



PROTOTYPICAL POSSIBILITIES

A Detroit sculptor challenges value through 3-D printing

BY TAYLOR DAFOE

Matthew Angelo Harrison
in Detroit, 2016.

TAYLOR DAFOE

IT'S NO WONDER that a critique of post-Fordism is so embedded within Matthew Angelo Harrison's practice. Not only does he live and work in the Detroit area (the birthplace of the assembly line, which kick-started the Industrial Revolution in America a century ago), but he is currently employed by the Ford Motor Company itself. Harrison is part of a team that creates the full-scale models of futuristic-looking prototypes. So it is fitting that in his very different, parallel career as a visual artist, he employs a technology at the forefront of industrial production today: 3-D printing.

Harrison is a sculptor in the most basic sense. He studied the medium at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and indeed does craft objects that sit on the ground or on a pedestal. But he also creates the machines that create the sculptures, designing and building his own custom 3-D printers from scratch—and treating this equipment as sculpture in its own right. In exhibitions like "Detroit City/Detroit Affinities," on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (MOCAD) through January 1, he installs the 3-D printers in the gallery, where they methodically churn out the objects he's programmed them to build. In something of a Brechtian gesture, Harrison brings behind-the-scenes labor into the public spotlight, spurring an active engagement with museum visitors. The printers are only activated—figuratively and literally—when the artist himself is there to oversee them, usually after his shift ends at Ford.

I first met Matthew at MOCAD where he was checking on one of the two identical printer-sculptures, titled *The Consequence of Platforms*. He was patiently waiting for it to generate a 3-D copy of an authentic African mask, the sort of object that he frequently employs in his work. He bought this particular mask via an online auction, consciously creating a link between oft-fetishized cultural symbols and everyday commerce. Yet in other instances, his source material is much cheaper—he has made replicas of the type of

mass-produced African masks you can purchase in downtown Detroit, for example. "Once these objects are scanned for the printer, they lose their context," Harrison tells me. "It democratizes the value system." 3-D printing itself is also in the midst of a democratization. Once an extremely expensive and high-end process, it has, in the last decade, become increasingly accessible to laypeople. But Harrison's printers don't look like the consumer-ready models sold by companies such as MakerBot; his traffic more in the language of post-Minimalist sculpture than contemporary industrial

design. Each assemblage operates at a scale relative to the human body and is prismatic, composed of three-foot-long parallel poles. Both printers at MOCAD sport a marble base—one white, the other black—a layered reference to classical sculpture, architecture, and 1960s and '70s Minimalists. There is another crucial distinction at play: While most 3-D printers use plastic as their primary building block, Harrison uses clay, watered down and pumped through a compressor. (The malleability of the material also allows Harrison to alter each object as it is being produced.) Though the MOCAD outing was curated by Jens Hoffman—

Bodily Study of Unthinking Groups 1.002, 2016. Zebra skull and automotive clay, 7½ x 7¼ x 7¼ in.





*Head 1.002
(Post-Chronology
Series), 2016.
Open-cell
polyurethane
foam,
26 x 25 x 17 in.*

RIGHT:
Installation view of
"Detroit City/
Detroit Affinities" at
the Museum of
Contemporary Art
Detroit, featuring
sculptural 3-D
printers designed
by the artist.



who likens Harrison's emphasis on digital and industrial technologies, in tandem with identity politics, to that of Cameron Rowland, Michael E. Smith, Josh Kline, or Kevin Beasley—the real shape of the show belongs to Harrison himself. Every time he creates a new piece, the dynamics change; the last day of the exhibition will look significantly different than the first.

On the outer edge of the gallery are sculptures Harrison made by very different means. One is a clear and hollow plastic box with a zebra skull (purchased online from a wildlife reserve) floating inside it. The skull is held in place by a cylinder threaded through a hole the artist bored using a programmable CNC machine. "There's so much distance between African culture and African-American culture," Harrison explains. "It's an expression of that gap." On the other side of the room is a clear, square bench—partly a nod to George Nelson's midcentury masterpiece. But this version is made from bulletproof glass—a not-so-subtle invocation of Detroit's tumultuous history—and features another zebra skull, this one wedged into the sculptural furniture's slats.

Harrison discusses his work through the idea of the prototype. For him, it is an ontological question: "The world is whatever we make it," he says. "What happens when nothing is really made yet, and everything is a prototype? The conversation shifts to 'possibilities.' Working with 3-D printers is perfect. My hand is removed from the material; but I do have control over what is made, and at what time, and I can make similar objects with slightly different outcomes."

But for him, it isn't just about commoditization, or generating a serial assortment of pieces on some high-tech, DIY assembly line. "I want to talk about ownership. My interests don't directly lie with the kind of art that deals with race, but I feel like I have to address that aspect, because my identity has an effect on how people perceive my work," Harrison says. "I want the ability to change my identity as an artist, and the identity of my work, whenever I want," he adds. "I want control over it." MP