Charles Ray's "Unpainted Sculpture"

This set explores Charles Ray's *Unpainted Sculpture*, a work of art in the collection of the Walker Art Center.

About the Artwork

Nearly two years in the making, this work is a life-size fiberglass cast of a 1991 Pontiac Grand Am that was totaled in a deadly accident. Like many of Charles Ray's works, *Unpainted Sculpture* was in part the result of a chance occurrence. During a dinner conversation with a student whose car had been repeatedly involved in accidents, Ray suggested that he simply reconstruct the car's dented bumper, cast it in fiberglass, and reattach it. When another student pointed out that this would be a good idea for one of Ray's sculptures, a project was born. The artist spent more than two months searching insurance lots, looking for wrecks in which fatalities had occurred. He hoped to locate a vehicle that would transcend the

specificities of any particular accident and would therefore attain the level of a “perfect” version of a crashed car.

About the Artwork

Purchasing the wreck from an auction, Ray painstakingly took the car apart, individually casting each element in fiberglass, and reassembled it piece by piece, as if it were a model hobby kit. The entire work was then uniformly covered with two coats of gray paint. The color—like the body-shop primer normally found underneath the high-gloss finish—lends the sculpture a disinterested quality, a flatness and silence, despite the drama of the event that produced the original wreck.

About the Artwork

Ray chose as his model an object created by chance, speed, and impact—by the collision of form, material, space, and time. In a sense, the artist made the actual car disappear, transforming it into an object that not only reveals many qualities of the original, but also helps us think about opposites: the real and the ideal, representation and abstraction, stillness and movement.

About the Artist

Born in 1953 in Chicago, Charles Ray is one of seven children in a family of artists. He studied at the University of Iowa and Rutgers University in New Jersey, and now lives and works in Los Angeles, where he is a professor in the art department of UCLA.

Ray often employs subjects from popular culture and everyday experience as source materials for his sculptures: making the commonplace strange is central to his work. Since the 1970s he has used various mediums—including sculpture, photography, performance, and film—to communicate his slightly absurd take on familiar objects that surround us: tables, shelves, clocks, automobiles, department store mannequins and toys. His work reveals his exacting attention to detail and often raises questions about what is real and what is abstract through shifts in size, unexpected relationships, and other effects that fool the eye. He said that he has tried to “make something that was so abstract it became real and so real that it became abstract.”

Discussion Question #1

In your opinion, is this a real car or not? Why do you think the artist titled his sculpture “unpainted” when it has indeed been painted?

Discussion Question #2

Do you think this car still echoes the tragic event that created its crumpled form, or is it now only a fiberglass object drained of any such history?

Discussion Question #3

“I don’t believe in ghosts but I wondered, if there were ghosts, would the ghost inhabit the actual physical molecules of the structure, or . . . if you were to duplicate the geometry, would the ghost follow?”—Charles Ray

Do you think a ghost from this fatal accident would choose to inhabit *Unpainted Sculpture*? Write what you imagine the ghost would be saying about it.

Discussion Question #4

"A good artwork causes people to think and if a sculpture is effective, it continues to work in the world, creating thoughts and feelings."—Charles Ray

How do you think this sculpture relates to American culture at the end of the 20th century?

Discussion Question #5

Select a theme below. Discuss ways that it is present in the media and popular culture. Use examples from film, television, advertising, literature, and other sources. How does *Unpainted Sculpture* reflect similar themes?

* cars as cultural icons

* fascination with speed

* prominence of violence