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African spirits suspended in resin, culture at SF art gallery

By Charles Desmarais

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Matthew Angelo Harrison's sculpture "Dark Silhouette: Potent Eyes" (2018) is on view through April 21 at Jessica Silverman Gallery.

"Prototype of Dark Silhouettes," an exhibition of 12 sculptures by Matthew Angelo Harrison at Jessica Silverman Gallery through April 21, takes a few minutes of attention to heat up. The sculptures are all clear-resin blocks, mounted on elegantly simple pedestals, lined up under fluorescent lights. Your first impression may be of entering a posh walk-in freezer display, showing off choice cuts of ice.

Stick with it, though. I left the gallery one recent afternoon feeling that I had experienced something profound. I had to return the next morning to check my pulse again: same reading.

It doesn't take long before you see that objects are embedded in the blocks. Most of these are what appear to be African wood sculptures. One is a zebra skull, the checklist tells us.

African art is notoriously subject to misinterpretation. Old wood objects warp and rot and often do not survive long in uncontrolled environments. Wood sculpture of the past 100 years or more was often made, not for tribal use, but with collectors and tourists in mind. Out-and-out fakes abound. An expert in the room with us could help with symbols and style, but even experts rely upon provenance — detailed records of prior ownership and use — to confirm a piece's authenticity.

I'm not sure Harrison himself knows more than we do about his source material. Anyway, he's not saying, which leaves the dark and weathered objects suspended not only in physical space, but also in a

postmodern atmosphere of suspect legitimacy.



Matthew Angelo Harrison's "Dark Silhouette: Zebra Manifold Composition No. 1" (2018)

Frozen in their polyurethane shells, they are both trapped and protected, fixed and floating. They might be specimens, mounted for inspection; genes in stoppered glass boxes; fetishes rendered powerless in cryonic suspension.

If Harrison's background as an African American man has something to do with his interest in African ritual objects, as it surely must, his home and studio in Detroit and his recently abandoned position in the design department at Ford Motor Co. bring another aspect of the work into focus.

The idea of floating found objects in hardened resin is not unique to Harrison. The sculptor Arman's famous "accumulations" of the 1960s, often cast in plastic, come immediately to mind. Most of Harrison's cast blocks are further manipulated, however.

They might be cut into pieces, polished to a high gloss or reduced to frosted translucency, stacked and rearranged. By use of industrial CNC (computer numerical control) tools and techniques, many of them are partially carved, drilled and routed to suggest engine-part attachments and channelways.

"Dark Silhouette: Zebra Manifold Composition No.1" (all works are dated 2018) conflates intricate designs – an industrial pattern ground into the block's surface, and an embedded natural one (that zebra skull). The artist's process and transparent materials allow us to look at one, then the other, then all at once.

"Dark Silhouette: Potent Eyes" encapsulates a West African mask. Holes drilled into and through the block with fine precision – from two sides and to varying depths – create a shifting, three-dimensional abstract pattern of circular vacancies. From some angles, voids optically (magically?) become disk- and rod-like forms.



Matthew Angelo Harrison's "Dark Silhouette: Enduring Father (detail)" (2018)

Not merely abstract design, the holes also suggest obsessive attempts to ... what? To plumb the depths of a past that no modern can understand? To reach a spirit embedded within? To touch a face that is not face but avatar, shield, metamorphosis.

It is a work about vision, the title announces. But the idea of potency suggests that if the eyes take in, they also emit.

Other works consider the powers of fertility and sexuality, set figures into translucent mechanical topographies, deconstruct the natural order. Each is a kaleidoscopic wonder, intricate and transfixing both visually and intellectually.

They are questions, not lessons, about identity, history, spirituality and other things that make us human. I could consider any one of them for hours.

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Matthew Angelo Harrison: "Prototype of Dark Silhouettes": 11 a.m.–6 p.m., Tuesdays–Saturdays. Through April 21. Free. Jessica Silverman Gallery, 488 Ellis St., S.F. (415) 255-9508. <http://jessicasilvermangallery.com>