

# BOMB

**Artificial Families: Matthew Angelo Harrison Interviewed by Tausif Noor**

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*The malleable biographies of cultural objects.*



Matthew Angelo Harrison, *Synthetic Lipiko no. 3*, 2018. Wooden sculpture, polyurethane resin, anodized aluminum, and acrylic. Courtesy of the artist.

Matthew Angelo Harrison is a Detroit-based artist whose sculptures and performances use 3-D printing technology to address the violent histories of colonialism in Africa alongside the formalist legacy of Minimalism. His delivery—slow, deliberate, considered—parallels his work, which consists of layers and layers of two-dimensional material that eventually take three-dimensional form. However, unlike his sculptures, which are hollow inside, Harrison's thoughts are rich and dense. He and I discuss his practice and his stakes: objecthood as an in-between state, the influence of his home city, and the possibilities offered by reworking, remodeling, and reimagining.

—Tausif Noor

**Tausif Noor**

Your sculptures often incorporate traditional African wooden figures as either readymades or objects for digitally scanning. How do you think about the ethics behind sourcing these items?

**Matthew Angelo Harrison**

I have no idea from where in Africa my ancestors came, but I feel an affinity to the Guinea coast, particularly Mali and Ghana, because my uncle collected wooden figures from these countries at inner-city festivals during the 1980s. These tourist objects provided a sense of historical belonging for a man who had lived through the civil rights movement. He may not have known the specifics of each object he owned, but through them he curated his own idea of a homeland. When I choose historic African objects from private or museum collections, these intuitive affinities float through my head.

In terms of the figures that I use as readymades in my work, I source them within markets and economies that already exist. The objects that I buy are collectables made specifically for the tourist market. They don't have any ritualistic or tribal use value, although they are often modeled on objects that once did. In America, the destination of African objects has often been African American homes. This casts a different light on colonialism and otherness—one that is not always obvious to people of European descent.

**TN**

Right. Perhaps it's because ideas of value are derived from a fetishization of object biographies: that is, the idea that certain objects accrue value over time as a result of their complicated histories. By producing objects in real-time performances, I think—maybe—that you subvert this idea of the object biography.

**MAH**

I am not sure if I subvert the idea of the object biography as much as allow museum goers to witness the making of a biography in real time, a biography which is not so much about fetishization and ossification as fluid formation, malleable identities, and artificial families.



Matthew Angelo Harrison, *Dark Silhouette: Mother and Child in Intervals*, 2018. Wooden sculpture from West Africa, polyurethane resin, anodized aluminum, and acrylic. Detail. Courtesy of the artist.

**TN**

There's been a lot of discussion lately about the repatriation and restitution of objects from colonial museums in Europe. Your work seems to offer a different way to think about these objects, suggesting that particular histories of specific objects, and perhaps the notion of collecting in itself, are blurry. What do you make of the repatriation debate?

**MAH**

Repatriation doesn't bring restitution. Repatriation from a colonial power to an African nation is at best a political gesture. I think more about the history of slavery and the forcible movement of humans through space. With that in mind, it should be noted that all of Europe and its branches are operating in a cultural economy in which they have accrued unpayable debt.

With regard to cultural objects, what has been stolen can never be returned or reconstituted into what it was before. It's forever fragmented, disjointed, and changed. Understanding this, I assume a series of adaptations to build new meaning from bits and pieces of broken biographies.

Nevertheless, my resin works could be seen as fantasies of repatriation: finding technologically advanced, semi-dignified resting places for tawdry readymades.



Matthew Angelo Harrison, *MK1-002-Scar*, 2017, Ceramic, acrylic, and aluminum. Courtesy of the artist.

**TN**

By creating these technologically advanced resting places, you're also pointing out the impermanence of our relationship to objects. Museums, galleries, and auction houses are all places where objects *spend time* between production and circulation. How do you think about your work in regard to its longevity? Do you think about your own archive?

**MAH**

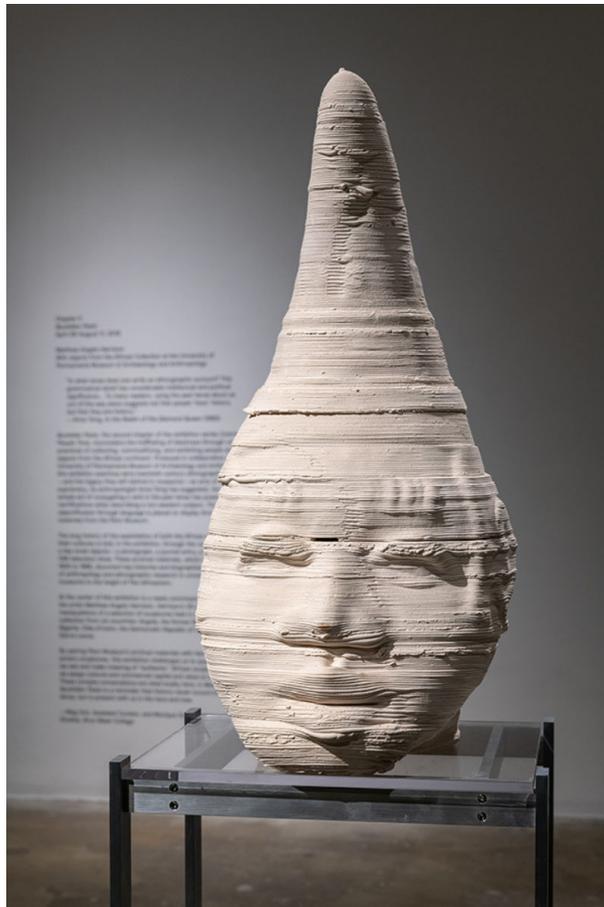
I like to play with the idea of the archive, with longevity and perpetuity. My resin encapsulations take wooden sculptures targeting the tourist trade—in other words, semi-disposable mementos—and give them a lasting platform, a stage to mean more, like a dragonfly caught in amber. My 3-D ceramics take Makonde masks whose forms are longstanding, due to the traditions from which they emerge, and render them in a mode that is very much of our time. The two bodies of work kind of move in opposite directions.

**TN**

I read somewhere that you once had a job in the design department of Ford Motors, making prototypes. I thought that was interesting not only because of what it might suggest about the formal production of your work—the use of a CNC router, for instance—but also about the larger environment of Detroit. How do you negotiate object histories with your own experiences and the particular histories of Detroit?

**MAH**

Pretty much everyone in my family has worked at the plant or manufacturing facility; my family is straight-up blue collar. My mom worked on the assembly line at American Axle, which made drive-train components for cars. I remember vividly being taken to her workplace when I was ten years old. The factory was such an intense, almost violent working environment. Exposure to this environment early on has clearly contributed to my artistic obsession with technology and hands-on fabrication. After getting a degree from the Art Institute of Chicago, I went to work at Ford in the clay modeling department to pay off my student loans. Working with commercial prototypes has certainly affected at least one on-going body of work.



Matthew Angelo Harrison, *Queen Mother (Edo, Oldman)*, 2019. Ceramic, acrylic, aluminum. Installation view. *Colored People Time: Quotidian Pasts* exhibition. Photograph by Constance Mensh. Courtesy of the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia.

**TN**

Can you expand on your relationship to the commercial prototype? How does your relationship to the commercial prototype and the 3-D scan relate—if at all—to the modernists and the readymade?

**MAH**

My resin encapsulations are part of the long history of Dadaist-assisted readymades. The wooden figures are modified through being placed in a resin purgatory and transformed when the hand-carved original is sliced and notched by machines. Same goes for my use of zebra bones and other found objects. They are meant to be in conversation with the twentieth-century history of the readymade, from Marcel Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919) to Gabriel Orozco's *Black Kite* (1997) or Ai Weiwei's *Grapes* (2015). I don't see the 3-D ceramics that way; they're custom-made, not ready-made.

I'm fascinated with manufacturing prototypes because of the idea that an object can exist in an in-between state as both a reality and a possibility. I'm looking for a way to introduce new contexts instead of relying directly on the meaning they had originally. I see all of my work as prototypes or imaginative pitches in the direction of a platonic ideal and also as resolved sculptures. A model of a product or object is informed by research and can be reworked, remodeled, or destroyed without consequence; meanwhile the reworking or destroying of something real typically has unforeseen consequences.

Matthew Angelo Harrison's work can be seen in the group exhibition [Colored People Time: Quotidian Pasts](#) at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, until August 11.

*Tausif Noor is a writer and contributing editor at Momus. His writing can be found in ArtAsiaPacific, frieze, The White Review, Artforum.com, Los Angeles Review of Books, ArtReviewAsia, and Bookforum.com, among other publications.*