

Detroit sculptor Matthew Harrison explores identity through clay and machines

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Matthew Harrison using a 3D printer
Courtesy of MOCAD

Machines have played an outsized role in art since the beginning of the 20th century; whether they are used as a tool for production, a marker to define the time period in which an artwork exists, or as art objects themselves. In Detroit, machines are commonly associated with automobiles or the methods that produce them.

Matthew Angelo Harrison, a local sculptor and 2017 Kresge Visual Art Fellow, knows a thing or two about both. Up until very recently, Harrison, a Grosse Pointe-native, produced clay models for prototypes of cars and car parts at Ford Motor Company. His interest and experience in clay modeling landed him the job at Ford, but the work subsequently led him to explore the role of machines and prototypes in his own artistic practice. Shortly after graduating from School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Harrison was drawn back to Detroit by the affordable rent and free time that allowed him to pursue his work.

After receiving a Kresge Artist Fellowship, complete with a \$25,000 reward, Harrison decided to leave his job at Ford to pursue art full-time. "There's a lot of panic, there's a lot of happiness, but I realize hey I'm young, I can do this," Harrison says of this transition.

The 27-year-old artist has plenty to keep him busy, with upcoming solo shows at Atlanta Contemporary, opening August 26th, and at University of Michigan's Institute for the Humanities opening April 2018.

I visited Harrison in his new studio space, formerly 9338 Campau Gallery, in Hamtramck. Harrison was joined by his partner Corine Vermeulen, an internationally renowned photographer. The two have just returned from a trip to Greece to view the annual art exhibition Documenta, and on this particular jet-lagged day, preferred working in the dark.

Harrison's studio looks like a messier version of his recent (and first) solo exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (MOCAD). A large 3D printer dominates one end of the room—a machine that Harrison built himself. He uses the printer to produce his clay mask sculptures, which are strewn about the space.



Detail of "The Consequence of Platforms" (2016), Aluminum, stainless steel, ceramic, marble - Courtesy of MOCAD



Harrison's 3D printers at the MOCAD - Courtesy of MOCAD

"I'm building iconography based on existing sculptures from African and African-American culture," Harrison says, "because I feel like I wanna do this thing with post-identity. Thinking about the constructs of identity and how that contributes to our reality."

Harrison talks about post-identity as a mechanism to distance himself from his own identity. "You have to have a narrow definition of who I am. So you know I'm a black male, I'm from Detroit, I'm interested in this or that. But what I'm investigating is based on what I'm not, what I might want to be, or what I don't want to be."

Harrison attributes this third person approach to Arte Povera, an art movement in 1960-70's Italy that heavily influences his work.

It's a little jarring to see beautiful work that was once in a pristine gallery suddenly laying among material remnants and refuse. Throughout the run of the exhibition, Harrison was a common fixture in the gallery space, frequently appearing to load materials or make any necessary adjustments.

"It's super performative," Harrison says of the exhibition. "It's largely invested in performance, even if I wasn't there, because the printers are making in the space. There's still labor behind autonomy in a way and that's kind of like what I'm representing by being in the space; loading up clay and having supplies. There's a lot of planning that goes into that whole experience that is kind of hard to understand at first, without having a person there."

In a way, the MOCAD exhibit was laid out to show the various stages of a prototype's life. You see very refined objects like an acrylic bench with an animal skull nesting on one end. The acrylic, with its sharp edges and clean lines, appears in every way as a finished product. The bones, mostly animal skulls the artist has acquired from wildlife reserves, are nature's prototype and have been perfected over time by evolution. Harrison's clay masks, which are modified replicas of traditional African sculptures, sit alongside these perfect, completed objects, as experiments or interventions into the perfect world he has created.

"[Prototypes] exist in the space that is in between reality and fiction," Harrison says. "Because they are prospects for reality in a way."

In auto manufacturing, it's easy to identify the prototype. It's the model—in this case a clay one that Harrison has sculpted—of a machine that may or may not ever be produced. In the case of Harrison's work, it's difficult to tell whether the prototype is the clay sculpture, the 3D printer itself, or the performance that results when the two interact.