

ARTFORUM

Critics' Pick: Matthew Angelo Harrison

By Glen Helfand

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Matthew Angelo Harrison, *Synthetic Lipiko no. 1*, 2018,
wooden sculpture, anodized aluminum, acrylic, 52 x 20 x 13"

The twelve works in Matthew Angelo Harrison's 2018 series "Dark Silhouettes" are a handsome provocation. Traditional wooden African sculptures, many sourced online, are encased in smoky resin and placed upon pedestals of the artist's design, echoing Minimalist furniture from the 1970s. It is intriguing to know that Harrison, who is based in Detroit, worked in prototyping for Ford Motors, as some of the resin has been carved into with a CNC router, creating topographical rivulets in these industrial arrangements. Some of the blocks have holes drilled as if to offer oxygen to a captured deity; others are cleanly split, revealing the inside of a head. There's also a visceral visual echo of Damien Hirst's cleft animals, and while Harrison does float an actual zebra skull in one piece here (Dark Silhouette: Zebra Manifold Composition no. 1), his work has more understated resonance and incisive cultural allusions. This is not a spectacle: Harrison's color scheme is muted and his scale modest, but more importantly, his precision slicing of these artifacts is tinged with the history of colonialism and the problematic aspects of acquisition and display of African art in sleek museum galleries in the West.

Appearing amid the cinematic phenomenon of Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* and its attendant discourse, this artist's exhibition adds to a dialogue on Afrofuturism by merging a sense of past and present, of handmade cultural specificity and the indifference of machine production. The one outlier here is *Synthetic Lipiko no. 1*, displayed free of encasement. It's a stylized carving of a male head, with actual human hair attached as a protruding beard. Here, the router has cut directly into the stained-wood cranium to reveal a pale interior that has been etched with computer-created mechanical forms. It's a complicated and extremely potent piece, a keenly textured exploration of ancestry in a time of technological and geopolitical tensions.