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When I first walked into the Hill Art Foundation, *Godflower* was the first work I saw. It was right in the center of the room and large, reaching from the ceiling to the floor. I felt dwarfed and awed by this artwork. As the meetings went on, I had many opportunities to look over and study it. It is a really interesting depiction of a flower given that it contrasts most depictions of flowers. An example of this would be botanical drawings, which are mostly concerned with capturing the flower's structure. The piece brings to mind questions regarding the artist's decisions regarding the color and composition as well as the intentions behind the overall piece. What contributions can this piece have to art and to the viewer?

Godflower by Charles Ray is an ink drawing of a flower measuring seven feet and three inches tall by five feet three inches wide. The flower takes up the entire space of the page. It has eleven yellow petals with a blue circular center. The petals are shaped like tear drops and extend outwards from the center. The stem and leaves are red. The stem is thin and wispy, seeming to be made with a single, long, line. The left leaf is shaped like an elongated paisley while the one on the right curls up and inward towards the center. The piece has asymmetrical balance. This is seen in the balance of the petals as the left side has five petals while the right has six, how the right leaf curls more inwards, and how the stem goes towards the left at the end. The piece also has a triadic color scheme with the colors yellow, red, and blue, the three primaries, which are further accentuated by the bare page. *Godflower* is very organic in shape, and contains many curved edges and curvilinear shapes. There are no rectangular shapes or sharp lines present. Charles Ray also uses negative space to depict another flower within the flower, which can be seen in between the yellow petals.

The artist of *Godflower*, Charles Ray, is a contemporary sculptor, revered today for breaking the boundaries of sculpture and introducing a new idea of what sculpture truly is. He has introduced sculpture as something that could undermine the viewer's perceptions of reality. Some instances of these would be his earlier abstract works *Ink Box*, *Ink Line*, *Rotating Circle*, and *7½-Ton Cube*. His sculptures also incorporate the concept of time, wanting to depict its futility and also for it to transcend time, as seen with *Hinoki*.¹ Ray's sculpture is more well known and prominent in his body of work, but he also creates drawings. *Godflower* is not his only drawing, but it is one of the rare few. This is due to the fact that these drawings were never meant to be for the public eye. The flowers were more of a piece for himself, as an indulgence. "They're colorful. I use them as an instant armature to engage with color, indulge in color. For me they are a kind of artistic location, or mental location, where I can begin without overthinking things. What's at stake in my sculptures is different from what's at stake in the flower drawings."

² Based on this statement, it is clear that Charles Ray does not regard his drawings as highly as his sculptures. His specifically stating that the sculptures have "different stakes" demonstrates how he puts more effort into creating sculpture than drawings. The sculptures are time consuming, and require much more in depth planning. The process is tedious, as he has to create a fiberglass model, adjusting until it is right, and then use a machine to carve out the sculpture in solid steel. Effort is also added to making the artwork have the desired impact. An instance would be *Firetruck*, made in 1993. The work is a toy firetruck scaled up to be life size, meant to make people question their reality and perception of objects. Though this doesn't decrease the

¹ Calvin Tomkins, "Meaning Machines." *New Yorker*, May 4, 2015.
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/05/11/meaning-machines>

² Charles Ray, "A Sculptural Differential: Charles Ray," interview by Zachary Cahill, *Mousse Magazine*, (December 2013-January 2014), <http://moussemagazine.it/zachary-cahill-charles-ray-2013/>.

value of his flowers as art, it establishes them as something less calculated as opposed to Ray's other works. Thus the lesser calculations indicate that he did not intend to show these works to the public and were instead a more private indulgence. Charles Ray mentions multiple times how these flowers are not meant to be serious. He describes the process as "very haptic, in that it's centered on the experience of doing it, in the moment"³ and states that his flowers are "certainly an engagement with life, too—they're sensual, they're in front of me, I'm making decisions—but they're instantaneous."⁴ Both of these statements indicate that Ray views the creation of his flowers as something enjoyable and relaxing. Their spontaneous quality is something that contrasts the calculated sculptures he makes.

The loose wild quality of the flowers are an indicator of nature, as nature can be unpredictable and spontaneous itself. Godflower, though more tame when compared to his other drawings, still demonstrates this quality. When he was a child, and as an adult currently, he exposes himself to nature as seen in his interview with *Purple*. He stated, "I've sailed almost every day for the last ten years. How I live, taking advantage of being outdoors, getting up early, going to bed early, thinking about things, the openness of space — all those things have influenced my work."⁵ As established, Ray's flowers are meant to be a loosening of sorts for him. Being exposed to nature has allowed for Ray to be more open and natural, to be more appreciative of the things that nature has to offer. This attitude can be demonstrated through his depiction of nature, which seems like gratitude. He does this not only with his flowers, but also with his sculptures, as seen with *Hinoki*. His teen years in military school provided a contrasting

³ Charles Ray, "A Sculptural Differential: Charles Ray," interview by Zachary Cahill, *Mousse Magazine*, (December 2013-January 2014), <http://moussomagazine.it/zachary-cahill-charles-ray-2013/>.

⁴ Charles Ray, "A Sculptural Differential: Charles Ray," interview by Zachary Cahill, *Mousse Magazine*, (December 2013-January 2014), <http://moussomagazine.it/zachary-cahill-charles-ray-2013/>.

⁵ Charles Ray, "Charles Ray," interview by Alex Israel, *Purple*, 2011, <https://purple.fr/magazine/ss-2011-issue-15/charles-ray/>.

experience. He described this as a horrible period which was responsible for giving him a “very rigid set of rules regarding how to behave.”⁶ This controlled and calculated nature factors into the creation of his flowers. After all, the flowers provide an outlet to let loose and relax, an experience that is vastly different compared to his process for creating sculptures.

Godflower is an outlier in the Hill Art Gallery, the only drawing among sculptures, and it was also the only abstract depiction of a living thing. It only uses three colors and three main shapes, yet it is able to convey its subject instantly. However, the main reason I was attracted to *Godflower* was because it depicted a flower. The reason I love flowers is simply because they are beautiful. I like beautiful things and to me, *Godflower* was one of the most beautiful artworks in the gallery. I also questioned the meaning behind this piece. I was conflicted on whether this piece had any significance. With the context of the name “*Godflower*”, it could be assumed that the flower was meant to be a representation of a holy being. The primary colors the drawing is composed of are the foundation for everything in art, just as how God is considered to be the foundation for everything in life. Furthermore, the fact that it is a single flower could be correlated to the Christian belief in only one God. The size may also be a factor, given that God is considered to have immense power and strength. Each of these points are also supported by the context of the exhibition, which has a theme of Christianity and religion.

I had the honor of meeting Charles Ray himself and asking him about the meaning of *Godflower* and its overall significance in the gallery. What he told me was out of my expectations but should have been foreseen in hindsight. The name *Godflower* was just an afterthought, something that Charles Ray thought of in the context of the entire exhibition. The

⁶ Charles Ray, “A Sculptural Differential: Charles Ray,” interview by Zachary Cahill, *Mousse Magazine*, (December 2013-January 2014), <http://moussomagazine.it/zachary-cahill-charles-ray-2013/>.

piece had no name originally, so the name only has significance in this exhibition. Furthermore, the reason he included it in the conference area was because he wanted it to act as a poster. The piece had no “meaning”. However, the whole point of the piece was to have no meaning in a sense. Charles Ray stated that the piece existed as a being in itself. He argued that art is not what the artist intends for it to be. To him, art starts with an idea, but it does not stay that way. It develops and evolves as time goes on, to the point that it may be unrecognizable from the original concept. Sometimes, he stated, even the own artist has no idea what the art has become. This is what he considers to be art, as something alive that grows and changes. To support his claim, Charles Ray also brings in the point that art is shaped by the culture around it using *Kouros*, an archaic Greek statue depicting a young man. He states that the artist didn’t really have a plan on what the sculpture would look like in the end. Instead, they started carving away, hoping that there would be a good outcome. He argues how the sculptor created it this way because that was how society viewed art at the time. *Godflower*, to Ray, is not a drawing but a sculpture. To him, it was something that occupied a space, and he wanted it to have a presence, and not to be seen as just iconography. He wanted to bring light to the room, as he views flowers as givers of life and energy.⁷

Despite the fact that the artwork did not originally have any symbolic meaning, intent, or hidden message, this does not mean the artwork itself was not meaningful. In fact, the artwork has a lot to contribute to art and art viewing experiences. Charles Ray did say that the artwork created itself, that it evolved into something unrecognizable. This means that the artwork is not set in stone and thus can be open to interpretation. Thus, even though my interpretation was

⁷ Charles Ray, Interview with Charles Ray, interview by Annette Garcia Jimenez, January 18, 2020.

technically not was correct, it is also not incorrect. This concept can also apply to other artworks as well, not just that of Charles Ray. This then makes the art viewing experience more personal and viewer centered, not on the artist. This can broaden people's mindsets and allow for deeper perspectives, validating everyone's opinion and perhaps even changing what art is and can be.

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