

# HEAD-ON

AFTER DECADES OF USING GLASS AS A MEDIUM TO CONFRONT SOCIO-POLITICAL ISSUES, IS CLIFFORD RAINEY FINALLY STARTING TO MELLOW?



*The Man Who Married the Moon, 1991. Glass, bronze, canvas, oil paint, C-clamps, charred wood. H 117, W 96, D 34 in.*

PHOTO: RYAN WATSON  
COURTESY: BULLSEYE GALLERY

BY RICHARD SPEER



**RAINEY CREATES MULTILAYERED WORK** that is redolent of a deep humanity drawn from a lifetime of far-flung travels around a world he is committed to bettering.



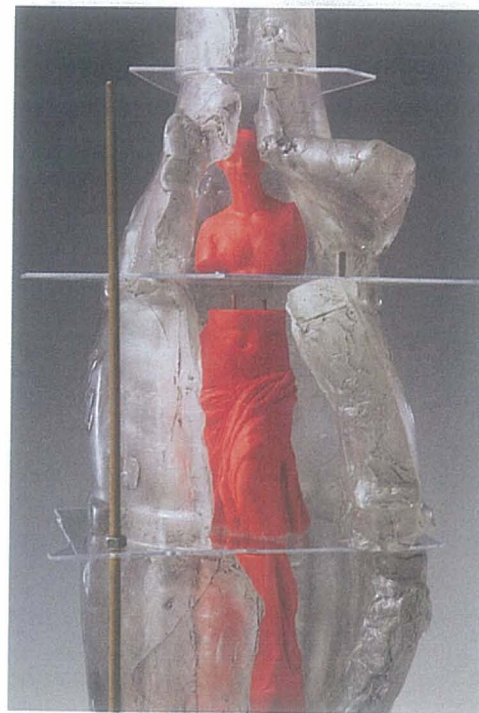
**B**ritish artist Clifford Rainey is among a handful of artists, such as Silvia Levenson and John Luebtow, who take the medium into the political realm. Walking through the exhibition rooms at the Bullseye Gallery's cavernous loft space in Portland, Oregon, where Rainey was given a midcareer retrospective in the summer of 2008, a viewer was led on an carefully lit journey through decades of cast-glass, mixed-media sculpture engaging topics as varied as globalization, cultural imperialism, the plight of Native Americans, and the troubles between Unionists and Nationalists in Northern Ireland. Throughout his career, Rainey has approached these topics with a mix of earnestness and high drama, levity and droll humor, to create multi-layered work that is redolent of a deep humanity drawn from a lifetime of far-flung travels around a world he is committed to bettering.

At 60, Rainey remains every bit the artist-activist he was in his youth, with one important difference. Whereas he has railed against injustices with an uncompromising intensity, his new work is apt to include a very subtle but discernable wink to the viewer, as if Rainey has begun to wonder whether he himself might be at least peripherally complicit in the wrongs he has spent his career seeking to right, or at least illuminate, through his artwork. Rather than taking something away from the righteous indignation that has given so much of his work the clarity of unquestioned conviction, the new work is strengthened by nuance, offering a more complex understanding that rather than undermining his message, opens it to deeper exploration.

Born in 1948 in Whitehead, Northern Ireland, Rainey hails from a family of farmers and linen weavers. As a child he made wood carvings in his maternal grandfather's shop. "I also loved drawing," he recalls, "especially animals and plants—I'd go off, find some ducks and toads, and sit down and try to draw them." He considered becoming a veterinary surgeon but decided—against his parents' wishes—to study art, and in the process became the first in his family to attend college. The summer before he enrolled at Waltham Forest College in London, he took a temporary job working on a fishing trawler in Iceland, an experience he credits with instilling in him a chronic case of wanderlust. "The combination of going to Iceland and then to London—going to the opera, the British Museum, meeting people who were well-read—it was as if in a matter of months, I became a different person. I felt like my brain was going to explode."

The ferment of the late 1960s was in sharp contrast to Waltham's traditional art program, and the young artist found himself careening between highbrow and lowbrow sensibilities, "with Henry Moore on one side and Peter Blake [designer of the Beatles' *Sergeant Pepper* album cover] on the other." Rainey found himself drawn to the natural world and created an installation called *Phototropism* (1970) in which he endeavored to coax pea plants to grow toward strategically placed lights. As part of this project he blew a tubular glass form that he subsequently cast in bronze. While at the time he was disappointed with the installation, he became intrigued with the material of glass, which he continued to explore, spending the summer of 1971 making goblets at Kastrup and Holmegaard's Glassworks in Nestved, Denmark. That summer a customer told Rainey he should return to London and study glass under Sam Herman at the Royal College of Art in London. He did so, earning a master's degree from the RCA in 1973.

In London, Rainey began working in a more experimental vein and embarked upon a period of intensive travel between terms, spending weeks or months at a time in Scandinavia, Africa, and the Mediterranean. Outfitted with little more than a backpack full of poetry books, he spent half a year island-hopping and soul-searching in Greece and Turkey, transfixed by the intensity of the light and appalled by the haphazard scattering of antique pottery and statuary he observed. In 1976, he embarked on a walking tour from Nairobi to Cape Town with what he now calls the "harebrained and arrogant" idea of studying and interacting with the native populations. As the trek progressed, he became increasingly aware of—and discomforted by—a strain of cultural imperialism within himself, with which he has been grappling in his work ever since. When you are the observer, the cultural tourist, where does interest end and exploitation begin? This train of thought intensified after he saw a 1982 Royal Academy exhibition entitled "The Treasures of Ancient Nigeria," which showcased bronze heads sculpted by Benin, Nok, and Ife artisans. The fact that many of these works had been smashed by idolatry-wary Christian missionaries made a deep impression upon him.



*Icon Fendue Rouge (detail), 2008. Glass, wood, metal. H 36, W 12, D 12 in.*

PHOTO: M. LEE FATHERREE  
COURTESY: THE ARTIST

## THE NEW WORK IS STRENGTHENED

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*Odalisque, 2007. Glass, wood, silk, gesso, pigment, peacock feather. H 20, W 42, D 21 in.*

PHOTO: M. LEE FATHERREE  
COURTESY: THE ARTIST



*The Engineer*, 1984. Glass, wood, pigment.  
H 35, W 24, D 15 in.

PHOTO: M. LEE FATHERREE  
COURTESY: THE ARTIST

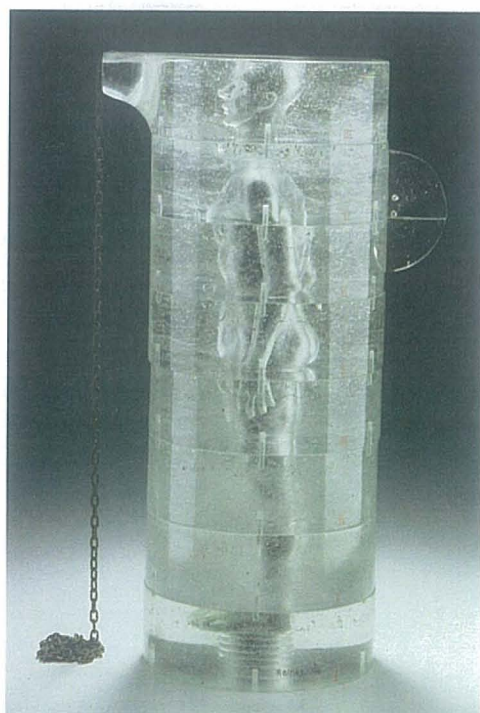
It was during one of his trips to Africa around this time that a symbol, now iconic in his work, came to him in a fashion that recalls the 1980 film *The Gods Must Be Crazy*. Parched and weary, Rainey was in Zambia hiking in the bush when a boy emerged from the brambles, offering in his outstretched hand a Coca-Cola. "He handed it to me, smiled, and walked away." Rainey commemorated the experience in a work called *Africa, The Journey of Man* (1984), one of the first pieces on display in the Bullseye exhibition. Incorporating the reds, greens, and blacks seen in many African flags, the piece also features a cast-glass Coca-Cola bottle and tree branch tied with a white cloth, harkening back to the artist's Celtic heritage, in which wanderers would tie cloths to branches, alerting subsequent travelers to a spring from which to drink. The piece quite literally ties together disparate components of Rainey's autobiography and existential concerns into a cohesive, multilayered sculpture, setting the tone for his career to this day. It also began an enduring fascination with the archetypal American soft drink.

"I have a love-hate relationship with Coca-Cola," he says. "It brings up the issue of globalization, of course, but purely as an object, it looks a bit like an Ionic column; it has all these mathematical proportions; it even looks like a female figure ..." Rainey points this out explicitly in his newer work *Icone Fendue* (2007), which presents the Aphrodite of Melos through the framing device of the iconic bottle, and in the tongue-in-cheek *Odalisque* (2007), after Ingres's famous painting of 1814. In Rainey's version, a Coke bottle doubles as the virgin slave reclining upon a tasseled pillow, a peacock feather completing the tableau. These works were a way for the artist to "lighten up and not be so serious all the time—although today I look at them and realize they were quite political in their own way." In a piece created especially for the retrospective, Rainey has created a *Map of the World* (2007) out of cast glass, reflecting his contention that valuable indigenous traditions are being replaced by rampant westernization.

Cultural desecration plays a part in a series called *Erechtheum* (2007), after the temple at the Acropolis of Athens. In the series' title piece, a lineup of Coca-Cola bottles stands like the temple's pillars, one of which was notoriously sawed apart and spirited off to the U.K. by Lord Elgin. A companion piece, *Caryatid* (1995), presents two female figures atop shipping crates, one marked "ATHENS" and the other "LONDON." But the work functions on an additional level as well, as a tribute to a friend of the artist, Elaine Mackie, who died of breast cancer in her early 30s. This piece, along with another called *Counting* (2003), is sliced in four sections, has a distressed surface, and has the breasts chipped off with carving tools, alluding not only to the scourge of breast cancer but also to Lord Elgin's crudely patriarchal treatment of the original caryatids and the Parthenon marbles that have come, notoriously, to bear his name.

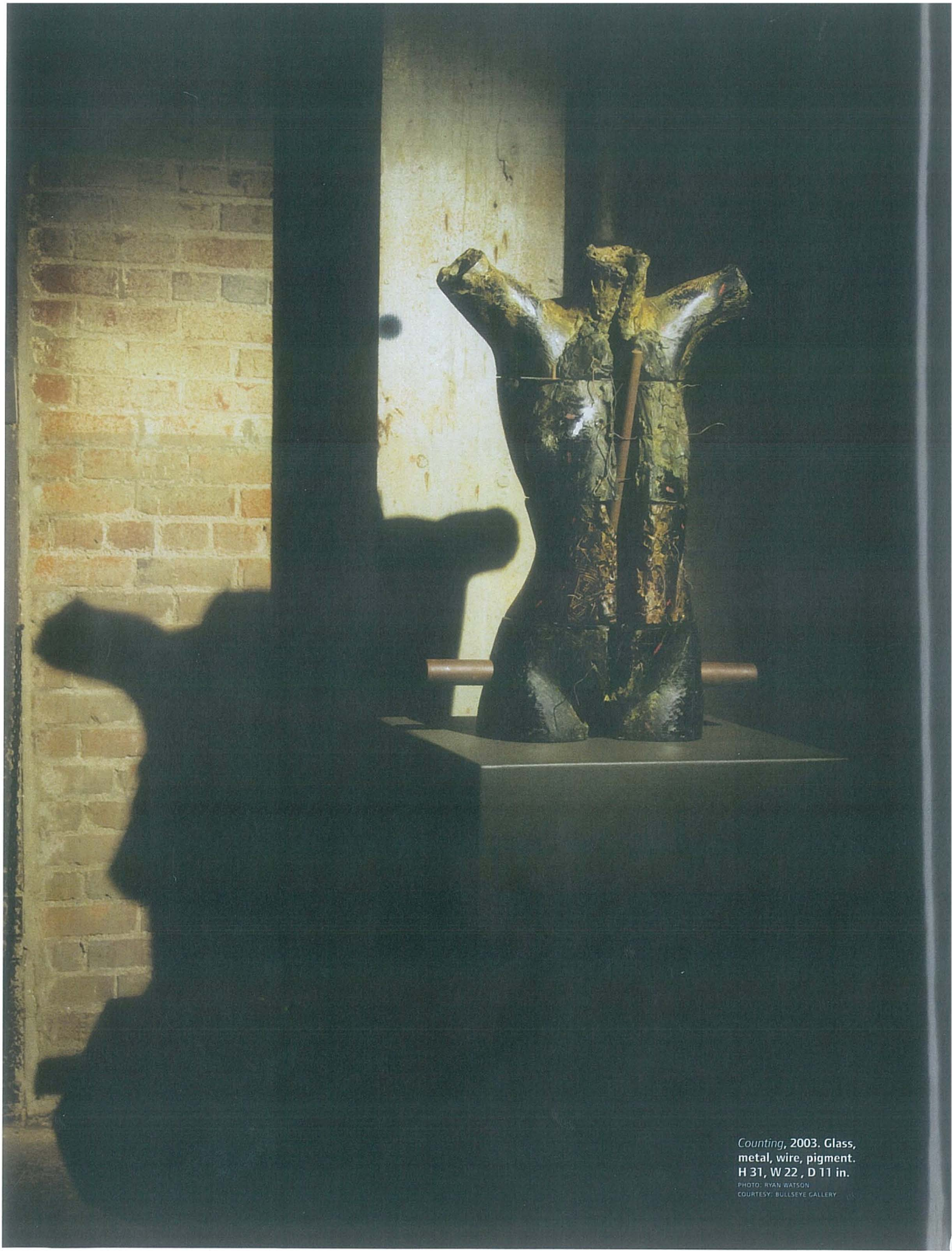
In a similar vein, *The Man Who Married the Moon* (1991) recalls the Ife bronzes that made such an impression on Rainey in his formative years. The head on the left is intact, the one on the right smashed, and between them is the casting mold itself, held together with clamps. "I know the world I live in," he says, "and I'm always trying to mend it. I use metal threads and binding wire and clamps to pull things together that are broken." In *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* (1998), he channels Gauguin in posing elemental human questions. The work, completed ten years ago as the artist was turning 50, waxes fatalistic about the ages of man. From right to left, the piece consists of an intact head modeled after Egyptian pharaohs; a head in the process of falling apart but clamped tenuously together; and a head lying on the floor, fallen off its pedestal and lying in shards.

Mortification of the flesh plays into another piece in the exhibition, *The Engineer* (1984), based on the multifarious artistic treatments of the martyrdom of St. Sebastian and the bombings in Ireland and the U.K. as part of the Catholic-versus-Protestant violence that plagued Rainey's homeland until recently. "It's about people being blown up," he says of the human figure sliced through with glass planes, an image of great violence but also of geometric beauty. In *Prism* (1990), he expresses his outrage about the atrocities rained down upon Native Americans by white conquerors. In the work, a glass wedge is being wrenched out of the solar plexus of a Native American figure, upon whose shoulder rests a coyote skull. This prism is illuminated by intense halogen light, emblematic of the artist's own agenda: illumination of injustice, examination of what has been stolen, and some form of assuagement for that which cannot be assuaged. *White Bison* (1986) is a cast of an American buffalo skull he found on a trip to Idaho. He presents



*Water Table* (commissioned by the San Francisco Art Commission for the 911 Communications Center), 1998. Glass, granite, steel, chain, small stones, water and water pump. H 54, W 84, D 42 in. Glass column, H 36, D 12 in., cast in eight segments.

PHOTO: M. LEE FATHERREE



*Counting*, 2003. Glass,  
metal, wire, pigment.  
H 31, W 22, D 11 in.  
PHOTO: RYAN WATSON  
COURTESY: BULLSEYE GALLERY

it as “a floating ghost” and places behind it a black-and-cobalt drawing of a Viking long-boat. Hauntingly, the piece contrasts “Christopher Columbus coming over, supposedly bringing enlightenment, with the people who came long before Columbus and left no footprint.” From the oppression of a people, the artist turns to the extinction of entire species in the chilling *Cry Nature Wolf* (1992). Sixteen cast-glass wolf skulls sit on clear platters, a rechargeable battery beneath each, such that the skulls dim and ultimately go dark as the viewer walks through the exhibition. The sculptures are lit, but one by one (and sometimes more than one at a time) they dim as the day continues, eventually going out.

Reacting to this harrowing piece as he walks through Bullseye’s cavernous second-floor gallery, Rainey confesses that “this show kind of floored me in a way—I got really depressed when I saw it because I hadn’t realized so much of my work was so dark and moody and brooding. It’s made me realize that when I was in my 30s and 40s, I really tried to give the work a political charge. In those days it was in-your-face. Nowadays I don’t like people preaching at me, so I don’t preach to them. The work’s meant to be more gentle and get the same concerns across, but in a more subtle way.”

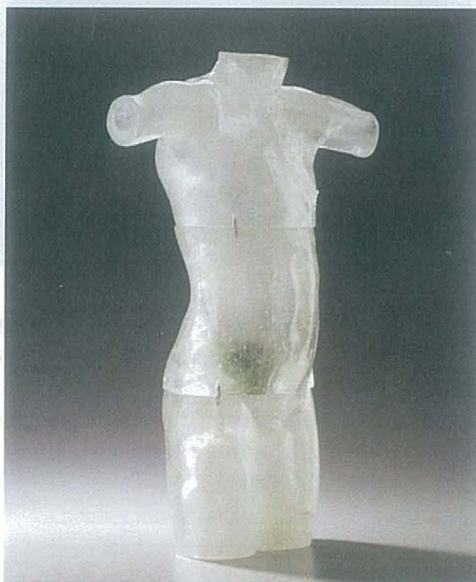
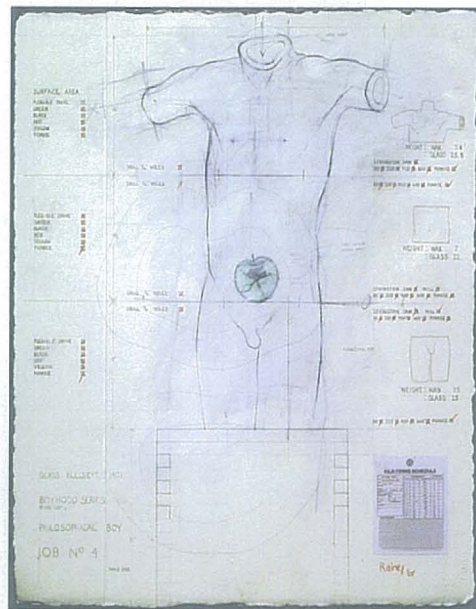
There is a certain agreeable irony in this, given the remarkable series called *Art Committee* (1995), which features 12 cast-glass penises atop a background of shiny black rubber. Subtle it is not. *Art Committee* is Rainey’s response to controversy surrounding a different series, *Boyhood* (2005), in which the artist reflects on the preoccupations of his own youth: biology, horticulture, history, and art. The works, which owe a debt to the *Kritios Boy* (circa 480 B.C.), show ephebic torsos filled with mementos. One torso is engraved with the Latin names of 200 plant species, while another, *Philosophical Boy*, has a broken apple inside, a reference both to the apple given by every good schoolboy to his teacher and to the Biblical apple given to Adam by Eve. In the United States, Rainey says, the works provoked outrage of various degrees. “I got criticized for using a young boy with a penis—people were saying it was pedophilic! I thought we were enlightened today. I thought the days of putting fig leaves on people were over.” One piece in the series, *The Water Table* (1998), was commissioned by the San Francisco Art Commission and, after much bureaucratic hand-wringing, placed in the 911 dispatch headquarters of the city’s Police Department. The sculpture incorporated water trickling down a chain, reflecting the city’s water conservation agenda. However, Rainey claims the piece was vandalized by city employees who misconstrued the chain as an endorsement of slavery and viewed the Greek-inspired torso as an allusion to pederasty. His response, then, was a tic-tac-toe board of phalluses writ large, a mischievous “Up yours!” to those who had questioned his character and toppled his artistic children.

The Bullseye retrospective comes at an auspicious time for Rainey. He has at last achieved a measure of financial success and professional renown, which he scarcely dreamed of as a young man. As chair of the glass program at the California College of the Arts, he enjoys the rewards of administering and teaching. Still, he says he yearns for a better balance between his roles as educator and practicing artist. He has bought land in the Bay Area on which he hopes eventually to build a live-work space. He also hopes to be able to live with his work—observe and adjust it—for longer periods of time before shipping it off to eager, deadline-conscious galleries across the world. Finally, he desperately wants to make art that is relevant to our times, reverent of the earth beneath us, and respectful of humankind’s foibles, his own included. “Today it’s so easy to be a hypocrite,” he says as our interview concludes. “We’re so conscious of our carbon footprint. I myself am making work about ecology and globalization, but of course there’s the dilemma that I’m working in cast glass, which makes a huge footprint ... So there’s a quandary between trying to make a living and the capitalism that’s a part of that, which I used to be totally opposed to. All of a sudden, there’s the danger of becoming a person you didn’t want to be.”

With Rainey’s willingness to examine motivations and contradictions—in others as well as in himself—this soul-searching may become grist for further work that tirelessly sifts, studies, and challenges in the hopes of posing important questions and maybe, just maybe, finding answers. ■

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RAINEY DESPERATELY WANTS TO make art that is relevant to our times, reverent of the earth beneath us, and respectful of humankind’s foibles, his own included.



*Philosophical Boy - Job No. 4*, 2005 (drawing), 2005. Glass, ceramic apple, wire, pins, gesso, maple plinth. H 43 ½, W 19, D 15 in.

PHOTO: M. LEE FATHERREE  
COURTESY: THE ARTIST