

ARTFORUM

Interviews: Matthew Angelo Harrison on *Dark Povera*, Minimalism, and prototyping

Interviewed by: Grant Johnson

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Matthew Angelo Harrison, *Dark Povera*, 2017, 3-D printer, dimensions variable.

Matthew Angelo Harrison creates technically precise sculptures rich with art-historical allusion, mixing and interrogating touchstones as diverse as 1970s American Minimalism, Benin bronzes, and Adolf Loos. His work is currently on view as part of the Whitney Biennial at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art through September 22 and "Colored People Time: Mundane Futures" at Philadelphia's Institute of Contemporary Art through August 11. Below, Harrison discusses his sculpture *Dark Povera: Manufactured Primitives*, 2019, which is included in the Cranbrook Art Museum's "Landlord Colors: On Art, Economy, and Materiality," open through October 6.

THIS SCULPTURE COMES FROM A BODY OF WORK I call "Dark Povera," 2017-. For this series I collect data from postcolonial African art and then synthesize that information with digital replicas or artifacts from a huge pool of masks with similar characteristics. Then I reproduce these amalgams in ceramic clay using machines that I built. These machines work like 3-D printers, by building up the layers of clay, but they're a little different. They invite a bit of mechanical flexibility that I harness to create the work. Clay is a traditional art material, and I find that constructing the work with technology creates an unexpected in-between object. I have been very interested in the conversation surrounding "the prototype" and feel it's a productive space in which to discuss the construction of identity and culture-building.

I think there is great potential in mixing 3-D prototyping with constructions, deconstructions, and redefinitions—to treat things that are thought of as concrete as clay-like, malleable substances. I'm trying to challenge the practice of cultural trafficking and the objects that are a part of this exhaustive economy of ancestry. There's very little authorship discussed when institutions or other

voices of authority describe the African objects I use, which relates to the lack of exactitude—especially as a black American or someone of slave ancestry—surrounding our pasts. A lot of black people have this curiosity and attachment to these kinds of objects, for stability, as a kind of root, yet these histories are severed and scrambled, dissociated by design. Some of my works feature a 3-D scan that's desaturated of color, so it's kind of ghostly and at a lower resolution, to represent the loss of information, the things that are taken or left out.

Honestly, I don't have anger. The response I'm having arrives from an agency that I feel is necessary for convoluted modern times. I'm really after opening up. I don't want to pigeonhole myself as having one singular voice or message. Typically, when dealing with content of such consequence, I think it's easiest to cling to whatever is most obvious. That approach leads to a dead-end, closed narrative. To truly deal with all of these layers you have to engage them simultaneously to get the macro-perspective. That's why I have so many different practices going on.

If Minimalism had a biennial, would it get a bad review by the press? If it were a new idea this year, would it be like, "What the fuck is going on here?" It's all rooted in the architectural ideas of Adolf Loos, European theories that come from the continent's total dominance over the rest of the world: *Ornamentation is disgusting and not sophisticated—remove it from your life*. That's such a fucked-up idea. To say that you should remove any clues about cultural influence, like outside cultural influence? It seems like it was written in such anger; it's such a hateful idea. But then it turns into this Zen tranquility—a folding-over of the same aesthetic breed.

That kind of slip is my favorite, something that comes out of this elitist tradition. I'm not sure if this negative or Minimalist ideal is racist necessarily. Perhaps, it is worse than that. It's a prejudice against inanimate things that hold cultural significance. It comes from taking objects out of their element and making them placeless: "I got this rug from China, I think I'm going to hang it here next to this mess that I got from somewhere else." When confronted with this collection of the world in one spot, Loos is like, "Enough! This is bullshit." Just imagine him pissed off, writing really fast in cursive about how he doesn't want anything anymore. "It's too much; it's a burden to have so much stuff."

Those guys were nuts but fascinating. And then you had Donald Judd, who approached this renunciation with the complete opposite energy. He's a futurist in a way that is very open and very resourceful, striving for perfection and new human heights. But he really has the same problematic ideas as Loos, so it works for me to be able to get in between both of those things. My work is a unifying contradiction.

— As told to Grant Johnson