has long explored the nude figure since his working the 1980s, and here, contra *Family Romance* and *Boy with frog*, invokes the homoerotic, speaking to the already-present carnal undertones of Twain's book. The choice to not let Huck and Jim touch is most effective and also speaks to the racial issues at hand: notably, although vagabonds wanted by the law and bound together by a delicate erotic girding, Huck and Jim are never equals in the eyes of anonymous passersby. Similarly affecting and equally amorous is Ray's *Sarah Williams* (2021). This piece reinvents a moment from chapter 10 of the novel, where Jim assists Huck in disguising himself as a woman before setting off to gather information about the search underway for the duo. Huck assumes the moniker and persona of "Sarah

Williams” to trek incognito. This is but one of the implicit queer elements interwoven in *Huckleberry Finn* that Ray makes explicit. Jim is again positioned close to Huck, kneeling behind him with a thread and fishhook in palm, preparing to adjust the hem of the dress. The thread and fishhook act both serve as a bridge between the two bodies, although Jim’s explicit position as physical laborer—and implicit physical position as “buggerer”—again speak to racially-coded disparities.

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Charles Ray (American, born Chicago, Illinois, 1953), Sarah Williams, 2021, stainless steel, 94 1/8 × 31 x 68 . in. (239.1 x 78.7 x 173.4 cm), collection of the artist, courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery, © Charles Ray, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

It is notable that, although not at first evident why, Ray cites Anthony Caro as his primary artistic inspiration. After all, Caro works in a domain analogous to architecture, setting up geometric assemblages made up of industrial objects. There are no humans that populate Caro's work: Caro's oeuvre consists of a cold, metal puzzle of structures, with pieces like *Dream City* (1996) redolent of an engineer's deserted, rusted playground. Nevertheless, while Ray has a penchant for populating his exhibitions with people—however strangely configured their proportions and stances may be—he, like Caro, is interested in setting up an assemblage. Both Caro and Ray toy with proportion, positioning, and relation. Furthermore, both artists tether items together to bedaub the entire assemblage in an ethereal patina. Such is the case with how, in both *Huck and Jim* and *Sarah Williams*, Ray transforms two characters into one structure. This is achieved via a haptic link in the first instance and negative space in the former (i.e., the thread and fishhook). Rather than the surface-level interest in materiality, it is a keen sensitivity to the relation between bodies that Ray picks up from Caro.

Figure Ground also includes a number of Ray's more minimal works and object studies, such as *Chicken* (2007), *Handheld bird* (2006), and *Hand holding egg* (2007). In turn, it is a genuine tour-de-force through the last three decades of Ray's cannon. But it is, specifically, those pieces where Ray makes tactful use of the canny as an aesthetic framing device that his work is most enduring. For these are the works that make us question our background conditions and unexamined ideological underpinnings, therein encouraging reflective and intelligent viewing. **WM**



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