

MATTHEW ANGELO HARRISON

Matthew Angelo Harrison (America, b. 1989, lives and works in Detroit) creates 3D-printed ceramic sculptures investigating themes of ancestry and authenticity.

ACTS OF ENCLOSURE

words by Harry Burke

In 2019, a cluster of Matthew Angelo Harrison's 3D-printed ceramic sculptures were shown in "Colored People Time" at the ICA Philadelphia. The exhibition, organized by curator Meg Onli and anthropologist Dr. Monique Scott, unfolded in three sequential chapters and assessed "the banal and everyday ways in which the history of slavery and colonialism permeates the present and impacts the future." Working with the collection of the Penn Museum, an archaeology and anthropology museum associated with the University of Pennsylvania, Harrison scanned ritual objects from six African countries—Angola, the former Benin Kingdom of Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana and Sierra Leone—and made replicas of these with a hand-built printer. The sculptures, built from thin ribbed coils of wet clay, were placed upon sleek aluminium plinths, juxtaposing an ancient earthen material with a lightweight metal that was industrially innovated in the 19th century. The artist had glitched some of the reproductions and manipulated their scale. These interventions questioned cultural standards of authenticity and authorship while accenting the tactility of the artefacts, many of which weren't designed to be displayed.

After graduating from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2012, Harrison found employment building prototypes for Ford Motor Company's design lab in Detroit. While the artist is influenced by his home city's spirited post-industrial maker culture, his warped, low-res replicas are sites of complex trans-Atlantic dialogues. The art historian Sampada Aranke has described Black aesthetics as an "anoriginary abstraction"—a term that acknowledges the irreparable processes of dispossession of life and land through which Blackness is formed. Harrison directs attention towards the ongoing ways in which cultural economies disconnect ritual items from their primary contexts through an accumulative process that reifies originality while destroying origins. At the ICA, his printed sculptures—which are part of his "Dark Povera" series (2017–), named after the postmodern Arte Povera movement—were positioned alongside archival materials from the Penn

Museum, including the correspondence of figures like W.O. Oldman (1879–1949), a British dealer of ethnographic art and European weaponry. The exhibition design reminded viewers of the colonial roots of many museum collections, and showed how institutions selectively remember in order to actively erase.

In last year's Whitney Biennial, Harrison exhibited works from his adjacent "Dark Silhouette" series, prototypes of which premiered at Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco, in 2018. These enclose vintage African wooden sculptures, spears and animal bones within rectangular prisms of tinted resin. The artist carves circles into the vitrines using a CNC router (a computer-controlled cutting machine). Appearing like air vents or unclassifiable sigils, the cuttings accentuate the animism of the encased objects while alluding to the often-observed African-American labor that sustains US industry. These holes call attention to the porousness of Harrison's work, which critiques capitalist enclosure and celebrates African antiquity even while probing set definitions of Africanness and antiquity. Many of the displayed items are of uncertain provenance: some were acquired from European secondary market sellers on eBay, and some are even fake. The artist has called these works "fantasies of repatriation," and they indicate the unpayable debts that accrue in the long shadows of irresolvable taxonomies.

The two series will be presented in Harrison's upcoming solo exhibition at the Kunsthalle Basel, which has been postponed to next summer 2021. Ceramics will be live-printed in the gallery throughout its duration, and polished resin sculptures will feature trade union memorabilia and African artworks. Harrison's timely mechanics commune with the spectres of labor organization and primitive accumulation that dwell in the vacated surfaces of post-war minimalism. Connecting the technical innovation of the American Midwest with Indigenous African cultural production, his work merges dispersed temporalities within the resurgent time of decolonial futurity. By addressing lively objects and deadly apparatuses, Harrison appraises custom- and ready-made histories.

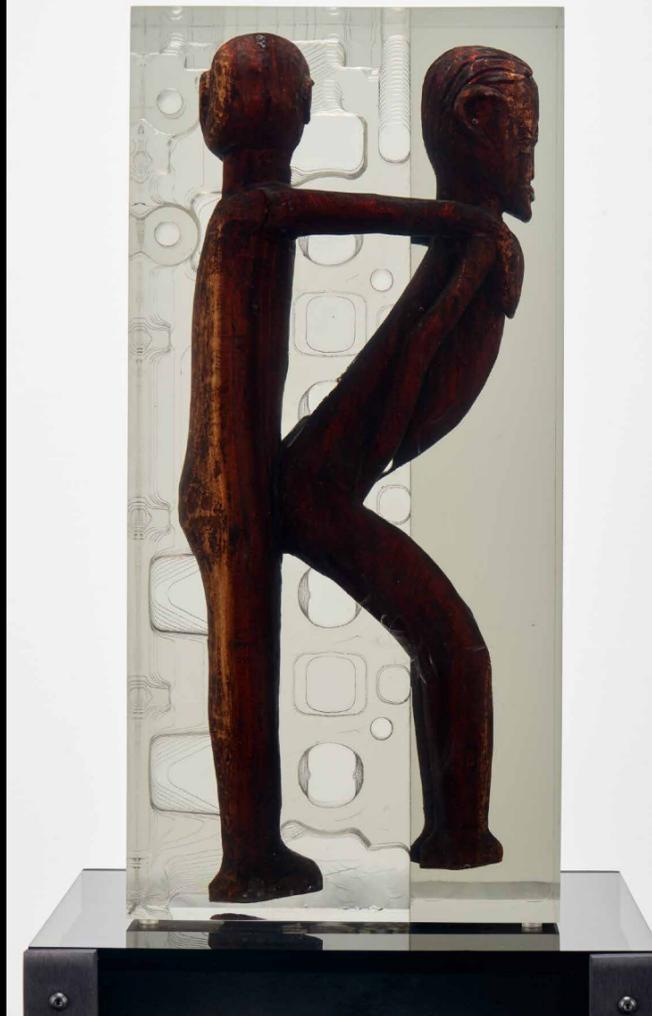


Image courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco.

